RELIGION & 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-

cializes in religion, but his move reflected the mood of discontent in their ranks. Blacks today make up less than five percent of the Church's 52 million American members. Black Catholics are a minority among blacks and "an anomaly among Catholics." There are 1,100 mostly black parishes and only 300 black priests. Black priests are rarely assigned to highly visible positions or as pastors in white parishes. There are only 11 black bishops, all but two of them serving under white bishops in dioceses with large black populations.

The Church's legacy of racism is not forgotten. Early Catholic leaders supported slavery as an easy way to win converts, and even after emancipation, blacks were consigned to the side areas or balconies of Catholic churches. They were excluded altogether from Catholic schools. Yet some early black Americans "responded to Catholicism's internationalism, its black saints, its claims to be a Church for all peoples." Newly arrived slaves also found in the Church's incense, libations, and feast days something more like their own African forms of worship than the austere Protestantism that prevailed in colonial America. Today, encouraged by Rome, blacks in some parishes celebrate mass with gospel choirs and practice baptism by immersion.

Yet, discontent simmers. Some black Catholics favor a new canonical rite for themselves, a separate denomination within the Catholic Church with its own liturgy, canon law, and clergy. The rite, if approved by Rome, would make the African-American denomination the second-largest black church in the United States, after the Baptists.

But many black Catholics are wary. There is concern, says Elie, that "'resegregating' the Church would be economically foolish for parishes," and would overburden the few black Catholic priests. Furthermore, Elie suggests, their long, if painful, history of loyalty to the Church makes blacks hesitate to isolate themselves from it. After all, "The current strains do not approximate the agony of slavery or segregation, and a new separatism is widely perceived as a betrayal of the black Catholic tradition rather than its culmination."

Supporters of the separate rite argue that the Church places too much emphasis on assimilating its members into mainstream American society; blacks "moving freely in the margins," says outspoken black Catholic priest Lawrence Lucas, would be better able to maintain a critical distance from society. Yet for all its possible benefits, Elie believes, the isolation of blacks within a separate rite "would be a great loss to the American Catholic Church—and American society as a whole."

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

The Rise and Fall Of Oat Bran

"Reconcilable Differences" by Ingram Olkin, in *The Sciences* (July–Aug. 1992), The New York Acad. of Sciences, 2 East 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Remember when oat bran was all the rage? A small 1984 study indicated that it dramatically lowered high levels of cholesterol. Then, a 1987 book, *The Eight-Week Cholesterol Cure*, trumpeted the humble bran's wondrous properties. Finally, a 1988 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* proclaimed it a more cost-effective treatment for high cholesterol than any available drug. By the end of that year, oat bran was "in" among the health-conscious—the '80s' answer to bean sprouts. The Quaker Oats Company's sales of what was once the stuff of childhood tantrums increased sixfold, and David's Cookies was selling 100,000 oat-bran muffins a week.

But two years later, the bubble burst. A 1990 study showed that refined wheat, used in plain old white bread and other now-scorned baked goods, although lacking the soluble fiber of oat bran, has the same effect on cholesterol levels—and does not produce the gastrointestinal distress that oat bran does. The study's authors suggested that oats and refined wheat reduce cholesterol simply by replacing the fatty foods that people would otherwise eat.

The mass delusion about oat bran could have been avoided, contends Olkin, a Stanford professor of statistics and education. If "all available oat bran studies [had] been meticulously analyzed before the furor of the late 1980s," he points out, "the evidence for a health effect would have looked flimsy indeed. A handful of small trials studying only eight to 15 people—minute samples by statisticians' standards—did