

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

*The Limits  
Of Realism*

"Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli" by Steven Forde, in *The Journal of Politics* (May 1992), Dept. of Political Science, Louisiana State Univ., Baton Rouge, La. 70803.

During the last half-century, through the work of Hans J. Morgenthau, George F. Kennan, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others, *realism*—i.e. skepticism about the applicability of ethical standards to international politics—has become a leading school of thought on international relations. Today, the realist mantle is claimed by both "neoisolationist" liberals and by some conservatives who oppose Wilsonian idealism in foreign policy. Although most modern realists do not favor suspending ethical standards in domestic politics, University of North Texas political scientist Forde notes, few have seriously considered whether morality can be entirely discounted in one realm without losing its force in the other.

Two figures that loom large in the realist tradition—Thucydides, the fifth century B.C. Greek historian, and Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), the Italian political theorist—did take up that question, and they arrived at very different answers. Both thinkers were extreme realists with regard to international affairs, believing that necessities arising from human nature and the nature of international relations overrode ethical obligations. Even imperialism could be excused. In the Peloponnesian War, according to Thucydides, the Spartans were not to blame for their aggression against the Athenians, because "the growth of Athenian power . . . inspired fear in [them] and compelled them to go to war." But neither was Athenian imperialism to blame. After all, as the Athenian envoys told the Melians, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

Machiavelli took the realist argument even further, Forde says, developing it into "a universal imperialist imperative." As he wrote in

*The Prince* (1513), "war may not be avoided but is deferred to the advantage of others." Machiavelli's international realism, Forde says, was just part of his "thoroughgoing ethical realism." He was not the first to discover immoral political necessity, but he was the first to insist "that the political world be made over in its image." He wanted "to make princes, states, and the world in general more 'Machiavellian' than they actually are." Machiavelli denied moral principles altogether.

Thucydides did not. As shown in his lament over the "barbaric" slaughter at Mycalessus, Forde points out, the Greek historian saw "a moral, or humane, or perhaps simply 'human' dimension to politics, a dimension which transcends the 'realist' side of political life, and in some sense is to be preferred to it." He also saw that international immorality "ultimately threatens the moral basis, and thus the integrity, of the community." Despite its great success in the international arena, Athens ultimately lost the Peloponnesian War because of a breakdown of cohesion at home. "The primacy of self-interest over justice, proclaimed for a generation or more as the basis of the city's [foreign] policy, came eventually to infect the city's domestic life," Forde notes. "When the community declares itself free from moral restraints in international politics, individuals conclude eventually that those restraints have no claim upon them either."

The fact that necessity dictates international immorality was, in Thucydides' eyes, "a problem if not a tragedy," Forde writes. The Greek historian's imperfect solution: moderation. Statesmen ought to resist the force of realism as much as possible, not only for the sake of the community, but because morality demands it.

*Black Catholics*

"Hangin' with the Romeboys" by Paul Elie, in *The New Republic* (June 11, 1992), 1220 19th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Four summers ago, former Roman Catholic priest George Augustus Stalling founded the African American Catholic Congress (a.k.a. Imani Temple) and declared his congregation independent of Rome. Soon excommunicated, Stallings then appeared everywhere from "60

Minutes" to "Donahue," spreading his gospel, which, as Elie describes it, is "that the Church, like America, is a racist, Eurocentric yoke around the necks of black Americans."

Very few black Catholics followed Stallings out of the Church, notes Elie, a writer who spe-