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Federal Alcohol Policy: Captive to an Industry and a Myth

If society is to bring alcohol abuse under control, we need a policy that restricts (not forbids) the use of alcohol; one that encourages people to use alcohol infrequently and as a relatively minor part of their lives.

DAN E. BEAUCHAMP

* THE FEDERAL AGENCY charged with addressing this country's alcohol problems cooperates with an industry committed to increasing its profits by raising the level of alcohol consumed in the U.S. A public-policy controversy is brewing, for the agency seems bent on disregarding the need for alcohol controls; its approach is directed toward finding out why problem drinkers are unable to control their drinking.

Last year when that agency, the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), released its second Alcohol and Health report, two bleak facts emerged. First, alcohol problems cost this nation a staggering \$25 billion annually in illness, family disruptions, arrests, property destruction, loss of productivity, and death. It is alcohol — not heroin or marijuana — that ranks as the nation's leading drug problem. Second, the NIAAA, an agency of HEW, has virtually no alcohol policy. Except for some pious slogans aimed at encouraging "responsible drinking," the NIAAA has more or less ignored the need for a policy to curb the steady rise in per-capita alcohol consumption (up by one-third over the past 15 years) and the ominous implications of the increase. In fact, the NIAAA operates as if controlling alcohol problems in no way involves controlling alcohol.

A 'Hands Off Alcohol' Policy

At a press conference announcing the release of the new alcohol report, NIAAA director Morris Chafetz was asked to define the level of "safe" drinking. He responded by endorsing the findings of a 19th century actuarial study showing that persons who drank no more than three ounces of whiskey or its equivalent daily did not appear to suffer an increase in health problems or mortality. Interestingly enough, less than 10 per cent of the people in the U.S. drink as much as three ounces of whiskey daily. In fact, a prestigious survey of drinking behavior conducted in the 1960s — the Ameri-

can Drinking Practices Survey — would have classified a daily intake of three ounces of whiskey as heavy drinking!

What is going on here? On the one hand we are faced with steady increases both in the per-capita consumption of alcohol and in critical alcohol problems. On the other hand, the director of the national agency presumably responsible for controlling these problems is endorsing a norm for safe drinking that far exceeds existing drinking practices. It would be easy to accuse the NIAAA of being a captive of the alcohol industry. It is clear that Dr. Chafetz and the institute are cooperating with this \$27 billion industry and are pursuing what amounts to a "hands off alcohol" policy.

However, the NIAAA is more a captive of the myth of alcoholism — a myth that diverts attention from the nation's obligation to institute tight controls over alcohol. It is of course no myth that some 9 million persons in the U.S. are — because of the amount of alcohol they drink — risking serious physical, psychological or social damage. The myth is that more stringent controls over alcohol, the alcohol industry and drinking are not needed to combat the nation's mounting alcohol problem since those problems are caused by a minority of individuals who suffer from a "disease" called alcoholism. In other words, it is because of the concept of alcoholism that alcohol controls remain a neglected issue.

Blaming the Alcoholic

Alcoholism theories assign responsibility for the huge social costs of alcohol to the make-up of individuals. Such theories start with the common sense observation that the vast majority of drinkers do not experience alcohol problems. It is then concluded that most people have an ability or capacity to use alcohol without problems. Only a minority fail as drinkers. Many alcoholism theorists see this failure as a disease predisposed by psychological, genetic, social or cultural factors. Thus these theorists tend to agree with the alcohol industry slogan that "the problem lies in the man, not the bottle."

The clear implication is that society should no

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try to prevent alcohol problems with little attempts to limit the availability and use of alcohol, but efforts should concentrate on discovering why a minority of drinkers (9 million) are unable to control their use of alcohol. Thus the concept of alcoholism serves to relieve all drinkers—and the alcohol industry—from the burdens and inconveniences of an effort to curb alcohol problems by means of stricter controls over alcohol.

A strikingly different theory argues that the primary factors contributing to alcohol problems are inadequate legal, social and cultural controls over the availability and use of alcohol. This alcohol-control approach contends that protection of the community from rising alcohol problems can be accomplished only as the result of community and societal rules designed to limit and control the use of alcohol and to minimize the problems for the largest feasible group.

In sharp contrast to alcoholism theories, the alcohol-control approach regards all who manufacture, distribute, market, sell and consume alcohol as subject to fair and just regulations that serve to minimize problems. According to this approach, the control of alcohol is analogous to the regulation of other public health hazards—tobacco, handguns or pollution.

The alcoholism approach has been the dominant paradigm for alcohol problems since Repeal—and it is no coincidence that alcohol as a community issue has virtually disappeared from the scene except in areas where temperance sentiment remains strong. Nonetheless, recent and impressive scientific research strongly suggests that the alcohol-control approach has the better argument.

A group of scientists at the Addiction Research Foundation in Canada has demonstrated persuasively that it is the low overall or per-capita consumption of alcohol in society (and by implication the factors that influence this low consumption) that produces low rates of such major alcohol problems as cirrhosis. The Canadians have gathered data showing a clear relationship: in countries where average consumption of alcohol is high, alcohol-related cirrhosis rates are high. In countries where average consumption of alcohol is lower, rates of alcohol-related cirrhosis are lower. Further, as the per-capita consumption of alcohol rises, so do the rates of heavy or damaging drinking.

These findings suggest that we are not likely to succeed at controlling the excessive consumption of alcohol unless we establish more effective limits over its manufacture, sale and consumption. The concept of alcoholism has in effect saddled the alcoholic with sole blame for the huge social costs of alcohol. Alcohol problems are seen as the failure of individuals rather than as the failure of inadequate legislation governing the availability and use of alcohol. Alcohol-control measures would be designed to af-

fect all who produce, sell or use alcohol; thus the industry and all drinkers would share the costs of preventing problems. In other words, the control of alcohol problems implies a new alcohol ethic—a *preventive ethic*—obligating a powerful industry and all drinkers to accept their fair share of the burdens of more stringent alcohol controls.

'Responsible Drinking'

The NIAAA has virtually ignored this impressive new evidence indicating a need for stronger alcohol controls and has instead offered a prevention campaign of its own: "responsible drinking."

The essential points of the responsible-drinking campaign are these: Alcohol and drinking are here to stay. Instead of placing tighter controls on the availability of alcohol, Americans must learn how to use alcohol more "responsibly." "Responsible drinking" means learning how to use alcohol in a nonharmful manner, learning to recognize the signs of impending intoxication and becoming intoxicated very seldom—no more than three times a year, advises Chafetz. The agency director has even suggested that students be taught in school how to drink properly, much as they are now taught how to drive.

The concept of "responsible drinking" is premised on naïve—if not cynical—assumptions about public policy and human capacities: that society's alcohol problems can be solved or controlled by promulgating vague pronouncements to the effect that individuals should not abuse alcohol. Those familiar with ethical debates will recognize "responsible drinking" as another variant of what Reinhold Niebuhr perennially criticized as "voluntarist" ethics. The assumption is that if people can be sufficiently apprised of the facts bearing on their own and society's welfare, they will voluntarily follow that standard—especially if society devotes enough money and resources to training and education.

This view of our ethical obligations is depressing—ly sentimental and optimistic about human capacities and abilities. It may well be that the NIAAA still retains this pious belief in the efficacy of ethical persuasion; it is hardly likely that the alcohol industry is so naïve. (Not surprisingly, the industry has rushed to endorse the responsible-drinking campaign.)

What is needed is a more realistic view of human nature and of the powerful interests implicated in the widespread and growing use of alcohol. If we are to begin to control alcohol problems, realism demands adequate governmental and nongovernmental structures to control the availability of alcohol. While we cannot now specify the details of a sensible alcohol control structure, we can broadly outline its major assumptions.

The key ingredients of a new alcohol policy are

with the use of alcohol, it can never serve as the guide for public policy. A prohibitionist stance ignores the essential fact that an adequate social ethic for alcohol must be forged in justice and must seek to weigh competing claims.

The tragic reality is that we cannot hope to eliminate alcohol problems; the best we can do is to control or reduce them. New leadership and new policies from the NIAAA are needed if we are to change a situation that is strongly biased in favor of

the industry and inadequate for controlling rising rates of alcohol problems.

The NIAAA is not likely to act, however, until powerful voices call for control measures. The churches are uniquely qualified to remind the nation of its obligations to share the burdens as well as the benefits of society—including the burden of reducing the tragic losses due to alcohol and the burden of creating a more balanced and fair policy for all drugs.

After Auschwitz: 'A Certain Script'

An Interview with Elie Wiesel

HARRY JAMES CARGAS

Jewish writer Elie Wiesel is a nominee for this year's Nobel-Prize for literature. Since 1975 marks the 30th anniversary of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, many feel that this is a particularly appropriate year to honor the 47-year-old Romanian-born author, a survivor of the Nazis' Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps. He and Dr. Cargas met while doing a television program the latter hosted for the Central Education Network. Their friendship grew; one result is a volume to be published this fall by Paulist Press: *Conversations with Elie Wiesel. This interview is an edited excerpt from that book. Wiesel, now a naturalized U.S. citizen, is the author of 13 books, including his memoir, Night; a drama, Zalmen, or the Madness of God; a report on Soviet Jewry, The Jews of Silence; and the novels A Beggar in Jerusalem, The Gates of the Forest and The Oath.*

Q: CAN JEWS and Christians have a meeting ground after Auschwitz?

A: They can because they should. But before that meeting can take place, certain words must be said. I think that Jews must first say certain words which hurt Christians: that Christianity did not "come true" during Auschwitz. Auschwitz would not have been possible without Christianity—and this is something that John XXIII understood: the fact that Hitler was never excommunicated, the fact that more than 20 per-

cent of the S.S. killers were practicing Christians, the fact that Pius XII never spoke up, Christianity's role, or the Christian church's role—both Protestant and Catholic—was dominant in the fact that it was possible for so many Jews to be killed. All that has to be said. And I think that Christians must recognize these truths, as Pope John did. Once all this has been said and done, I think that there can be a meeting ground between Christian and Jew—provided, of course, that one does not try to convert the other. We must understand that conversion is not a solution; authenticity is the solution. And if Christians give up their dream to convert Israel (Israel never tried to convert the church), then I'm sure that we can find some common ground.

I

Q: Historically, was the role of the Christian been that of persecutor?

A: Unfortunately, for many centuries the Christian defined himself by the suffering he imposed on the Jew. The more the Jew suffered, the better a Christian his persecutor was. Of course theologically the Christian regarded himself as the Jew, the true Jew, the true Judaea. The true Israel was the church; in the beginning that's what they said. The others had to suffer for not becoming part of that new concept of Judaism. Again, despite that suffering, I think a ground can be found, should be found. And that possibility must be voiced first, in honesty, without hidden thoughts, without rancor. But these ideas must be explored; these truths must be confessed—on both sides.

Q: Georges Bernanos may have begun a kind of recognition. He said that Buchenwald was not a chance phenomenon but the culminating abyss collecting pus.

A: Yes. So did many others in France. François Mauriac returned again and again to such themes. And we became very close because of his recognition. He understood the part Christianity had played, and he was the first to come out against Pius XII. It wasn't Rolf Hochhuth; it was Mauriac who did it. But then, French literature was influenced greatly by Christianity, and the entire right wing had the courage to accept, after the war, the fact that it was anti-Semitic before the war. Those writers grew up in a Christian milieu, and therefore they grew up with anti-Semitism. Even the great writers were anti-Semites. André Gide himself recognized that he had been anti-Semitic—without knowing it, without wanting it. This honest approach must be made first, and it requires a willingness to say, "Yes, we were guilty; we were guilty—not directly, because we didn't participate in it. But we as Christians—the Christian part, the past Christian part in us, made us guilty." If it is said, I think that something can be done—something important.

II

Q: So you are not automatically pessimistic about the future of Christianity?

A: If it goes the way it is going, then of course I am pessimistic. But then, the Christians themselves are more pessimistic than I. The crises occurring now within Christianity are very serious.