

In Memoriam:
GERHART NIEMEYER
1907–1997

Gerhart Niemeyer died on 23 June 1997. He was, for four decades, a defining presence in the Department of Government at Notre Dame, as well as a valued friend and frequent contributor to this journal.

Niemeyer was born in Essen, Germany, and was educated at the University of Kiel and at Cambridge. He left Germany in 1933 and, after a brief period spent teaching in Spain, he came to the United States, teaching first at Princeton and later at Ogelthorpe University in Georgia. During the early 1950s he worked for the State Department and the Council on Foreign Relations. He came to Notre Dame in 1955 and took his place with other extraordinary European scholars, including Steven Kertesz, F. A. Hermens, and Anton–Herman Chroust.

Niemeyer contributed six articles and twenty–four reviews to *The Review of Politics*. His life–long interests were perhaps best represented by the first of the feature articles, “Lenin and the Total Critique of Society” (1964), where he wrote that “Human order is in the last analysis possible only as men are aware of participating in realms of being that transcend human purposes.” That statement is a touchstone of Niemeyer’s thought. It is not original—like his friend, Eric Voegelin, Niemeyer regarded lack of originality as evidence of the truth of an idea—but reminding people of its truth was the heart of Niemeyer’s vocation. The notion of “total critique,” as the distinctively modern form of self–destructive rebellion against the world, represented the greatest threat to human order; and Niemeyer devoted his theoretically richest book, *Between Nothingness and Paradise* (1971), to its explication and analysis, though Niemeyer’s own critical faculties were always guided by those transcendent realms in which he grounded his life. A godly portion of his career, including his six books and countless articles on communism, was spent analyzing the ideological mass movements that have plagued so much of the twentieth century. Thus what Niemeyer wrote of his mentor, Hermann Heller, in the preface to his first book, *Law without Force* (1941), could easily be said of Niemeyer himself: “His urge to

penetrate the phenomena of political association with the clarity of the spirit sprang not from a mere intellectual interest in his work but from the depth of his soul, which suffered from arbitrariness and the lack of order in politics much as a man may suffer from the moral inadequacies of his own nature. Yet the strength of his character made him look straight into the face of realities, without flinching from the ugliness or covering their features with the veil of wishful thinking." It is also crucial that Niemeyer's critique of ideology was not simply negative, but part of a larger affirmation of the goodness of creation, an affirmation most evident in some of his more occasional essays.

To list his publications and concerns is to give only a partial notion of the man. Gerhart Niemeyer was cultivated in a way that few people now are, academics included. He was an accomplished musician, an enthusiastic traveler, and was steeped in the literatures of several languages. He was also a delightful host who practiced an old-world hospitality that made an evening at his home an education of both mind and palate. Most centrally, Gerhart Niemeyer was a man of deep faith whose love of God and the church was the anchor of his being. An atheist as a young man, Niemeyer converted to Christianity in the 1930s. He was ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church in 1973 and in 1980, at the age of 73, was ordained a priest. In 1993 he was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

In many respects, Niemeyer's character is captured by Aristotle's term, *spoudaios*, since maturity and discipline radiated from his person, although the Greek term does not do full justice to his profound Christianity. Throughout his life, Gerhart Niemeyer was a reminder to his students, colleagues, and friends of the possibilities of human excellence, and the deep nobility of that life shines on "in realms of being that transcend human purposes."

—V. Bradley Lewis

Contributors To This Issue

RICHARD S. RUDERMAN is Assistant Professor of Political Science in the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. **MARKUS FISCHER** is Visiting Lecturer and Postdoctoral Fellow in the University of Chicago's Department of Political Science. **PAUL FRANCO** is Associate Professor of Government in Bowdoin College. **JOHN C. FORTIER** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science in Boston College. **JOHN L. HILTON** is Adjunct Professor of Statistics in Brigham Young University. **NOEL B. REYNOLDS** is Professor of Political Science in Brigham Young University. **ARLENE W. SAXONHOUSE** is Professor of Political Science in the University of Michigan. **HEIDI D. STUDER** teaches political philosophy in the Department of Political Science in the University of Alberta.

GEORGE A. BRINKLEY is Professor Emeritus of Government in the University of Notre Dame. **V. BRADLEY LEWIS** is Assistant Professor in the School of Philosophy in the Catholic University of America. **BENJAMIN GREGG** is Assistant Professor of Government in the University of Texas at Austin. **PATRICK F. MCKINLAY** is Assistant Professor of History and Political Studies in Morningside College, Sioux City. **ARISTIDE TESSITORE** is Associate Professor of Political Science in Furman University. **LAURIE M. JOHNSON BAGBY** is Associate Professor of Political Science in Kansas State University. **THOMAS S. HIBBS** teaches philosophy in Boston College. **KATE LANGDON**

FORHAN is Professor of Political Science in Siena College. **FRANCIS MORAN, III**, is Adjunct Professor of Political Science in Jersey City State College. **SUSAN GLUCK MEZEY** is Professor of Political Science in Loyola University Chicago. **TERESA GODWIN PHELPS** is Professor of Law in the University of Notre Dame School of Law. **STELLA Z. THEODOULOU** is Chair and Associate Professor of Political Science in California State University, Northridge. **DERMOT QUINN** is a member of the Arts and Letters faculty in Seton Hall University.

INSTRUCTIONS TO CONTRIBUTORS

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