

Acknowledging Ambiguity and Difference in Politics: A Christian Realist Challenge to Thomists

Jeanne M. Heffernan

During the 1930s and 40s democracy faced powerful challenges from various quarters. Rival ideologies challenged the foundations of democratic politics most directly, but even sympathetic observers were critical of democratic governance. Perceiving a crisis in democratic theory, several prominent Christian intellectuals proposed new theoretical support for democracy. Among these, Reinhold Niebuhr and Yves R. Simon deserve renewed attention, for their work marks a critical contribution to democratic theory. Niebuhr and Simon, working from Protestant and Catholic traditions, respectively, drew upon widely divergent theological orientations which have at times produced opposing accounts of human nature and politics. From Niebuhr's perspective, Catholic thought was incapable of offering a principled, not merely pragmatic, defense of democratic politics. Yet, as I shall demonstrate, Simon's Thomism grounds a comprehensive philosophy of democratic government, answering Niebuhr's criticisms with a defense of democracy drawn from the tradition of Catholic natural law theory.

Niebuhr and Simon each attempted in his own way to illuminate "the essence of democracy" and provide it with "a more compelling justification" than liberalism could offer.¹ Yet, while Niebuhr and Simon commonly perceived liberalism as defective and undertook similar tasks in proposing an alternative foundation for democracy, and while each approached his task from a theologically informed perspective, the positions they articulate appear strikingly different. Just how fundamental and deep these differences are requires exploration, especially given Niebuhr's criticism of Catholic natural law theory as itself an inadequate philosophical foundation for democratic politics. Considering the challenges of

¹Yves R. Simon, "Thomism and Democracy" in *Science, Philosophy and Religion, Second Symposium*, eds. Louis Finkelstein and Lyman Bryson (New York: The Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Their Relations to the Democratic Way of Life, Inc., 1942), vol. 2, p. 260; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. xii.

contemporary pluralism, a close examination of Niebuhr's claim that the natural law tradition produces a rigid ethical system that lends itself to intolerant politics is in order.

Clear-sighted Children of Light: Christian Realists

Reinhold Niebuhr's commitment to Christian Realism underlies his criticism of liberalism as a naively optimistic faith in man's moral progress and of natural law theory as a semi-Pelagian moral philosophy with anti-democratic implications. As Niebuhr articulates it, Christian Realism constitutes a theological orientation in the tradition of Augustine and the Reformers with certain key emphases, especially sin. A Christian Realist perspective—unlike its liberal Protestant cousins—attempts to recover Biblical insights on man's sinfulness and need for redemption. As Niebuhr puts it:

The high estimate of the human stature implied in the concept of "image of God" stands in paradoxical juxtaposition to the low estimate of human virtue in Christian thought. Man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God. The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will.²

The root of sin resides within man himself, for man, whose essence is freedom, has the inclination to deny his creatureliness, his dependence upon God, and to claim divinity for himself and infallibility for his opinions; this, Niebuhr tells us, is "the very inclination which Christianity defines as original sin."³

Underscoring the problem of sin, Christian Realism reflects anew on the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine plays a critical role in Niebuhr's conception of man, as it draws together insights from revelation that are amply confirmed by experience. For Niebuhr, its significance lies in the fact that it expresses an existential and paradoxical truth: there is a "bias toward evil" in the human will which cannot be attributed to external factors, such as historical institutions or traditions. No, "the temptation to sin lies . . . in the human situation itself." Man, created finite and free, recognizes that he transcends natural necessity on the one hand, but is limited on the other; this recognition evokes anxiety, and in his anxiety man attempts "to transmute his finiteness into infinity, his weakness into strength, his dependence into independence . . . [T]he self lacks the faith and trust to subject itself to God. It seeks to establish itself independently. It seeks to find its life and thereby loses it."⁴ Such is the sin of pride, which manifests itself in endless permutations, from overt violence to subtle manipulation.

The social effects of sin are as varied and pervasive as sin itself, for the temptation to selfishness and will-to-power is exaggerated in human collectives.⁵ In Niebuhr's

² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), vol. 1, p. 16.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 248, pp. 251-2.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), pp. 48, 272.

estimation, the basic pattern of communal life reflects Augustine's description of the *civitas terrena*, which enjoys only a precarious peace. Conflict and domination disturb its concord, as competing factions vie for supremacy; partial and particular communities exalt their own purposes, arrogating to themselves undue authority and power. Within these communities, moreover, domination and injustice often prevail on account of a self-worshipping ruling caste. Thus, Niebuhr laments, "[M]an's collective, like his individual, life is involved in death through the very strategies by which life is maintained, against both external and internal peril."⁶

An adequate political philosophy pays heed to this fact. It reflects a sober assessment of the human situation and outlines a politics of modest ends and realistic means. As Niebuhr puts it, "To establish justice in a sinful world is the whole sad duty of the political order," which relies upon a combination of moral, rational, and coercive forces to avert anarchy and create a tolerable degree of justice and peace. To this end, political society must seek to achieve:

The greatest possible equilibrium of power, the greatest possible number of centers of power, the greatest possible social check upon the administration of power, and the greatest possible inner moral check on human ambition, as well as the most effective use of forms of power in which consent and coercion are compounded.⁷

A democratic regime best approximates this balance of power, for democratic institutions "place checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator and thus prevent it from becoming vexatious," while allowing individuals and groups to reach "tentative and tolerable adjustments between their competing interests and ... arrive at some common notions of justice which transcend all partial interests."⁸ Niebuhr recommends a federal constitutional democracy of the Madisonian stripe, for it fragments power among different branches and levels of government and, in contemporary parlance, affords multiple points of access to organized interests, as well as to individual citizens equipped with voting rights. More than other regimes, this kind of system fosters a symbiotic relationship between freedom and order, inasmuch as it guarantees individual freedoms within the context of a legal order to which all are bound—legislator and executive no less than private citizen. Negatively, this splintering of power curbs the ability of any one person or group to exercise what Augustine calls the *libido dominandi*; in other words, it will "deflect, harness, and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community."⁹ Positively, it allows in the best case individual and collective centers of vitality to express their creativity without a premature foreclosure of possibilities

⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), pp. 221-22.

⁷ Niebuhr, "The National Preaching Mission," *Radical Religion*, vol. 2 (Spring, 1937), p. 3; "Coercion, Self-Interest and Love" in *The Organizational Revolution*, ed. Kenneth E. Boulding (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 242.

⁸ Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p. xii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

by the heavy hand of government. These structural features, Niebuhr observes, give rise to an ethos of openness and free inquiry, the *sine qua non* of a healthy political society. This ethos tempers the sinful tendency of the powerful to identify their partial interests with the common good and chastens each group to recognize the ideological taint in their own purposes. In short, democratic life requires and optimally fosters “a spirit of tolerant cooperation” among individuals and groups that neither moral cynics nor moral idealists can achieve: the former know no law beyond their own interest, while the latter recognize such a law but remain unconscious of the corruption tainting their own conception of it.¹⁰ Such is the Christian Realist defense of democratic politics.

Misguided Children of Light: Thomists

Unlike Christian Realism, according to Niebuhr, political Thomism and natural law theory cannot serve as a philosophical foundation for democracy. To understand Niebuhr’s assessment of Catholic natural law theory, one must view it in light of his more general criticism of Catholic theology. For Niebuhr, the historic emphases of Catholic theology on either the problem of human finitude *vis-a-vis* an infinite God or of human ignorance *vis-a-vis* an omniscient God misses the more central issue recognized by Augustine and the Reformers: sinful pride, not simple finitude or ignorance, effects human alienation from God. While related to finitude and ignorance, pride is distinct from it; the former are not intrinsically sinful, the latter is. Man, as Niebuhr relates, becomes aware of his finitude and contingency. With this awareness comes the temptation for him to shore up his existential hold on life, to make secure the ground of his existence. In the process, he tries in vain to suppress awareness of mortality. If he succumbs to the temptation, he commits the sin of pride, the primal sin, so basic because it constitutes a willful rejection of God’s created order. Once in sin, man will invariably assert himself over others, attempting to make men and the things of this world his existential foundation. From the sin of man’s rebellion against God’s order flows all other sin. Deceit, injustice, sexual lust—indeed, every manifestation of fallen nature—find its root in pride’s rejection of human finitude and ignorance. We know that we are mortal, and we deny our mortality. We know that we do not know, and we pretend to omniscience. What leads us from one to the other in Niebuhr’s Kierkegaardian view of sin is anxiety, the nervous apprehension of finitude in the absence of a trust in God’s loving providence. But because man has an imperfect and inconsistent grasp of God’s care, he is ever tempted to sin. Thus, original sin is a symbolic depiction of any given existential moment in which man is tempted to deny his dependence upon God and establish his own ontological order.

In light of this, it is not surprising that Niebuhr identifies an inadequate account of sin as the fundamental flaw of Catholic natural law theory. This stems in large

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

part from its understanding of original sin. As Niebuhr describes it, Thomistic doctrine holds that “the Fall robbed man of a *donum superadditum* but left him with a *pura naturalia*, which includes a capacity for natural justice.” Until the “further gifts” are restored, man is subject to the natural limitations of his finite nature. Original sin, according to Niebuhr, is thus interpreted negatively: “It is the privation of something which does not belong to man essentially and, therefore, cannot be regarded as a corruption of his essential nature.”¹¹ The fallen man, Niebuhr emphasizes, is basically an incomplete man who is made complete by the infusion of sacramental grace which nearly restores all of the supernatural virtues lost in the Fall. Thus in the estimate of Thomistic theology, Niebuhr concludes, “The Fall does not seriously impair man’s capacity for natural justice.”¹² Man is left with his reason and will essentially intact, however incapable he is of reaching the heights of perfection made possible by the supernatural gifts.

Niebuhr regards the Thomistic account of sin “semi-Pelagian,”¹³ since it posits the essential freedom of the post-lapsarian will and the intactness of reason as an instrument of natural justice. This interpretation of original sin fails on two counts for Niebuhr. First, it underestimates the enduring noetic and moral effects of original sin. “The loss of man’s original perfection,” Niebuhr insists, “never leaves him with an untarnished though incomplete natural justice.”¹⁴ Rather, sin infects man’s intellect and will, leaving him alienated from God and his fellows. His most basic sin, pride, reveals itself in so many ways as to discredit the Catholic notion of natural justice. Pride, or man’s unwillingness to recognize his creatureliness and ultimate dependence upon God, insinuates itself into man’s social relations; it prompts him to forget his finitude, deny the partiality of his perspective, and usurp the place of God in pronouncing final judgment on human actions. This, Niebuhr maintains, is the seed of “ideological taint” in human knowledge, and it affects every articulation of moral and political norms.

Catholic natural law theory fails to recognize this insidious taint and so fails “to understand the full seriousness of human sin or the full tragedy of human history.”¹⁵ Thus, it too simply affirms the possibility of identifying natural law precepts and deriving universally valid moral judgments therefrom. As Niebuhr explains, Catholicism attempted to systematize ethics, appropriating the Stoic conception of the natural law with its distinction between a relative and an absolute natural law. In so doing, the Church made rational norms of justice definitive for the Christian conception of virtue and vice. “The difficulty with this impressive structure of Catholic ethics, finally elaborated into a detailed casuistic application of general moral standards to every conceivable particular situation, is that it

¹¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, p. 248.

¹² Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and Natural Law,” *Theology*, 40, no. 236 (February 1940), p. 87.

¹³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, p. 247.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and Natural Law,” p. 87.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, p. 148.

constantly insinuates religious absolutes into highly contingent and historical moral judgments.” The tendency for Catholic thought to confuse ultimate religious perspectives and relative historical ones underlies “the fury and self-righteousness into which Catholicism is betrayed when it defends feudal types of civilization in contemporary history as in Spain for instance.”¹⁶

Relatedly, Niebuhr specifically criticizes the anthropology underlying Jacques Maritain’s definition of natural law in *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*. According to Maritain, “Natural law is the ensemble of things to do and not to do which follow therefrom in a *necessary* fashion and from the simple fact that man is man, nothing else being taken into account.”¹⁷ Niebuhr takes issue with Maritain’s claim, noting:

One of the facts about man as man is that his vitalities may be elaborated in indeterminate variety. That is the fruit of his freedom. Not all of these elaborations are equally wholesome and creative. But it is very difficult to derive “in a necessary fashion” the final rules of his individual and social existence. It is this indeterminateness and variety which makes analogies between the “laws of nature” in the exact sense of the words and laws of human nature, so great a source of confusion. It is man’s nature to transcend nature and to elaborate his own historical existence in indeterminate degree.¹⁸

Catholic natural law ethics, moreover, fails to acknowledge the fact that the very men articulating natural law norms are themselves sinful and subject to the corrosive influence of self-interest. Thus, the male oligarchy, for instance, appealed to “natural laws” concerning the place of women in society to protect its hegemony against an emerging social movement. Far from revealing the eternal intentions of the Creator, natural law formulations more often reflect the particular biases of the age, introducing “contingent practical applications into the definition of the principle[s].”¹⁹ Catholic natural law theory’s “[u]ndue confidence in human reason, as the seat and source of natural law, makes this very concept of law into a vehicle of human sin. It gives the sanctity of universality to the peculiar conditions and unique circumstances in which reason operates in a particular historical moment.” For example, Niebuhr maintains that the “social ethics of Aquinas embody the peculiarities and the contingent factors of a feudal-agrarian economy into a system of fixed socio-ethical principles,”²⁰ just as the specific content of the putatively natural laws of the eighteenth-century physiocrats justified the aspirations of the bourgeois classes.

The epistemological optimism—not to say arrogance—of Thomistic theology reinforces for Niebuhr the grounds upon which Catholic ecclesiology claims its

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 221.

¹⁷ Quoted in Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, p. 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, p. 281.

uniqueness. Roman Catholicism arrogates to itself an “unconditioned possession of truth”²¹ which destroys the Biblical paradox of the “having” and “not having” of the kingdom. In Niebuhr’s estimation, the confidence with which Catholicism regards its own epistemological power undergirds the Church’s “officially intolerant”²² stance toward opposing opinions and the practice of other religions; hence the Church’s favorable view in principle of religious establishment articulated in Leo XIII’s *Immortale Dei* and its merely pragmatic acceptance of religious toleration as outlined by Frs. Ryan and Boland in *Catholic Principles of Politics*.²³ Catholicism, Niebuhr contends, assimilated Greek rationalism in its theology and subjected the individual to the universal rules of the natural law as the mind of the magisterium discerned them. In its articulation of these laws, the Church employed a rigid distinction between truth and error, thus obscuring the “ambiguous character of all knowledge” and engaging in a “sinful spiritual imperialism.”²⁴

Given its epistemological pretensions, Catholic natural law theory is particularly disturbing politically. It lends itself, Niebuhr insists, to the justification of anti-democratic politics, and it has been used in just this way by Catholic regimes. For instance, Niebuhr recalls, feudal aristocrats appealed to the Church’s natural law-based prohibition of usury in order to prop up their position over against burgeoning commercial classes. This ostensibly universal principle was in fact time-bound and “could be maintained only as long as the dominant aristocratic class were borrowers rather than lenders of money. When the static wealth of the landowners yielded to the more dynamic wealth of the financiers and industrialists, the prohibition of usury vanished.”²⁵ This example attests for Niebuhr to the danger of turning relative judgments into absolute principles. This has special significance in politics, since absolute principles are an inadequate, even dangerous, guide for the statesman who must navigate the “morally ambiguous”²⁶ waters of politics which require “the arbitration of conflicting interests and the choice of relative values required in an imperfect world.”²⁷

A Thomistic Response

Reinhold Niebuhr’s indictment of Catholic political thought includes four counts. First, Catholic political thought presupposes an overly optimistic anthropology that lacks self-critical perspective. Second, it relies on natural law ethics which itself tends to absolutize relative historical judgments. Third, the

²¹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 221.

²² Ibid., vol. 2, p. 222.

²³ Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, p. 127. It is important to note that Niebuhr’s criticism here preceded Vatican II’s affirmation of religious freedom in its *Declaration on Religious Liberty*. Thus, in certain aspects, his critique is now dated, though the heart of his claims about the epistemological status of religious claims and moral and political norms still deserves attention.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, p. 224.

²⁵ Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and Natural Law,” p. 89.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, p. 73.

²⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1935), pp. 144-45.

combined force of one and two make it incompatible with the compromise and contingency of political judgments in democratic politics. Fourth, it has been associated historically with the Church's negative view of democratic institutions and advocacy of absolutist regimes. The cumulative strength of Niebuhr's criticisms demands consideration and response. Upon reviewing the work of Yves R. Simon in light of Niebuhr's criticism, one finds ample evidence to suggest that mainstream twentieth-century Thomism offers a powerful rejoinder to Niebuhr and reveals significant points of convergence with Christian Realism.

First, a brief point with respect to the fourth claim above. In Niebuhr's estimation, the fact that the Catholic Church has deployed natural law arguments in the service of dubious religio-political ends reinforces his substantive criticism of Thomistic natural law theory. This claim will not receive much attention here.²⁸ Suffice it to say that Niebuhr can be criticized for making a "guilt by association" fallacy, since it does not follow that because an intellectual tradition—or some of its language or methods—has been appropriated for dubious purposes, the substance of that tradition is *ipso facto* dubious.

In any event, it is in response to Niebuhr's other criticisms that Yves Simon's work appears so fruitful. Considering the first indictment, the theological anthropology underlying Simon's political thought does not succumb to Niebuhr's criticism. A careful reading of Simon indicates that while his anthropology appears more positive than Niebuhr's, it is by no means sanguine. It is, arguably, realistic. And its realism, like Niebuhr's, derives from experience—Simon did encounter the fascist menace face-to-face—and Christian reflection on sin. Considering the possibility of a distinctively "Christian Humanism," Simon proposes that "Christian beliefs concerning original sin do not exclude the confident vision of man that humanism implies," seeming to confirm Niebuhr's criticism. But, Simon hastens to add:

They do contain a warning against the myths of naturalistic optimism. The Christian knows how easily the confidence of the humanist deteriorates into a rejection of the supernatural order. Correspondingly the humanist is permanently tempted to see in Christian mysteries a threat to his exalted notion of man. The solution lies in a humanistic theory which places at the center of its universe the union of divine and human nature in Christ.²⁹

Here, Simon, like Niebuhr, does justice to the dignity of man as the *imago Dei* while recognizing man's temptation to inflate his place in creation. In this regard, Simon can espouse both "ontological optimism" and "moral pessimism."³⁰

²⁸ Part of the rationale behind this decision is the recognition that with the change of the Church's formal position on democracy and religious liberty, Niebuhr's criticism becomes dated. Attention is better spent on the substantive, and potentially perennially valid, criticism of natural law theory.

²⁹ Yves R. Simon, "Christian Humanism: A Way to World Order," in *From Disorder to World Order*, ed. John O. Riedl (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1956), p. 200.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198; Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 80-81.

This ontological optimism, Niebuhr might respond, is itself dubious. Here, too, Simon offers a strong rejoinder and explains the conceptual apparatus Niebuhr rejects. In the Thomistic schema, two systems of gifts, supernatural and preternatural, mark the state of original innocence: the former enabled man to know and love God on a level of which created being is not naturally capable; the latter protected man from hardships to which nature subjects him. Original sin stripped these added perfections. Contrary to Niebuhr's interpretation of Thomism on this point, Simon underscores the serious effects of the Fall, as he emphasizes that the removal of the *superadditum* wounded nature itself, leaving two kinds of effects. The formal consequences are the wounds of nature, the "disquieting propensities" and "incapacities" that created man knew not.³¹ The material consequences are natural conditions, preternaturally suspended in innocence, such as mortality, susceptibility to disease, fallibility in opinion, and the precariousness of virtue. Lest these Thomistic categories obscure the existential quality of Simon's anthropology, he testifies to the frailty of post-lapsarian human nature thus:

All that is implied by moral pessimism is a profound feeling of the wretchedness of our condition; a perfectly sincere disposition to see evil wherever it shows itself, together with its frequency and its extent; will and resolution to knock down the protective screens which our fear and our laziness manufacture to spare us the sight of evil; a thorough sense of the immense difficulties which the accomplishment of good presents. One could say that pessimism is nothing but *depth of moral intelligence*. . . Optimists are men who believe that there are easy questions in the order of human action; men who believe that one can easily be good, become better, improve mankind's lot: they are the shallow minds, the idiots, of the moral order.³²

Simon's ontological optimism did not yield a moral optimism; the fact that human nature did not suffer total corruption in the Fall does not imply a propensity for moral perfectibility in history.

Indeed, Simon underscores the difficulty of achieving virtue and the propensity to err in moral and intellectual judgments. His account of practical reasoning constitutes a rejoinder to Niebuhr's second claim that Thomistic natural law theorists place undue confidence in reason, devise a rigidly deductive scheme of ethics from general principles, and view the moral life as action in accordance with absolute principles. First, it should be noted that Simon's recognition of the difficulty of developing the intellectual virtues informs his own tone of epistemic humility, a far cry from the triumphalist neo-Thomism one might expect from Niebuhr's description. Simon insists that even "the most trifling questions, once examined, will always turn out to be incomparably more difficult than one could have foreseen," and he scolds those blind to the challenges of the mind: "Only shallow minds

³¹Simon, "Christian Humanism," p. 196.

³²Yves R. Simon, *Freedom and Community* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1968), pp. 177-78.

believe that there are such things as easy questions in the sciences, in philosophy, and history. Profound minds know that there are no easy questions.”³³

Not only does Simon perceive the challenge of intellectual life, he clearly acknowledges the difficulties involved in the moral life and has an account of prudence adequate to the complicated facts of moral decision-making. Like Niebuhr, Simon perceives the ambiguity of action; his account of practical knowledge reflects this sensitivity. Rather than a neat, let alone infallible, derivation from a universal principle, a practical judgment always risks error, as it always involves contingent conditions. It may conform to the factual state of affairs, or it may not. “In that sense a practical judgment always falls short of certainty inasmuch as any practical situation involves contingencies that defeat the most earnest endeavor to establish the conformity of our judgments to the factual state of things contingent...”³⁴ Even our best intentions may go awry. Thus, truth in practical knowledge denotes “a relation of conformity between a judgment or a proposition and the requirements of an honest will,” not the logical certainty found in a catalogue of absolute principles concerning all matters of practical affairs; such certainty is illusory.

Moreover, for Simon a practical judgment proceeds from cognition and inclination. The moral agent rationally deliberates but finally settles on a course of action because of inclination. Deliberation does not cease because one has arrived at an airtight conclusion through rational deduction. In fact, Simon argues that deductive reasoning aids little in concrete decision-making, since the life of action involves so many contingencies. And “wherever the contingent is relevant to a decision, logical connection with ethical principles is either loose or purely and simply impossible . . . for prudence cannot determine the mean by derivation from general principles. To know what the right thing to do in this unique existential situation,” Simon insists, “the prudent man relies on inclination.”³⁵ The affective and non-logical character of the movement of the will in a practical judgment renders the practical judgment incommunicable. Just as the practical judgment fails of theoretical truth, it eludes full explanation. In this light, Simon counsels, “Adjustment to life, good sense, good judgment consists, to a large extent, in an ability to know where to stop in the indispensable quest for a certainty that indeed cannot be attained in the world of contingency in which our actions take place.”³⁶ Simon’s account of practical knowledge offers a powerful rejoinder to Niebuhr’s criticism of Thomistic ethics.

Finally, with respect to Niebuhr’s concern that Thomistic natural law theory yields anti-democratic political principles, Simon makes a compelling counter-argument, using a Thomistic framework to erect a philosophy of democratic governance. Simon’s defense of democracy includes Niebuhrian insights into the

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁴ Yves R. Simon, *Practical Knowledge* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), p. 12.

³⁵ Yves R. Simon, *Definition of Moral Virtue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), pp. 116, 127.

³⁶ Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, pp. 12-13.

necessity of coercion and an equilibrium of power, but it is not fundamentally pragmatic. Rather, in the words of Jerome Kerwin, Simon offers a philosophical account “that shows democracy to be grounded firmly on rational principles.”³⁷

Simon justifies political authority as he does authority *per se*, that is, he argues that political authority originates not in human sinfulness, but in human plenitude. The essential function of authority is to choose the means to a given end when those means are not univocal. The essential function of political authority, then, is to direct the community to the common good when the means to that end are plural, a likely situation given human creativity and inventiveness. This function, Simon insists, “originates not in the defects of men and societies but in the nature of society.”³⁸

But what form would political authority take? Would it be anti-democratic? Simon’s analysis of political authority in fact grounds his explicit defense of democracy. Simon espouses a “transmission” theory of government. According to the transmission theory, the first bearer of civil authority—given by God—is the people as a whole, the civil multitude. Circumstances warranting, the people can designate distinct governing personnel, that is, they can *transmit* their natural political authority to a governor or body of governors—the governing personnel may take many forms; what is essential is that it rule the people for the common good.

While the Thomistic tradition recognizes the validity of several forms of government, Simon maintains that there are significant resources in the tradition to support the democratic form. One finds the initial locus of this position in Aquinas himself, as he recognizes the people as the original bearer of political authority. Elaborating on Aquinas, Cajetan affirms that “the royal power, by natural law, resides primarily in the people, and from the people is transferred to the king; it resides first in a community,” a position further expounded by Bellarmine and Suarez.³⁹ As Simon understands it, the natural law tradition recognizes that democracy is a natural institution, inasmuch as it can exist without any positive disposition. The move to a distinct governing personnel is a judgment about the common good.

Simon recognizes that in most cases such personnel will be necessary, and he contends that a strong natural law argument exists for a representative democracy over other forms of appointment. Borrowing Aquinas’ distinction between political and despotic regimes, Simon argues that a representative democracy actualizes most effectively the political nature of a regime, since the governed have the institutional means of resistance to bad government readily at their disposal in the electoral process. And it is right that this means be available to all: “That the multitude in charge of selecting the governing personnel should comprise all citizens follows from the nature of political society. Other societies are built on the basis of

³⁷ Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, p. vii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

exclusive membership; not so the state, which is, by essence, the concern of all.”⁴⁰ Not only ought the people retain this power as a guard against despotic governance—a good Niebuhrian measure — they ought to remain actively engaged in political decision-making at various levels of government, in accord with the principle of autonomy (subsidiarity), because this is what human plenitude requires.

Human plenitude, according to Simon, also requires various civil freedoms fully compatible with a natural law-based theory of democracy. Sharing Niebuhr’s concern over the premature suppression of vitality, Simon affirms that government based on the people’s deliberation demands freedom of expression, of the press, and of association, so as to discuss openly the means to the common good. Also wary of moralistic absolutism, Simon recommends that “civil government cannot afford to demand much along the line of ethical perfection; whenever it crusades indiscriminately, it destroys little evil and much good.”⁴¹ Likewise, Simon fears the heavy hand of the law in coercing moral behavior. While the state legitimately exercises this function, it ought prefer persuasion as an instrument; a strong democracy relies on the latter far more than the former.

Conclusion

Simon thus proposes a theoretical defense of democracy largely compatible with Reinhold Niebuhr’s, though it is grounded in the Thomistic natural law tradition. His understanding of human nature, sin, moral action, and political authority meets the challenges posed by Niebuhr’s Christian Realist criticism and in so doing defies the conventional polarization of the two positions. In short, Simon’s work reveals that a Thomistic anthropology and political vision yields a realistic view of man’s situation, a theoretical framework to ground democratic government, and an account of practical reasoning compatible with the challenges of democratic citizenship in an age of pluralism.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.