

# *Civil Theology in the Gnostic Age: Progress and Regress*

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ONE OF ERIC VOEGELIN'S most trenchant *aperçus* is his observation that Gnosticism, which he considered modernity's core, is fundamentally a flight from the universally human "horror of existence,"<sup>1</sup> by which he meant, I believe, the horror not of existence itself but of life's seemingly precarious suspension over the void of non-existence. Our terror of the *summum malum* of annihilation is only partially assuaged in the Western tradition by Christianity's teaching that the world is securely grounded in an eternal, absolutely good, unchanging divine will, for Christianity, which demands faith and bestows no certainty, also teaches that we have a natural inclination to choose nothingness while deluding ourselves that we possess the greatest good. The ironic result of our predicament between uncertain share in reality and certain possession of unreality in a world "dedivinized" by Christianity is, as Voegelin saw, that the theories which modern Western societies have devised to eliminate conscious existential horror have instead intensified it in the depths of the soul.

This is the point of David Hart's observation that modernity believes in noth-

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ing, that is, the alternatives are Christianity or nothing, and the modern faith has evolved through a rejection of Christianity into the Epicurean conviction of the reality of nothingness, the absence of truth, a cosmic void, a belief formulated as the greatest good because on this emptiness we are free to project our own personal preferences regarding values and meaning. Because such a "faith" makes no demands and seems to eliminate any risk of being wrong, modernity's religion is, he says, "one of very comfortable nihilism,"<sup>2</sup> comfortable because it is designed according to our own wishes so that anything that we want to be true can be "true for us." Nevertheless, it is also very uncomfortable because the nature of meaning, which requires searching and submission, is vitiated by our attempts to create it in conformity with our own personal inclinations, however superficially consoling that may seem. Contrary to modernity's claim that power over reality is a great good, it is, as the soul profoundly knows, the ultimate horror, for in a cosmos we can master and possess we are groundless.

Indeed, in the past few centuries Western civilization has wrestled with the profound paradox that our relentless efforts to convince ourselves that we can secure our human grip on existence and increase the existential density of earthly life

through scientific and technological achievements, a constantly rising standard of living, and endeavors to attain the democratic ideal of optimizing both freedom and social order have, ironically, steadily eroded the spiritual substance of truth. Voegelin put this rather pithily in *The New Science of Politics* when he observed that “the question how a civilization can advance and decline at the same time” is “one of the thorniest...to plague the student of Western politics,” for the West’s material advances have been accompanied and perhaps even made possible by a forgetfulness of the essential rootedness of meaning in spiritual truth. Voegelin tersely concluded that “the death of the spirit is the price of progress” and “the very success of a Gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline,”<sup>3</sup> stark formulations of the structure of the psyche in-between the transcendence-oriented *amor Dei* and its antithesis, the egoistic *amor sui*, that defines goodness primarily in terms of what we can control within the bounds of an inherently meaningless material universe.

It was Voegelin’s contention that into the vacuum of earthly meaning created by the Christian de divinization of the world and its denial that human nature could find fulfillment through material desires irrupted various forms of Gnosticism, a somewhat deformed version of Christianity that seeks immanent salvation through human action in a redivinized world in which humanity is the locus of the divine. Modern Gnostic ideologies are, in general, progressivist but nihilist world views because they promise movement toward an immanent Pleroma which can be attained only by pretending to satisfy the soul’s innate hunger for immortality and transcendence with an endless stream of ephemeral gratifications. When he spoke of advance and decline Voegelin was certainly thinking of the unmistakable contrast between the progress of science and technology

and the waning of the sense of transcendence, where advancement or improvement in the material realm is clearly distinguishable from the decline of spiritual orientation, but his analysis of the Gnostic characteristics of modernity also implies that what the worldly consciousness perceives as moral or cultural progress can actually be spiritual regress because the ego narcissistically misconstrues the ontological significance of constructing a cosmos according to its own inclinations.

The meaning of Voegelin’s succinct formulation becomes clearer if we note that it is the reverse of the Christian discernment that the death of the ego is the “price” of spiritual growth in faith, because he was referring to the *agon* within the soul between its mortal ontophobic and immortal ontophilic parts, between its fear of what *is* because reality does not cater to our egos and its humble love for and willingness to surrender to a reality greater than ourselves.<sup>4</sup> The origin of the fall into Gnosticism he found in Christianity’s realization that the soul must be ordered through humble openness to transcendence in the tension and uncertainty of faith rather than masterfully grasping it with the security of knowledge. The spiritually impotent ego pursuing worldly dominance and the illusory power of certainty while rejecting the genuine substance of order is what Voegelin meant by “the revolt of Western society against God.”<sup>5</sup>

Voegelin diagnosed what he regarded as the Gnostic nature of modernity in the seventeenth-century Puritan “lust for massively possessive experience,” an un-Christian *libido dominandi* for achieving existential security by drawing transcendence into immanence to transform all experience into proofs of divine election. Thomas Hobbes’s remedy for the destructive conflicts stirred up by the Puritan drive to possess certainty was an immanently salvific Gnostic civil theology that

effectively rejected transcendence and permitted all citizens to have a relationship with the divine only through obedience to the terrifying Absolute Sovereign, the intracosmic “mortal god,” who dictated the form of “Christian” worship compulsory for the whole society and prophylactically sealed off the “Christian Commonwealth” against intrusions by transcendence. Because for Hobbes “there was no public truth except the laws of peace and concord in a society,”<sup>6</sup> he constructed civil theology as a “peace” in which soulless human beings attain worldly salvation from the imminent fall into non-being through death in the state of nature by suppressing not only the Puritan appropriation of transcendence but also the spiritually ordering power of *amor Dei*. The enjoyment of the “natural right” to physical self-preservation in a cosmos devoid of divine presence is the substitute for the soul’s quest for immortality through participation in divine transcendence.

As Benjamin Wiker points out, the concept of modern natural rights comes from Hobbes and “Rights, according to Hobbes, were simply the name we give to our amoral desires, desires that...are in and of themselves no sin.”<sup>7</sup> If we contract our souls to purely immanent beings then our natural desires in the earthly sense define the good and the right. To a hedonist the concept of natural rights means that our liberty to gratify our self-centered desires cannot validly be constrained except by others’ liberty to do the same. Since we most urgently desire to *be*, to live, all the specific laws of nature that Hobbes lists are ultimately rules for postponing death, the *summum malum*, not commands that guide us to do what is right in itself, for no such thing exists. The Hobbesian Commonwealth has no substance of order and participates in nothing. And just as the fear of death and the desire to live drive human beings from the chaos of the state of nature to establish a lawmaker in

the Commonwealth, so, for Hobbes, “rights precede laws, and all laws are merely conventional, having as their *only* purpose balancing claims of rights,” that is, the law is the arbiter among warring passions.

In natural law theory God is the Absolute Sovereign transcending all earthly sovereigns, but in Hobbes’ natural rights theory, “since it was based in the Epicurean materialist rejection of nature as intrinsically ordered and God as the orderer, there was nothing above the human-made law to which one could appeal.”<sup>8</sup> In John Locke’s revision of this theory, since the entire purpose of government is the economic function of the preservation of property, the political realm has nothing to do with the good life in the sense of virtue or the rational life in the sense of noetic reason as participation in higher truth, but is “the complete servant of Epicurean hedonism...[And] the only goal for our common life, and for the laws that direct and define our common life, will be economic....[which] amounted to redefining our highest pursuit as material pleasure, rather than spiritual perfection.”<sup>9</sup>

Voegelin’s belief that human nature can be most accurately characterized as openness to transcendence, that is, spiritual perfection, starkly contradicts Hobbes’s claim that his materialist hedonist theory was a significant advance beyond the “old moral philosophy,” a claim that illustrates the point that spiritual death can paradoxically assume the appearance of a better life through progress in the security of desire gratification and natural rights. The price of escaping the stark nothingness of the state of nature is the dissembled nothingness of purely materialist life in the Commonwealth with its transcendence-prohibiting civil theology.

But after Hobbes, who himself seems to have had little sense of social progress, the problem of civil theology in moder-

nity, the problem of articulating the political order as a *cosmion*, a small cosmos representing truth and order within the larger cosmos, was exacerbated by the tension between the transcendent orientation of Christianity and the increasing worldly progress of modernity. If Christianity, transcending political order, is truth, then what truth can political order represent or participate in? If the political realm is nothing but the organization of a material realm of false selves seeking constant gratification as a means of existential security, as Hobbes characterized “felicity,” then how can it provide our earthly lives with any ground of meaning? Is it possible to forge some link between transcendence as understood by Christianity and civil society? Do natural rights, which Hobbes derived from our craving for continued existence, interfere with spiritual truth?

To a great extent the answers to these questions depend on how much openness to truth has survived in modern civil theology. One place to look for an answer is in the American civil theology, which was not produced by an intellectual or a ruler as a useful fiction but has developed organically and spontaneously as the mythic articulation of a people’s interpretation of the true meaning of its existence. It was founded by the Puritans who had attained such un-Christian certainty that they alone were the elect that all their experiences confirmed their conviction that they were the New Chosen People who would regenerate the world by building God’s kingdom on earth. As one Urian Oakes put it, describing the Puritan Commonwealth as an existentially secure *cosmion* that foreshadowed the plenitude of the Parousia, “the design of our founders and the frame of things laid by them [made] the interest of righteousness in the commonwealth and holiness in the Church...inseparable.... I look upon this as a little model of the glorious kingdom of Christ on earth.

Christ reigns among us in the commonwealth as well as in the Church and hath his glorious interest involved and swept up in the good of both societies respectively.”<sup>10</sup>

The Puritans provided the framework, but by the latter part of the eighteenth century, because of the American attainment of a distinct national identity through a Revolution for the sake of freedom, and because of considerable influence from the European Enlightenment, the civil theology underwent a kind of sea change. The ground of meaning in a divinely ordained glorious destiny of most fully embodying transcendent truth remained, but under the influence of Locke and Hobbes in the eighteenth century the substance of order was increasingly secularized and transformed from righteousness and holiness to an earthly happiness that was defined in terms of the liberty to enjoy natural rights, which, despite their superficial desirability, retained their Hobbesian meaning of fleeing the horror of nothingness by existing in a constant state of distraction through the constant gratification of appetites.

Puritan godliness thus modulated to Enlightenment liberty, which, although at first still understood as somewhat godly, nevertheless contained a momentum that drove it increasingly toward an emphasis on personal gratification and the isolation of individual desires rather than the community of shared participation in transcendence. Americans came to see themselves as the saviors of the world through their achievement of the most rational order that maximizes individual freedom and earthly happiness. The inherited sense of being God’s gift to humanity guided the belief that it was America’s “manifest destiny” not only to increase its physical territory but also to disseminate its enlightened view of human happiness so that eventually all the world would become America through participation in perfect liberty. Typical is

Isaac Wise's 1869 assertion in *Our Country's Place in History* that, in general, the destinies of all nations could be encompassed under one term, "PROGRESS," and for America this meant liberty,.... "the cause, progenitor, preserver and protector of all the blessings which we enjoy and impart to others.... Liberty is our place in history, our national destiny, our ideal, the very soul of our existence."<sup>11</sup>

But what did this salvific liberty mean? Well, first it meant democracy, which the civil theology of the mid-nineteenth century proclaimed as the will of God for the attainment of human happiness. To avoid the anarchic tendencies of liberty it became necessary to assume that liberty in its true sense could flourish only where the citizens had sufficient wisdom to order their own souls to create an abiding public order. For example, John L. O'Sullivan believed that the purpose of the "American experiment" was to advocate, and disseminate, the "high and holy democratic principle" of democratic republicanism grounded in "an abiding confidence in the virtue, intelligence, and full capacity for self-government of the great mass of our people—our industrious, manly, intelligent millions of freemen."<sup>12</sup> Democratic order ascends from the virtuous people to the institutions of government to which they consent and is essentially natural and spontaneous. Furthermore, democracy is "essentially involved in Christianity, of which it has been well said that its pervading spirit of democratic equality among men is its highest fact, and one of its most radiant internal evidences of the divinity of its origin," that is, Christianity is true because it is democratic, for only an order based on human freedom and equality can provide a solid grounding for human existence.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, defines the transcendent in terms of the immanent.

Although O'Sullivan did not think that America had yet achieved complete democratic perfection, its existence as "the

nation of futurity" began a new epoch in history. In his revealingly titled *America and the Perfectibility of Man* O'Sullivan grandiloquently described the eschatological destiny of America to become a securely constructed *cosmion* guaranteeing earthly happiness through democracy. "In its magnificent domain of space and time, [America] is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High.... Its floor shall be a hemisphere; its roof the firmament of the star-studded heaven; and its congregation a union of many republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions calling, owning no man master, but governed by God's natural and moral law of equality...."<sup>14</sup>

To a great extent the liberty extolled by O'Sullivan and others is that of the unhindered enjoyment of natural rights, which, lacking natural law's participation in Divine Reason, are merely the entitlement to gratification of basic desires. But a lingering concern for godliness entailed a certain tension in the public philosophy between virtue and liberty or rights. That is, were Americans obliged to be virtuous simply for the sake of moral excellence or was the meaning of virtue determined by the requirements of maximizing the enjoyment of individual rights? Did virtue define rights or did rights create virtue?

Nineteenth-century authors like O'Sullivan, although relying on a traditional sense of virtue, nonetheless inconsistently took the latter position, that is, the better America became at promoting and protecting the liberty of equality and natural rights, the ego's demands for gratification (to which natural law had been reduced), the more virtuous would its national life become. The major process relentlessly at work here is secularization, as Voegelin was well aware in 1938 when he observed in the Preface to the

second edition of *Die politischen Religionen* that, as all distinguished philosophers knew, “the world is experiencing a serious crisis, is undergoing a process of withering, which has its origins in the secularization of the soul and in the ensuing severance of a consequently purely secular soul from its roots in religiousness.”<sup>15</sup> Since he believed that resistance to modern ideologies’ satanic evil “can only be derived from an equally strong, religiously good force,” and “one cannot fight a satanical force with morality and humanity alone,” this meant that the more advanced the withering effects of secularization the less ability Western society had to comprehend and resist evil. Of course, this was accompanied by a precipitous decline in the comprehension of good.

Since it was precisely this Gnostic self-understanding of earthly gratification through the power of attaining perfection that became the root of the American sense of meaning and identity, Voegelin had to account for the fact that among the nations that have developed within Western civilization America has been among those most immune to Gnostic totalitarianism. Observing that “the corrosion of Western civilization through gnosticism is a slow process extending over a thousand years,” he argued that “[t]he several Western political societies, now, have a different relation to this slow process according to the time at which their national revolutions occurred.” Thus, even though the debate around the American Revolution was influenced by the Enlightenment with its own strains of Gnosticism, it was nonetheless concluded “within the institutional and Christian climate of the *ancien régime*.” Because, compared to much of Europe the American infection with Gnosticism was minor, in the midst of the wreckage of civilization caused by Gnostic totalitarianism Voegelin was able to see “a glimmer of hope” in the American and English de-

mocracies, “which most solidly in their institutions represent the truth of the soul.”<sup>16</sup> But was Voegelin correct in his assessment of the spiritual truth of American democracy? (I am not considering the English democracy here.) To what extent has creeping secularization, to which America is certainly not immune, left American principles and institutions with reliable defenses against modernity? Can the institutions remain outwardly solid while their internal truth atrophies?

One example of an argument claiming this has indeed happened while also betraying an inadequate understanding of the good is Hadley Arkes’s contention that through the legalization of abortion on demand, which, of course, many consider major moral progress, the understanding of natural rights has become so perverted that America has lost the substance of true moral order, retaining only the façade of a democratic republic. Arkes’s position is based on the Kantian premise that all human beings have natural rights, preeminently to life and liberty, that are coeval with our existence. Furthermore, since morality requires an orientation to truth, the recognition of the truth of these natural rights is the ground of public morality, which is, in turn, the basis of the legitimacy of political order.<sup>17</sup>

The current moral crisis centered on abortion has arisen, Arkes believes, because a nihilistic shift away from natural rights to a form of legal positivism has replaced objective reality or moral truth, which the law or an individual is obliged to respect, with only power in the service of self-interest. As Voegelin pointed out, positivism is another variety of Gnosticism through its reduction of reality to the immanent, with legal positivism contracting the truth of order to convention or statute. In the case of abortion, Arkes, like many others, sees a reprise of the slavery controversy of the nineteenth century, with a similar positivist tendency by the powerful to define a “man,” or a

“person,” as a being possessed of rights in ways that suit their own interest or convenience. To enhance the liberty of some, others are deprived of liberty and even of life. (The individual’s enjoyment of natural rights is limited only by the power of others’ claims to enjoy theirs.) And just as Lincoln argued that the defense of slavery violated the basic principle of the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” and therefore have the same natural rights, so Arkes argues that for the sake of preserving a spurious “constitutional right to abortion” “many Americans, and especially, members of the political class, have come to talk themselves out of the premises of the American Founders and Lincoln,” and they have done this without even being aware of it, for they have convinced themselves that the right to “privacy” is a more basic principle than human equality.<sup>18</sup>

As Arkes recognizes, a law that protects the interests of some at the expense of others has jettisoned morality for the sake of power, because it defers to no objective truth, and morality defined in terms of self-interest is no morality at all. But without an objective grounding of rights there are no rights of any significance, and the basis of order and the good life is thereby reduced to nothingness.

If we can arbitrarily alter the definition of a “man” as it suits our convenience, if nature provides no definition of a human being that we are obliged to respect, then...we remove the distinct ground of our claim to “natural rights.” But if we do that, if we remove “natural rights,” we would convert all rights into rights of “positive law.” With that subtle shift, we would have removed, in effect, the very logic and substance of rights. For what we call “rights” then are simply the things declared to be right by the opinion that is dominant in any place. In that event, the “rights” enacted into law are merely the rights that a majority is willing to confer. But what the majority may confer, the majority may also remove when it no longer strikes the majority as right or convenient.<sup>19</sup>

Thus a human life has value only when the individual, or someone else, prefers that that life continue because it gives pleasure. When no one actually expresses or experiences such a preference there are no other grounds on which life could be attributed value.

Arkes believes that a political system and a jurisprudence based solely on the power, self-interest, and convenience of some faction in the society have undergone a kind of desubstantiation because they have abandoned the necessary moral substance of a republic which must be a regime of objective law, not power. During the slavery crisis Lincoln had pointed out “that as the republic began to absorb and defend the premises of slavery, it could have the forms of a republic, while the inner substance was removed. And as the people began to make themselves suggestible to the premises of slavery... they would, in that measure, cease to be a democratic people, even as they went through the outward forms of casting ballots and acting in the *style* of citizens in a democracy.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Arkes concludes that the judges who created the right to abortion “have created a jurisprudence...with the trappings of law, but without the moral substance. And in the same way they have converted this regime into something else: a regime with all of the surface features, or the outward forms, of a republic, but without the moral substance of a republic or regime of law.”<sup>21</sup> The meaning of “democratic” for Arkes is subordination to objective law that is the standard that restricts majority rule. Majority rule according to a higher law is legitimate political authority but majority rule according to its own preferences is not.

What Arkes overlooks is the fact that the meaning of natural rights has been secularized by Epicurean hedonism insinuated into modernity by Hobbes and Locke, among others, and because of the preponderance within the concept of

natural rights of individual, subjective desires over universal, objective truth a public order based on natural rights rather than natural law inevitably tends toward increasing secularization. Although Arkes makes a strong case for a morally objective understanding of natural rights, there is an even stronger hedonist and relativist interpretation of natural rights that eviscerates the philosophically substantial meaning of human liberty and makes the understanding of freedom in terms of rights rather problematic. Since the civil theology has been reduced to an entirely secularized and immanent version of the Puritan sense of mission, if the public philosophy means that liberty is the possession of rights determined by the citizens' preferences then order is merely the absence of chaos but has no positive content or meaning. It certainly does not involve the participation in a higher truth that is essential for the life of the soul. It is, in fact, little more than the Hobbesian view that society exists simply to maximize earthly gratifications.

In other words, Arkes fails to see that positivism is not an error exogenous to natural rights but is a congenital disorder of the very notion of natural rights. Thus, Arkes's rational, objective interpretation of natural rights is not the whole story because the modern idea of natural rights is heavily contaminated by the secular devotion to progress in the individual's ability to pursue self-interest, which is, in metaphysical terms, a devotion to nothingness. This subordinates the common good to the protection of individual natural rights and the laws become an articulation, not of what actions are right or wrong in themselves or serve to promote the common good, but merely of what rules serve the private individual desires of the majority.

This is the central philosophical difficulty in progress in modern democracy, an issue trenchantly analyzed by Robert Kraynak in *Christian Faith and Modern*

*Democracy*, essentially a critique of modern democracy and its claim to spiritual truth. Because Kraynak accepts Christianity as the truth concerning the soul's openness to transcendence he clearly sees that this *requires* a certain tension, or distance, between Christianity and modern politics in the world that Christianity dedivinized. Therefore, Christianity cannot mandate democracy, although democracy has sought legitimacy from Christianity, and it is questionable whether democratic institutions can represent the truth of the soul.

Part of Kraynak's thesis is that there is, in fact, an enormous gulf between democracy's understanding of human existence and Christianity's. In his analysis, modern liberal democracy, rooted in the meaningless materialist universe of the modern *Zeitgeist*, envisages human dignity as a defiance of cosmic indifference to us by an assertion of autonomous will through which we become masters of our own destiny. Although in the phenomenal world of the material universe we are subject to ineluctable laws of nature we nonetheless manage to carve out a kind of noumenal realm of rights in which our autonomous wills and desires are sovereign. In modern democracy the good life is one of material success and enjoyment rather than of virtue. Having no substantial truth in itself it worships freedom, which means that it appeals to relativism and the related skepticism—since among human beings there are disagreements and uncertainty about the highest good, the greatest human dignity is through determining truth and one's own identity and destiny autonomously for oneself, which is quite the opposite of Voegelin's characterization of the nature of man as "openness to transcendence."<sup>22</sup>

As Kraynak emphasizes, we cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps by grounding human dignity in the assertion of our independence of a meaningless universe completely indifferent to

our own existence. The public philosophy of natural rights as satisfaction of desires is really nothing more than a nihilistic diversion from the horror of existence in the metaphysical void of the modern secular universe. By contrast, Christian philosophical anthropology denies human autonomy and sees human dignity in man's resemblance to and participation in God (the *imago Dei*) through prelapsarian immortality and the capacity for holiness through a transcendently oriented and ordered free will. Unlike the radical egalitarianism of modern democracy Christianity has a hierarchical view, for creatures participate in God to varying degrees with each having its level of excellence appropriate to the perfection of the whole created order. Unlike Arkes, Kraynak seeks to restore the true understanding of human nature and dignity as based not on modern natural rights but on natural law with its immediacy of participation in divine Reason.<sup>23</sup>

In Kraynak's view, Christianity is concerned primarily with the soul and leaves politics to worldly prudence, which essentially means what Aristotle called practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Kraynak's whole approach is, however, Augustinian and anti-modern in that he sees human beings belonging first to the City of God but existing in this world in a fallen, corrupted condition such that, as Augustine said, political systems are both consequences of and remedies for Original Sin. He would prefer to abandon entirely the civil theology emphasis on pursuing happiness in liberty and democratic rights and on the superiority of democracy as a progressive political order. Although he would replace democracy with a "mixed regime, with the best choice being 'constitutional monarchy under God,'" he allows that, prudentially, given the actual conditions of the modern world, Christianity can support democracy simply as the best form of govern-

ment that is actually possible, although it cannot legitimate democracy as the one true form of political order without becoming seriously distorted. Also, as a matter of prudential politics, "in the spirit of civil religion which makes the moral education of citizens and statesmen the highest priority, it seems wise and beneficial to say that Christianity teaches democratic human rights as a secular reflection of a sacred idea because it strengthens the democratic state and humanizes the churches."<sup>24</sup> Of course, what Kraynak is arguing would substantially alter the meaning of civil religion by reducing it from a truth in its own right to merely "a secular reflection of sacred ideas." Kraynak would reverse the drive to redivinize the secular realm in order to restore a civil religion that would serve the truth of the soul but not be a cosmic truth in its own right. But this seems to contradict Voegelin's observation that Plato discovered "a society [that] must exist as an ordered cosmion, as a representative of cosmic order, before it can indulge in the luxury of also representing a truth of the soul."<sup>25</sup>

In a Gnostic age is it possible for society to be a *cosmion* that also represents the truth of the soul? Is it possible for modern societies to invest their energies in earthly progress without abandoning the transcendent for a belief in nothing? Can civil theology provide meaning and truth for democratic political existence and yet not be so secular as to be in conflict with *amor Dei*? Can democratic institutions represent the truth of the soul outwardly while inwardly losing the substance of order, and is Arkes right in his argument that this has happened in the United States? Can a civil religion in the modern age not be Gnostic in its prediction of earthly salvation through future progress in improving the satisfactions of earthly life? Is it possible for the contending forces in the soul, the *amor Dei*'s love for Being and the *amor sui*'s turn

to nothingness in its single-minded pursuit of earthly desires, to achieve a balance so that democracy need not tend toward an emphasis on the autonomy of the self? If, as Voegelin states, the society must be *microcosmos* as well as *macroanthropos*, is it possible to incorporate into the civil theology the sort of openness to a higher order that characterized cosmological societies without attempting an impossible restoration of cosmological compactness?

These are all questions that must be pondered in the ongoing struggle to reconstruct political theory and the basis of political order. Voegelin himself argued that we cannot revive the past, and

any renewal must come through the experiences of our own age. To attempt to return to the past would require a deliberately constructed civil theology, and the tradition of those that have been designed, such as those of Hobbes and Rousseau, is radically opposed to real openness to transcendence. It seems likely that any change must develop organically from within the society, as its members become conscious of the baneful, nihilist consequences of basing the understanding of order on the fullest possible satisfaction of the *amor sui* of modern natural rights. But whether or not they do become aware of this depends on the inscrutable mystery of divine grace.

1. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952), 224. 2. David Hart, "Christ and Nothing," in *First Things* (October 2003), 47. 3. *The New Science of Politics*, 128-131. 4. The terms come from Gerhart Niemeyer, who uses *ontophobic* and *ontophilic* (or *philo-ontic*) in *Between Nothingness and Paradise* (Baton Rouge, 1971). 5. Eric Voegelin, *Published Essays 1953-1965*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 11*, ed. by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Mo., 2000), 54. 6. *The New Science of Politics*, 212. Civil theology, or civil religion [I use the terms interchangeably in this essay] is not, of course, an idea that originated with Hobbes. The specific concept of civil theology dates back to ancient Rome. 7. Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists* (Downers Grove, Ill., 2002), 162. 8. *Ibid.*, 163. 9. *Ibid.*, 170-171. 10. Quoted in Thomas Jefferson Wertebaker, *The Puritan Oligarchy* (New York, 1947), 70-71. Oakes goes on to say, "Although Churches be distinct and therefore may not be confounded with one another, yet all the Churches ought to preserve Church communion with one another, because they are all united in Christ, not only as a mystical but as a political head." P. 72. 11. Isaac M. Wise, "Our Country's Place in History," in *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. by Conrad Cherry (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1971), 220, 228. For Wise liberty was essentially a mythic symbol that had supplanted God in the Puritan understanding of the source of order and happiness. "Nothing can arrest our progress, nothing drag down our country from her high place in history, except our own wickedness working a wilful desertion of our destiny, the desertion from the idea of liberty. As long as we cling to this idea,

we will be in honor, glory, wealth, and prosperity." The Puritan Community of Saints who prospered because they were godly has evolved into the glorious society of individuals who prosper because they are free. 12. John L. O'Sullivan, "The Greatest Good of the Greatest Number," in *The Annals of America, Vol. VI* (Chicago, 1968), 333-334. Emphasis in the original. O'Sullivan was writing in the mid 1830s. 13. As O'Sullivan continued, America's "noble mission" was to be "the representative of the democratic principle and...the constant living exemplar of its results.... For [democracy] believes in [humanity's] essential equality and fundamental goodness.... It is the cause of Christianity." *Ibid.*, 339. 14. *Ibid.*, 510. 15. Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, tr. by Virginia Ann Schildhauer, in *Modernity Without Restraint, Vol. 5 of The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. by Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, 2000), 24. 16. *The New Science of Politics*, 187-189. I think Voegelin's explanation for American resistance to the modern ideologies that have ravaged much of Europe as well as other parts of the world clearly sees the beneficial effects of a deeply rooted habit of respect for law and a commonsense way of thinking but overlooks the central importance of the frontier, the American tradition of individualistic freedom, and a steady influx of immigrants seeking religious as well as economic freedom in shaping the national character and its reluctance to submit to state-run collectivism. 17. Arkes's philosophical assumptions derive from Kant's argument that "moral principles [are] accessible only to creatures of reason." Since Kant believed that moral laws are valid for all rational beings *as rational*, he concluded that

moral principles ought to be derived from “the great concept of a rational being as such,” which means a moral absolutism, for the same rights and duties belong, in principle, to every human being. Although in concrete reality some individuals have less capacity for fulfilling duties, nonetheless all human beings have the same dignity and the same moral worth. **18.** Hadley Arkes, *Natural Rights & the Right to Choose* (Cambridge, 2002), 7. **19.** *Ibid.*, 31. **20.** *Ibid.*, 70. **21.** *Ibid.*, 69-70. **22.** One of the most notorious examples of this autonomy is the statement from the Supreme Court’s decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Quoted in *Moral Darwinism*, 165. **23.** In fact, he argues that “Christianity actually has a deep resistance to the concept of human rights,” for which countercultural assertion he provides five reasons: 1) For Christianity duties to God and neighbor take precedence over claims of individual rights; 2) Christianity recog-

nizes the authority of transcendent truth and the church that proclaims it rather than the sovereignty of individual conscience (thus there is no right to define the mystery of the universe for oneself); 3) Where the democratic view seems blithely to assume that the more successful society is in protecting and fulfilling human rights the happier it will be, Christianity’s doctrine of original sin and the corruption of human nature gives it a profound awareness of the ways in which human freedom can produce more evil than good; 4) For Christianity the common good takes precedence over individual rights; and 5) Against the background of Christian charity, properly understood, individual rights appear to be basically a manifestation of selfishness, of the *amor sui* of the closed soul, rather than the open soul’s *amor Dei*. **24.** Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, 2001), 167. **25.** *The New Science of Politics*, 162.