Book on Niebuhr Major Contribution To Rekindled Debate On Policy of Realism

By J. Bryan Hehir, S.J.

Analysts regularly observe that debates on United States foreign policy run in cycles. No theme has been more consistently present in the debates than the "idealism-realism" polemic. In the Carter administration commentators described the human-rights emphasis as a continuation of Wilsonian liberal idealism. Today, some would contend that the Reagan posture is a return to realism. The case is more complex in both instances, but "realism" as a topic of study and a tagline for policy is once again in the forefront of the U.S. political debate.

Two publishing events symbolize the revival of realism. First, a new edition of the textbook of realism, Hans Morgenthau’s Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace, has been prepared by Morgenthau’s former student and collaborator, Kenneth Thompson. The Morgenthau text, in use now for almost 40 years, is the secular point of reference for defining the often slippery notion of realism. Second, the theological counterpart to political realism, “Christian Realism,” was also identified with one thinker, Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary in New York. A brilliant new book by Richard Wightman Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography, appeared in January, just as the realism debate was being rekindled.

The secular and theological versions of realism did not begin with the same categories and did not always end with identical conclusions, but in the public mind, Morgenthau and Niebuhr together fashioned the realist creed. In a long review of the Morgenthau volume in the Atlantic, Stanley Hoffmann of Harvard shows that the phrase political realism is still used more confidently than it can be precisely defined. The task becomes doubly complex when the secular tenets are then reshaped in theological terms. Many appeal today to Morgenthau for policies he would not likely have espoused.

Niebuhr is similarly invoked by supporters of contending positions with very different ideas of where his realism leads. In a recent issue of The Christian Century Michael Novak and Robert McAfee Brown illustrate the very different legacies Niebuhr is said to inspire.

The Fox volume, acclaimed by every reviewer in secular and religious journals, provides much material for sifting through Niebuhr’s complex theological vision of realism. Fox is so comprehensive in his research and so meticulously careful in his judgments that he makes it very hard for anyone to capture Niebuhr. That will not stop people from trying, it will just make it difficult to do. It is precisely the way in which the book avoids trying to settle posthumous debates about Niebuhr that produces in the reader a sense of confidence about Fox’s systematic interpretation of Niebuhr’s significance.

Fox deftly resists isolating any single element of Niebuhr’s dialectical theological style or identifying any single period of his life as the Niebuhrian position. The care with which the biography is written makes it very difficult for partisans to invoke Niebuhr in the service of a cause or a particular conclusion. Fox’s work will help keep all of us honest in our use of Niebuhr. For myself, the Niebuhr who emerges from this volume is interesting because of his theology, his politics and his personal witness.

Fox recounts the various ways in which Niebuhr eschewed the title theologian, preferring to describe himself as a “teacher of social ethics.” While some of his academic contemporaries were all too ready to support Niebuhr’s disclaimer, and some admirers in the secular arena wished he would forsake the categories of sin and grace, Niebuhr’s status as a theologian is not in doubt. His self-description is half correct: he was principally a social ethicist, pursuing his craft at the point where the implications of Christian faith provided direction for secular events. But Niebuhr’s lasting legacy was that he provided a theological framework for social ethics, grounding its analysis in the central doctrines of Christian faith.

More precisely, Niebuhr shaped a theological anthropology that mediated the meaning of the Christian vision for the world of politics and international relations. By probing the nature of the person, the possibilities and limits of human community, the role of power in the pursuit of peace and the place of self-interest in the quest for justice, Niebuhr broke open traditional political categories in new ways. His contribution (continued on page 2)
Niebuhr Book Adds to Debate on Realism

(Continued from page 1)

bution was properly theological; he cast secular policy debates in the categories of sin, grace and sacrificial love. Many, including some secular realists, were uncomfortable with the language, but appreciated how he enriched policy perspectives and political choice with these ancient terms. He spoke as a theologian — even when he doubted his own credentials.

If he was more of a theologian than he would admit, he was also more of a politician than "teacher of social ethics" usually implies. The Fox biography allows one to distinguish three forms of political influence: active engagement, direct impact and indirect impact. Engagement in the political process was a constant in Niebuhr's life, reaching from his candidacy on the socialist ticket in the 1930s through his leadership of Americans for Democratic Action in the 1940s and 1950s.

The Fox biography inclines me to evaluate this immediate involvement in the political process as Niebuhr's least effective form of political influence. In contrast, his direct political impact through the scores of articles and essays he produced on foreign and domestic politics established Niebuhr as a unique religious and political figure in the United States. As a columnist, analyst and commentator, Niebuhr was a political actor, but not a politician.

A third form of influence, indirect impact, was the manner in which Niebuhr shaped the views of other public figures in the United States. The comment attributed to George Kennan, that Niebuhr was "the father of us all," is disputed by Kennan, but Niebuhr's influence did not hang on a single quote. He shaped a perspective on history, politics, morality and power that many used explicitly and scores of others absorbed simply because it was such a pervasive influence in the culture. A quote not in doubt was Morgenthau's designation of Niebuhr as "the greatest living political philosopher of America."

Niebuhr's theological and political influence must also be seen in light of his personal witness. Here one can speak in vocational terms — the way in which he wove distinct dimensions of his life into an integral posture and presence in American society. Fox does a superb job of uncovering the person at the core of the presence. Niebuhr's psychological struggles, his intellectual journey and his pilgrimage of faith, are all examined with a careful tone of honest analysis and reverent respect.

The picture that emerges is that of a preacher of unmatched influence but no pulpit of his own, a prodigious scholar with unconventional credentials and a political figure who never held public office. He moved in uncharted territory and he recast public discourse in both church and society. The revival of the realist debate will be one reason to read the Fox volume, but the book and the man it analyzes are wider and deeper than any one debate can exhaust.

(Father Hehir is a senior research scholar of the Kennedy Institute.)
Percival’s ‘Paternalism’ Is Re-examined  
In Light of His Life and Moral Writings

By Edmund D. Pellegrino, M.D.

The following is excerpted from an article to be published in the Archives of Internal Medicine.

Since its appearance in 1803, (Thomas) Percival’s Ethics has been the dominant influence in American medical ethics and the paradigmatic source document for the first, and subsequent, AMA Code. It influence is exceeded only by the Oath and Deontological books of the Hippocratic Corpus. Yet the moral philosophy underlying Percival’s Ethics has not been well studied, and indeed, seems misunderstood in the standard account given by most contemporary commentators.

Almost all recent ethicists and historians take Percival to task for his elitism, for a code that seems to give preeminence to the good of the medical guild, and that reeks of a demeaning paternalism repugnant to our pluralistic and participatory democracy. Such unanimity of opinion among scholars is surprising since the body of Percival’s writing offers considerable evidence to the contrary. That evidence is contained in Percival’s own writings in moral philosophy and in the content of his Code, once we interpret it against Percival’s other moral treatises and his own life.

The moral philosophy undergirding Percival’s Medical Ethics is that of a morally perceptive English physician of the Augustan age, grounded in a deep religious faith, joined to a love of learning and thinking, cognizant of the importance of character and virtue, and living out his precepts in his own personal and professional life. All of this is what Percival means to subsume under the term “Gentleman,” when in his dedication of his Ethics to his son, he says that the purpose of Medical Ethics was to form him “. . . . to that propriety and dignity of conduct of a Gentleman.”

It is important to understand that, for Percival, a Gentleman was defined more by the virtue of his conduct, than by the purity of his patients of nobility, or the size of his estates. Percival placed his trust in the character of the physician as gentleman, as someone who by virtue of his profession voluntarily assumes uncommon responsibility, is expected to behave accordingly, and to be accountable for that behavior.

We are not necessarily the richer morally, in our day, for grounding our ethics in rules and rights rather than virtue. We have, as Percival did, good reasons to doubt the character of an unfortunate number of those who practice medicine. But, it remains to be seen whether law, rights, and duties can provide a more reassuring foundation for medical ethics than the character of a virtuous physician. We still need physicians who voluntarily, consciously, and sincerely impose upon themselves a higher degree of self-effacement than is customary in other callings.

(Dr. Pellegrino is director of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics.)

Faden Leads Johns Hopkins AIDS Project

Ruth Faden, a social psychologist who holds joint appointments at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics and at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Hygiene and Public Health, is leading a group of public-health students at Johns Hopkins in an exploratory study of the special problems of AIDS among intravenous drug users. Of particular concern is that IV drug users may be a major source of transmission for the disease into the general population. For example, male intravenous drug users who contract the AIDS virus by sharing contaminated needles or syringes may infect their female sexual partners who in turn can infect their children. Also, prostitutes who use drugs and who have contracted the virus through contaminated needles or syringes can infect their clients who in turn may infect other sexual partners.

The only method currently known to halt the spread of AIDS among IV drug users is to influence them to reduce their own risk (and the risk of others) by inducing them to stop injecting drugs or, more realistically, by persuading them to use only sterile needles and syringes. The most straightforward way to accomplish this goal is to distribute needles and syringes free, but this practice is illegal in most jurisdictions. As an alternative, public-health agencies are turning to education campaigns with as yet unknown results.

The Hopkins students, who will examine the problem in Baltimore, will interview representatives of public-health agencies, community groups and the local media to establish what, if anything, these groups are doing to educate intravenous drug users about the risk of contracting AIDS, and about how they can protect themselves from contracting the virus. The students will also investigate the extent to which these groups have been working together on the AIDS and IV-drug-user issue, and how each sees its role and responsibility.

One focus of the project is the ethical issues raised by AIDS education and intervention programs, including such concerns as privacy and truth-telling, as well as the responsibility of the media with respect to this public-health crisis.
Biotechnology and the World

On Feb. 6 several members of the Kennedy Institute faculty participated in a day-long seminar at Georgetown under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy on "The International Implications of Biotechnology." The program was introduced by Peter F. Krogh, dean of the School of Foreign Service, and the keynote address was delivered by Edmund D. Pellegrino, M.D., director of the Kennedy Institute. The program was moderated by the Hon. David D. Newsom, director of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy and a former under secretary of state.

Somewhat presciently, the luncheon speaker was the astronaut, Joe Engle, a space shuttle commander, who spoke on "The Human Dimension of Space Flight." Other subjects discussed included "Recent Biotechnological Advances in the Field of Medicine" and "New Biotechnology in Agriculture and Forestry." Rihito Kimura and Hans-Martin Sass of the Kennedy Institute joined in a discussion of "International Cooperation and Biotechnological Transfer" and LeRoy Walters and Warren Reich of the institute discussed "Ethical Dimensions of Biotechnology in an International Perspective."

K.I. Roundup

Hans-Martin Sass, a senior research fellow at the Kennedy Institute and a professor of philosophy at Ruhr University in West Germany, has been elected a member of a central commission of the West German Medical Association, which has the task of drafting guidelines for in vitro fertilization. Sass is the only philosopher on the commission.

• Abigail Rian Evans of the institute staff is co-directing a conference in May on "Addressing Stress in Adolescents." The conference is sponsored by the National Capital Presbyterian Health Ministries and the District of Columbia chapter of the American Red Cross.

• Edmund D. Pellegrino, M.D., director of the institute, received the second annual Cardinal Stritch Award presented by the Diocesan Coordinators and the Aquinas Medal of the University of Dallas in January and will receive the Calvary Medal of Calvary Hospital in New York on April 9.

Bioethics Symposium

A one-day symposium on "Withholding and Withdrawing Artificial Sustenance: Catholic Ethical Teaching and Public Policy" will be held on March 14 at the Konover Hotel in Miami Beach. The co-sponsors of the symposium are the Bioethics Institute at St. Francis Hospital in Miami Beach and the Florida Catholic Conference. For further information and registration, please contact the Rev. Dr. James J. McCartney, director of the institute, or Ms. Leona Hausman, administrative secretary. The address is: Bioethics Institute at St. Francis Hospital, 250 W. 63d Street, Miami Beach, Florida 33141. The telephone number is: (305) 868-5000. Father McCartney, an alumnus of the Kennedy Institute, is currently an associate member.

Franck Memorial Lecture

On the evening of June 2, Prof. Baruch Broady of the Baylor University College of Medicine and Rice University will deliver the first annual Isaac Franck Distinguished Memorial Lecture in Jewish Ethics and Jewish Studies. This year’s lecture will be in Jewish medical ethics and it has been timed to coincide with the Kennedy Institute's Intensive Bioethics course, which is offered the first week of June every year. The lecture is open to the public. Funding for the series was provided by contributions made to the institute in Dr. Franck’s memory.