

*Michael Henry*

## The Heritage of Gerhart Niemeyer

After I learned that Gerhart Niemeyer was dying I found myself frequently recalling a passage from the end of Plato's *Phaedo*. Just before his execution Socrates has temporarily left the company of his friends for a last visit with his family, and *Phaedo*, the narrator, reports that the friends began to speak sorrowfully of the great misfortune that had befallen them. "We all felt," he says, "as though we were being deprived of a father and would be fatherless for the rest of our lives."

When I first met Gerhart Niemeyer at Notre Dame early in 1970 I found a man of integrity and prodigious learning, possessed of an intensely clear and rigorous mind and a personality combining charismatic authority with humility, warmth, generosity, and humor. Eventually I came to know and appreciate his abiding concern with nurturing and supporting his students, many of whom became his friends. In his continued efforts to promote our success I believe he was motivated certainly by a fatherly interest in our personal accomplishments, but also, on a deeper level, by a sense of responsibility for fostering a succeeding generation to continue the work in which he saw himself engaged, handing on a critically deepened understanding of what he had received. Niemeyer's excellence at "fathering" grew

out of his contemplative dedication to "sonship"; that is, he gave a lifetime of profound thought to the tradition, and the faith, he had received. Because he strove to live and even to embody what he knew and loved he was able to transmit to his students an example of the life of philosophy in the truest sense, the life dedicated to the loving search for wisdom.

Had Athens been a place of order and love of truth Socrates might have passed his life hewing stone and Plato pursuing political power. Niemeyer's destiny was to live through and search for the antidote to a far more barbarous and irrational period, "this terrible century," as he called it, the age of Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, as well as a number of lesser ideologies, some of which still plague us. After Hitler came to power in 1933 Niemeyer left his native Germany and, a few years later, arrived in the United States, where he was to lend his expertise in various ways to the United States government, particularly in the development of policy toward Communism. As the events of the century unfolded, Niemeyer, like other serious thinkers of his

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generation who found the intellectual tools they had inherited inadequate to grasp the enormity of evil they found around them, began to search for the way to lift the “fog of meaninglessness” of contemporary nihilism.

In his first book in English, *Law Without Force: The Function of Politics in International Law*, published in 1941, he raised the question of how the international order based on international law had broken down so completely. At the beginning of the book he sketched out the work that he would continue for more than half a century.

The generation which had to bury its hopes of peace, security and harmony on [September 1, 1939] is called upon to stand up and make a new effort to master the difficulties of international politics. The task demands the energy of unsentimental thinking, regardless of the prejudices which may have to be sacrificed. Two problems have to be faced: The first is to give an unflinchingly realistic account of the past, the second is to try to conceive an alternative for the future.

Unsentimental and unprejudiced thinking, rather difficult to sustain, is the intellectually open attitude that Niemeyer carefully cultivated and sought to impart to his students. He once advised me to work at analyzing a text “like a dog worrying a bone,” that is, he believed one should never approach a text on the basis of presuppositions or try to force a text or theory into a certain framework, but should rather concentrate tenaciously on the laborious task of digging out fully and seeing clearly *what was there*. This required an objective analysis of the author’s often unconscious assumptions, the questions he was trying to answer, his reasons for making the arguments that he did, and the implications of his theory. Only through such clear seeing and thinking, such unflinching realism, is it possible to continue what T.S. Eliot characterized as “the fight to recover what has

been lost/ And found and lost again and again.” At the end of *Law Without Force* Niemeyer says that “what is needed is not organization but orientation, not a mechanism but organic order,” that is, reality is not subject to our will, as ideologues have claimed, but there is a natural, *given* order of reality which can be understood only if we approach it in the proper orientation or perceptive, and receptive, frame of mind.

Although Niemeyer’s later work ranged far beyond this first book in its scope, it was always guided by the same spirit. After the 1950s three major concerns dominated his writings: the analysis of Communist Ideology and of the sort of foreign policy the West should maintain toward the Soviet Union, the interpretation of the philosophy of Eric Voegelin, and the realistic assessment of the disorders besetting Western civilization. Books such as *An Inquiry Into Soviet Mentality*, *The Handbook on Communism*, *Deceitful Peace*, and *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, as well as numerous articles, bear witness to Niemeyer’s labors to explain the roots and the true meaning of Communism, an ideology which, as a modern Gnosticism, grew out of the rejection of a reality declared evil and the desire to replace it with a new reality more to the ideologist’s liking. Only too well aware that few people in the West were able to grasp the true metaphysical perversion of ideologies such as Nazism and Communism, and that most people, even government officials responsible for foreign policy, interpreted the actions of Communists in terms of their own assumptions and illusions, not in terms of what Communism actually was, Niemeyer cut through the confusion to clarify what was really at stake in the Cold War. Such an understanding required getting inside the minds of those who accepted Communist Ideology as the truth, which was why at the beginning of his two-semester seminar on Communism Niemeyer advised

his students that what they had to learn, through a rigorous analysis of the texts, was how to think like Communists and at the same time to see clearly everything that was wrong with such thinking.

The degree to which he himself had penetrated the true nature, and the insidious evil, of Communism is apparent in his remarkable essay, published in *Modern Age* in the Winter of 1957-58, entitled "The Tourist's Soviet Russia." He describes at length what he observed in his travels through the Soviet Union and explains in detail how and why all the appearances of a benevolent society disguise the sinister and humanly destructive purposes flowing from the state's, and the ideology's, contempt for the real nature of human beings.

Because of this radical and irrational rejection of reality, which has been at the root of the unprecedented evils of the twentieth century, Niemeyer concluded that the West's policy toward Communist nations should exclude accommodation, appeasement, and defeatism. Unlike "neutralists" in the late 1950s who thought that the risk of nuclear war was so terrible that the West should, in effect, simply surrender to Communism (there were many who thought that the West would lose eventually anyway), Niemeyer believed there is an evil worse than death, namely abjectly surrendering to radical moral evil. In his 1960 article in *Modern Age*, "Risk or Betrayal? The Crossroads of Western Policy," he argued vehemently against the

defeatist and virtually nihilist "Better Red than dead" attitude of surrendering to evil rather than risking physical destruction.

The truth of our situation is...that we are threatened not by one destructive force of unprecedented dimensions, but by two. The atom bomb represents material devastation; the Communist Party, political destruction. The latter,

as a political force, is as demonic, as novel, as un-heard of as nuclear explosion. The former's destructiveness is on a new level of *quantity*..., while Communism is destructive with a novel *quality* (not mere injustice or mere unfreedom, but the ravaging of the reality of human life by the spirit of dogmatized unreality).

Western intellectuals understand the danger of material destruction, which is, after all, simple and obvious. The quality of Communism's destructiveness has so far escaped their grasp. To understand it, one must get oneself to enter a mental world of

distortion, reason perverted with the aid of force, half-truth set up as dogma, deceit espoused as norm.

He put the drastic spiritual consequences of moral surrender very succinctly and graphically, and because his argument provides a clear insight into how he understood the stark demands of integrity I think it is important to quote him at some length.

[T]he neutralists contrast the choice of "race suicide" with that of the "continued existence of mankind." But one wonders in what sense choosing the risk of an atomic war can be called "suicide"; and the deliberate abandonment of the convictions underlying our public order to an evil system can deserve to be called "continued existence"? Supposedly all of us, including neutralists, assume that man is not just a physi-



Gerhart Niemeyer

cal being but also a spiritual being,...that he has a soul, that he can be destroyed not only in his body but also in his *psyche*, and that he can bring about himself either kind of destruction. Deliberate and knowing betrayal of his deepest convictions for the sake of bodily safety is surely one of the ways in which a man can break his own backbone for ever.

In the same way a nation can commit moral suicide.... Partial goods, of course, are sacrificed to greater goods in the daily decisions of every community. These compromises, however, occur within the more fundamental framework of the entire order, which as such remains untouched. But when this order as a whole is surrendered to another public system—an evil system at that—the backbone of common life has been broken. There is no restoring what has thus been killed.

Niemeyer was not, of course, advocating war. He was simply pointing out what the Western democracies were in danger of losing sight of, that when the policy toward the radical evil of ideological dictatorship is peace at any price the price becomes morally and spiritually prohibitive. Loyalty to truth, a loyalty that entails the willingness to run risks in bearing witness to truth, provides the only genuine basis of hope and the good life.

Beginning in the 1950s, Niemeyer's writings began to show the influence of Eric Voegelin, whom Niemeyer had gotten to know in 1947. Voegelin, a fellow refugee from Nazism, was an extraordinary philosopher with a concern similar to Niemeyer's—understanding and seeking to avert a repetition of the horrors of the twentieth century. Niemeyer gratefully accepted Voegelin's magisterial analysis of history and of human consciousness as existing in the tension of searching for the Divine Ground of Being, and because he read Voegelin's books with the same critical penetration with which he read everything else, he was able to play, in several of his essays, the important role of intermediary and interpreter of Voegelin's profound

and often difficult thinking. (Niemeyer also translated Voegelin's book *Anamnesis*, which contains important essays on his theory of consciousness.)

He applied his own thinking, enriched by a fully digested comprehension of Voegelin, to the theme that came to dominate his later essays, namely truth and order, and their decline, in Western civilization as a whole. Although Communism and the other ideologies were the most serious loss of reality, it seems that societies that did not succumb to these ideologies still suffer from the same disease, although in milder forms. It is not an exogenous disorder but one with roots in the tradition itself, and in his discriminating study of the Western tradition Niemeyer labored at diagnosing the pathology and tracking down its ultimate causes in the metaphysical loss of being and the good. Regarding the possibilities of a restoration of order he was hopeful but far from certain. This depended on whether or not Western societies could rediscover what was valid in the tradition and re-establish order on the basis of truth gained through regenerative spiritual experiences.

The respectful and loving relationship with the wisdom to be found in the tradition was central to Niemeyer's understanding of political and spiritual order. In his 1974 essay "The 'Autonomous' Man" (included in the ISI edition of his essays called *Aftersight and Foresight*) Niemeyer traced the cause of modern anomie to the devolution from the recognition that we are part of an order much greater than ourselves to the mere "invertebrate subjectivity" of autonomy. Having stripped autonomy down to its essence as the radical and disorder-engendering rejection of norms, hierarchies, and structures of reality in order to replace them with whatever the self wills in its pursuit of freedom as power, at the end of the essay he presents to the reader the

autonomous man minus delusions of grandeur: "...we conclude that the autonomous man is 1) man without a father, having divested himself not merely of his heavenly Father, but also of his earthly parents, his forebears, and the past in general; 2) man without a Creator....; 3) man without any judge...." Because human existence is temporal and the wisdom gained by each generation will be lost unless it is passed on to succeeding generations, autonomous selves who reject the tradition and all authority simply withdraw from humanity into a private, meaningless world.

His analysis of the disorders, the rebellion, and intellectual barbarism of modernity is matched by the richness of his reflections on the remedy, which requires, essentially, conversion to an attitude of intellectual and spiritual openness to what reality is, both in its earthly imperfection and its divine perfection. In his essays, in particular, the reader frequently encounters philosophers such as Aristotle and Augustine whom Niemeyer regarded as particularly representative of this openness, and there are several words and phrases that are like leitmotifs running through his writings, words in which his whole understanding of the openness of the good life reverberates: love, loyalty, humility, gratitude, praise, deference for being and truth, tradition, goodness. There is a great deal of truth in John Guegen's comment, in his review of *Aftersight and Foresight*, that Niemeyer was "an older man who [wrote] with the innocence of youth." In an age of horrifying, unprecedented evil and irrationality caused by the autonomous will closing in on itself and attempting to superimpose on reality a second "improved" reality, Niemeyer clung tenaciously to the ancient understanding of philosophy as nothing more, or less, than the life dedicated to striving to see, clearly and gratefully, with the eyes of innocence, what is given.

When Niemeyer wrote about Communism he focused on Communism but when he wrote about the sources of order and disorder in the Western tradition his scope became immense. His mind moved back and forth through the tradition, through philosophy, law, politics, international relations, art, literature, music, science, psychology, and theology, ancient and very recent, with the facility of one speaking his native language. He tells us frequently that what he hoped to do was to struggle against the forces of dissolution that lurk in the human psyche in order to further the process of recovery and restoration. His aim was like that of Richard Hooker, who said that he wrote *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* "for no other cause but for this; that posterity may know we have not loosely through silence permitted things to pass away as in a dream...." Or, to put it another way, Niemeyer was engaged in what Confucius had in mind when he said that if he had public power he would "rectify names" because the names of offices and public institutions no longer represented truth. In fact, I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that the phrase "rectifying names" encapsulates the fundamental goal of Niemeyer's work—to know and speak, unflinchingly, the truth about what is. Were this not such a rare accomplishment the history of the twentieth century would likely have been happier.

As Marion Montgomery notes in his Introduction to *Within and Above Ourselves*, a second collection of essays published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Niemeyer's was the role of prophet, and I believe that what he wrote about the Biblical prophets in his essay "Redeeming the Time" applies also to himself:

[A] prophet is a figure wholly absorbed with concern for the relation of God with man, not so much in particular instances but rather in the public teaching and dominant patterns of a

society. By force of his situation, he is a solitary figure, standing his ground against attitudes and ways of acting that have become popular. He is also one who proclaims truth unselfconsciously, much as a man fighting in a great historical battle utterly forgets about his own life.

Niemeyer regarded literary figures such as Flannery O'Connor and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as prophetic because of their rare ability to see and proclaim and restore the truth in the midst of societies where truth had been or was being lost. This loss of truth results from the tendencies of human nature, for as Niemeyer observed, "being human is a risky business, beset on all sides with insecurities and pitfalls. Vigilance is the price not only of freedom, but also of truth and 'responsible' personal commitment."

Vigilance required Niemeyer to be a conservative, which he understood not as adherence to a dogma or even a specific set of principles, but simply as "common sense." Conservatives "affirm life's reality rather than their own emotions. It follows that conservatism cannot be a doctrine. Conservatism cannot be defined because, in its essence, it is an attitude." Conservatives have no system of ideas, no program for solving life's problems and eliminating evils. They prefer to allow individuals, who, not the state, are the subjects of concrete experience, to deal with life's difficulties. Conservatives cultivate a consciousness of concrete, living reality, not abstract, theoretical, and imaginary realities.

The redemptive power of common sense he articulated in his eulogy for the great conservative thinker and writer Russell Kirk:

What is important is the ground that Russell Kirk occupied, alone, effectively, with great tenacity. Whatever you may call it, it was ground still free from the revolutionary forces of our time. It was the ground of common sense, of sobriety, of ultimate verity. It was the ground where prevailed love of being, love of country,

love of God. It was the ground of historical continuity, of public loyalty, of personal integrity. It was the ground from which the sanity of our time could not be ousted. It was the ground on which conservative persons could put down roots, from which their minds drew nourishment.

The attitude he is describing here is one of humility, a virtue on which he built his work. Anyone who reads Niemeyer's writings finds therein a mind of immense authority, without ego. Of the internal strength or condition of ego in Gerhart Niemeyer I have no knowledge. I do know that, whether with ease or whether with great difficulty, he wrote books and articles in which he strove only to make himself a transparent medium for truth and reality and goodness: in their existence, in our experience, and in our tradition. Although he often deeply laments the evils and disorders besetting our age he just as often speaks with joy, gratitude, and praise for reality as we find it and especially for the Creator of that reality. Because he utterly forgot himself in his struggle to preserve everything that serves as the foundations of right order, Niemeyer was, I think, unable to see what is clear to others, namely, that every virtue he praised in others was powerfully present in his own character through his lifelong endeavor to become what he loved. I will end with two passages from his own writings which praise others whom he loved and admired and which also, I can attest, apply fully to himself. One is from very early in his career and the other, from his eulogy for Russell Kirk, he wrote very nearly at the end. In the Preface to *Law Without Force*, he paid tribute to the exemplary character of his mentor Hermann Heller.

The book is dedicated to the memory of the man whose spirit guided me throughout the four years of work. Hermann Heller's teaching inspired me with his ideas; his living inspired me with the example of an extraordinary man,

outstanding in qualities both of soul and mind, a man to whom the rational mastery of political reality meant a profound human responsibility and thus a personal task. 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 their ugliness or covering their features with the veil of wishful thinking. Hermann Heller's life and death were a constant and forceful proclamation of the idea that to realize a genuinely rational order in the political side of human culture is not merely a pragmatic, but an ethical requirement.

More than fifty years later, about four years before his own death, he wrote in memory of Russell Kirk, "We enjoy the many facets

of such a personality, the generosity of his soul, the gentility of his manners, and, seeking to look through all this to the core of his secret, we faintly taste the peace of God."

Niemeyer was also among those rare individuals who, even in the midst of great disorders, radiate the profound love of truth which they nurture in the depths of their souls. In one way, at least, we are more fortunate than Socrates' friends, for Niemeyer was a writer, and a writer who explained the reasons for his deep convictions with a clarity, grace, and eloquence that I have been able only to begin to suggest here. For those who hope to understand and find the way to avoid, in the twenty-first century, the disorders that have devastated the twentieth, the writings of Gerhart Niemeyer, rich in wisdom, provide luminous signposts.



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