

Civil Theology in the Gnostic Age

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In the fourth chapter of *The New Science of Politics*, in which he first characterized the nature of modernity as Gnosticism, Eric Voegelin brought into focus the profound paradox of the West, which generates a dazzling array of scientific and technological marvels and considers itself the epitome of civilization and culture even as its spiritual substance of truth seems to attenuate. Observing that this raises “one of the thorniest questions to plague the student of Western politics....the question how a civilization can advance and decline at the same time,” Voegelin tersely concluded that “the death of the spirit is the price of progress.” That is, Western progress has, to a great extent, resulted from the “murder” of God through the Gnostic “enterprise of salvation through world-immanent action” which by its very nature entails a departure from the life and the truth of the spirit. And because it is precisely this life of the spirit that gives rise to true order, “the very success of a Gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline,”¹ in much the same way that gaining the whole world can cause the loss of one’s soul. The root of the decline is in the orientation of the will.

Voegelin’s stark formulation of the strife at the heart of our earthly existence derives ultimately from the “in-between” structure of the psyche as illuminated by classical philosophy and Christianity. Within the psyche are two faculties, or levels of consciousness, or selves. The *amor Dei*, the good will, the noetic reason, the true self, is the source of right order because it is grounded in transcendence. However, the part of the psyche that comprehends goodness only within the bounds of the material universe is the *amor sui*, the evil will, the egoistic love of self. Modern gnostic ideologies are, in general, progressivist worldviews because, implicitly or explicitly, they promise to movement toward the plenitude of happiness, although it is by constricting the soul’s hunger for transcendence in the coils of increasing intramundane gratification. The meaning of Voegelin’s laconic formulation becomes clearer if we note that it is the mirror image of the Christian discernment that the death of the ego is the “price” of spiritual growth in faith. Since the ego’s self-love is the part of the psyche that is entirely invested in earthly existence, this is really a struggle within the soul between its mortal and immortal parts. What strengthens the *amor sui* is not worldly success *per se*, but rather the ego’s own conviction that such progress will bestow happiness as the ego defines it. The price of seeking complete fulfillment in worldly pursuits is the atrophy of the awareness of transcendence, just as a powerful encounter with transcendence drains the material world of ultimate significance.

Because of their openness to transcendence Classical philosophy and Christianity did, of course, deny ultimate importance to the material world, and it is Voegelin's contention that this vacuum of earthly meaning created by the Christian divinization of the world was filled by various forms of Gnosticism, itself a somewhat deformed version of Christianity that attempts to redivinize the world and asserts immanent salvation through human action. The root cause of the fall into Gnosticism he finds in Christianity's realization that the soul must be ordered through weakness, through accepting existence in the tension and uncertainty of faith, rather than by the security and certainty of knowledge, so the more the spiritually impotent ego demands worldly dominance and the illusory power of certainty the more it rejects the genuine substance of order, all of which contributes to what Voegelin called "the revolt of Western society against God."²

When he spoke of progress Voegelin was certainly thinking of the unmistakable contrast between the advances 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 points to a condition in which that which to worldly perception most definitely appears to be moral or cultural progress can actually be spiritual regress when it is progress only in terms of ego gratification. The structure of reality is such that the immanent worldview often construes spiritual deterioration as advancement because Gnosticism defines progress in attaining salvation precisely in anti-transcendent terms. What Voegelin would probably consider a demonic characteristic of modernity is the deception by which the cause of the death of the spirit masquerades as the elixir of life, a deception as old as original sin, and that in the modern world often assumes the mantle of moral or cultural progress.

Voegelin finds Gnosticism early in modernity at the heart of the Puritan "lust for massively possessive experience," an un-Christian *libido dominandi* skillfully and incisively analyzed by Hobbes, whose remedy for the destructive conflicts stirred up by the Puritan drive to possess a certainty confirmed by political power was a Gnostic civil theology which permitted all citizens to have a relationship with the divine only in the pseudo-mythic form of the Absolute Sovereign, the intracosmic "mortal god." The Sovereign dictated the form of "Christian" worship compulsory for the whole society and completely sealed off the "Christian Commonwealth" against openness to transcendence. For Hobbes civil theology is a political religion in which Christianity is construed as necessitating a secular realm ordered entirely by the checks and balances of passions.

Civil theology, or civil religion³, is not, of course, an idea that originated with Hobbes. The relation between religion and political order is as old as political order; the specific concept

of civil theology dates back to ancient Rome. Voegelin's analysis of it, in general theory as well as in the theories of specific thinkers such as Hobbes, seems to embrace two distinct but often interrelated meanings, first, as the spontaneous mythic articulation of the society's sense of its order as a *cosmion*, a small world within the larger cosmos, and, second, as a set of beliefs that the masses require to give some order to their existence. Because neither is identical with the truth of the soul, there is an inescapable tension between the philosopher, open to transcendence, and a civil theology which is based on myth rather than noetic reason. Although Voegelin speaks sympathetically of Marcus Varro's compact mythic understanding of the Roman *theologia civilis*, he also seems to think more along the lines that Livy and Polybius followed in their discussion of the Roman civil religion. While for Varro the civil theology expresses the compactness of the experience of existing as a people in the cosmos, Livy, for whom the truth of the myth had broken down, viewed the state religion as an invention designed to turn an unruly populace to law-abiding piety. Similarly, the Greek historian Polybius thought that the Roman religion had been adopted for the sake of the common people in order to maintain the cohesion of the Roman state. He thought such a "superstitious" religion would probably not have been necessary in a state composed of wise men, that is, philosophers, whose souls are governed by reason, "but as every multitude is fickle, full of lawless desires, unreasonable passions, and violent anger, the multitude must be held in by invisible terrors, and suchlike pageantry. For this reason I think not that the ancients acted rashly and haphazardly in introducing among the people notions concerning the gods and beliefs in the terrors of hell, but rather that the moderns are most rash and foolish in banishing such beliefs." (*Histories* VI, lvi, 6-12). This is not Gnostic in itself because the point is a humanly possible mitigation of disorder, not a perfection of order. Where the truth of the soul did not inform the souls of the citizens the civil theology provided a necessary force of terror to constrain the chaotic forces of the passions. Even though Voegelin regarded Hobbes' political theory as a civil theology in Varro's sense, there is an obvious similarity between Polybius' understanding of the basic nature and purpose of civil religion and that of Hobbes. Both regarded the use of civil religious symbols as coercively imposed by pragmatic reason on lawless passions for the quite useful and desirable but still entirely immanent good of wresting civil order from the individual citizens' self-centered and therefore disorderly *amor sui*.

However, Hobbes' understanding of civil theology, unlike that of Polybius, is constructed as a Gnostic perversion of Christianity in which salvation is attained when the spiritually ordering power of *amor Dei* is entirely suppressed by the physically regimenting drive of egoistic *amor sui*, manifested fundamentally in the despairing fear of death as the horrifying fall into non-being. In the Commonwealth the form that this takes as a practical force for public

order is the terror of the Absolute Sovereign. Since the Commonwealth is hermetically sealed against any irruptions of external transcendent reality and Hobbes correspondingly denies the internal existence of the soul human beings are reduced to immanent material bodies in mechanical motion and reason has an immanently pragmatic but not transcendentally noetic function. It was Hobbes' argument that implementation of such a civil theology was the necessary condition for any attainment of material felicity through the endless gratification of desires. In this Hobbesian sense the civil theology is the servant of the false self's desire for a purely immanent happiness defined entirely as pleasure, over which it has substantial power. The fact that Hobbes presented his materialist theory as a significant advance beyond the "old moral philosophy" illustrates the point that spiritual death can immanently assume the appearance of progress in the security of desire gratification. If, as Voegelin believed, human nature can be most accurately characterized as openness to transcendence, then Hobbes' civil theology, which reduces politics to a form of physics, sacrifices the substance of spiritual order and life for the sake of guaranteeing a merely physical order and preserving only bodily existence. The question of civil theology in modernity, first exemplified by the Puritans and Hobbes' response to them, is posed by the tension between the transcendent orientation of Christianity and the worldly successes of modernity: If Christianity, itself apolitical, is truth, then what truth can the dedivinized political order represent or participate in? Must the political be nothing but the organization of a material realm of false selves? Or is it necessary to forge some link between Christianity and civil society? Can this even be done without one being absorbed and transformed into the other?

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 during almost four centuries as the mythic articulation of a people's experience and interpretation of the true meaning of its existence. But because its roots are in Puritanism and it has developed within modernity, which Voegelin calls "the gnostic age," the American civil theology shows symptoms of Gnosticism. Here the question we must consider is whether the symbols and self-interpretation that gave early Americans a sense of unique identity and mission in the world have also, through a Gnostic assimilation of the religious with the political, come to represent simultaneous progress and decline.

The American civil religion was founded in the Puritan exodus from England to establish their own society in a "wilderness" where there was no necessity of overcoming non-Puritan resistance through civil war and political tyranny. Because they emigrated to an underpopulated country lacking a political order and Christian opponents they were able to establish a Puritan

civil society according to their belief in their own special standing in Divine Providence. The Puritans had attained such certainty that they alone were the elect that they interpreted all their experience in Biblical (Old Testament) terms as confirmation that God had sent them, as the New Chosen people, into the pristine land reserved for them to build God's kingdom on earth, the "City on a Hill," to serve as the earthly embodiment of a divinely willed order of "Saints" that would regenerate the world. In their attempt to realize perfection in this world it became the tyrannical role of the political magistrate to effect the "quiet and peaceable life of the subject...in matters of godliness." As transcendence was immanentized, so the religious and the political became virtually identical, at least in the early "optimistic" view, before it inevitably became dismayingly clear that not all Puritans qualified as Saints. As one Urian Oakes put it, describing the Puritan Commonwealth as a *cosmion* or small world 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. To divide what God hath conjoined...is folly in its exaltation. 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."⁴ The Puritans simply absorbed politics into religion, in contrast with the much older Christian tradition that had recognized two distinct realms of power and order, the temporal and the spiritual, as well as the tension between them. The secular order had its own domain of concern and was certainly meant to participate in divine order, yet was also clearly different from and inferior to the fuller experience of the truth of the soul in the spiritual realm.

Since it is the Puritan Gnostic self-understanding of earthly gratification through the power of attaining perfection that is the root of the American sense of meaning and identity Voegelin had to account for the fact that among the countries that have developed within Western civilization America has been one of the most immune to Gnostic totalitarianism. His explanation begins from the observation that "the corrosion of Western civilization through gnosticism is a slow process extending over a thousand years," and he argues 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 also English democracies “which most solidly in their institutions represent the truth of the soul.”⁵

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 and the American tradition of individualistic freedom in shaping the national character and its reluctance to submit to state-run collectivism. But individualism is a two-edged sword. As Hobbes showed, because it leads to anarchy that frustrates its entire point in self-gratification, unlimited individualism is forced to choose tyranny in order to effect its end of conforming the world to the desires of the ego. *Les extrêmes se touchent*, for absolute tyranny is absolute spiritual disorder. The question is whether America’s resistance to Gnostic totalitarianism does indeed provide grounds for hope or whether America is steadily succumbing to the corrosion of its own form of progressivism that serves in the civil theology as the meaning of American existence. Has the American sense of national identity developed in ways that restrict or expand the life of the spirit? Can the institutions remain solid in their outward form while their internal ability to represent the truth of the soul is steadily eroded away?

To a great extent the answers to these questions depend on how the civil theology has represented the public understanding of truth. The Puritan civil theology of Providentially ordained national destiny provided the American 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 protecting freedom, and because of considerable influence from the European Enlightenment, the civil theology underwent a kind of sea change. The structure of divinely ordained glorious destiny of most fully embodying truth remained, but under the influence of Locke and Hobbes in the eighteenth century the substance was increasingly secularized and transformed from righteousness and holiness to an earthly happiness that was defined in terms of the enjoyment of natural rights, or worldly desires to live and enjoy the gratification of appetites. Puritan godliness modulated to Enlightenment liberty, and, although this was at first still understood as a somewhat godly liberty, nevertheless the shift to natural rights liberty 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. Or the participation in divine providence was interpreted as requiring an increasing liberty to enjoy natural rights. 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. Grafted onto this was a myth of the translation of empire, of the center of God's infusion of order into the world, from the East toward the West, so that history would reach its glorious culmination in the renewal of the face of the earth through American progress in liberty.

This sense of being God's gift to humanity guided the belief that it was America's "manifest destiny" not only to maximize 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. Isaac Wise's 1869 explanation of American identity in *Our Country's Place in History* is typical. Wise believed that, in general, the destinies of all nations could be encompassed under one term, "PROGRESS," and for America this meant liberty. "Liberty is 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." 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."⁶ 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.

But what did 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."⁷ Order ascends from the virtuous people to the institutions of government to which they consent and is essentially natural and spontaneous. Furthermore, democracy is "the true theory of government," the "elixir of political life," which 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, participation in democracy is participation in divinely willed order. Therefore, 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.”⁸ Although O’Sullivan did not think that America had yet achieved complete democratic perfection, its existence was a new beginning in history, a new epoch, “the nation of futurity.” In his *America and the Perfectability of Man* O’Sullivan implied that it was the eschatological destiny of America even to regenerate the cosmos. “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....”⁹

O’Sullivan’s prose is more grandiloquent than that of some, but his theme of immanent salvation from original sin through progress in liberty was quite common at the time. In its outline it appears to be a political version of the Christian experience of salvation through liberation from “the world” and one’s attachment to it. Yet the tendency is to transform this experience of tension toward transcendence into the immanent tension toward a future perfection. The actual meaning of salvific liberty is, however, a somewhat complex question because O’Sullivan was taking for granted the public philosophy that developed in the eighteenth century through the importation of Enlightenment ideas.

For the Puritans liberty had meant the political freedom to follow the law of God, but by the eighteenth century Enlightenment thought had transposed this into the liberty of individual natural rights, expressed most famously and authoritatively as self-evident truths in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration outlines beliefs regarding the principles of a universal secular order, and, unlike the civil theology, there is nothing in these principles that is unique to the United States, although they were co-opted into the civil theology to serve as the philosophical truths that were America’s “gospel” as savior of the world. To a great extent the liberty extolled by O’Sullivan and others is that of the unhindered enjoyment of natural rights, which are rooted in the philosophical belief in participation in transcendence through natural law but have in modernity become freighted with the immanent preference for satisfying natural desires. But a lingering concern for virtue entailed a certain tension in the public philosophy between virtue and 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 define virtue?

Nineteenth-century authors like O’Sullivan seemed to take the latter position, that is, the better America became at promoting and protecting the liberty of natural rights the more virtuous

would its national life become. But in the modern view natural rights, which are limited only by other individuals' pursuit of their own natural rights, are grounded in the ego's worldly wishes and desires for gratification. 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."¹⁰ Since he believed that resistance to modern ideologies' satanical 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, one of the delusions induced by the advanced secularization is the denial of satanical evil, but also the more secularized the soul the greater the decline in the comprehension of good.

Assuming that Voegelin was correct, we must consider whether or not he was also later correct in saying that the American institutions and the beliefs of liberal democracy most solidly represent the truth of the soul. He was not, of course, saying that American institutions embody a kind of Platonic ideal of philosophical truth against Gnosticism, but merely that the way in which it had originated had largely immunized America against Gnostic evil and totalitarianism. Nonetheless, it is questionable to what extent creeping secularization has left American principles and institutions with solid defenses against modernity. In the half century since the publication of *The New Science of Politics* the symptoms of the underlying pathology in modern democracy's basis in natural rights have become more apparent. To illustrate this point I would like to consider three critics who, in different ways, critique the contemporary understanding of natural rights, which are, in the American public philosophy and civil theology, the entire basis of liberty, which is the substance of progress. All of them cast doubts on the ability of American institutions to represent the truth of the soul.

The first is Hadley Arkes who, in his recent book *Natural Rights and the Right to Choose*, argues that through the legalization of abortion on demand the understanding of natural rights has become so perverted that America has lost the substance of true moral order and so retains only the façade of a democratic republic. Arkes' position is based on the premise that human beings *qua* human have natural rights, preeminently to life and liberty, and therefore our personal rights are coeval with our personal 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.

Arkes' 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.

The current moral crisis centered on abortion has arisen, Arkes believes, because of a shift away from natural rights to a form of legal positivism, according to which there is no objective reality or moral truth which the law or an individual is obliged to respect but 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 sees a reprise of the slavery controversy of the nineteenth century, with a similar positivist tendency by the powerful to define a "man" 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. 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 "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.¹¹ 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 (for Kant it would be, at best, a hypothetical imperative and the heteronomy of the will). But without an objective grounding of rights there are no rights of any significance.

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.¹²

In other words, rights defined according to convenience are nothing more than an expression of the preferences of the majority regarding the gratification of their desires and from this perspective moral progress means improvement in such gratification.

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 abandoned the necessary moral substance of a republic which must be a regime of objective law, not power. There are, in fact, only these alternatives: law embodies either an objective truth or subjective preferences. In the latter, positivist case the law becomes merely edicts issued by those with power, completely lacking in what Gerhart Niemeyer called “deference for Being.” A society of purely positive law is then simply a form of tyranny, whether or not its members recognize this (and Arkes believes it is possible for the members not to recognize it¹³). 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.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ The meaning of “democratic” here 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 majority preferences is not.

If Arkes is right we are left with the question of the substance of order. 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 participation in any higher truth, but the participation in a higher truth and meaning was precisely the understanding of America’s founding. It is, in fact, little more than the Hobbesian view that society exists simply to maximize earthly gratifications.

But why have natural rights been interpreted more in the sense of positive law? How did the meaning of *rational* change from universal principles to pragmatic calculation of self-interest?

Why have natural rights been interpreted in a positivist sense to mean the preferences of those with the power to achieve what they desire?

What Arkes overlooks is the fact that the meaning of natural rights has been secularized by Epicurean hedonism inseeded into modernity by Hobbes and Locke, among others, and the tension within the concept of natural rights between individual, subjective desires and universal, objective truth means that a public order based on natural rights is unstable in its meaning. As Benjamin Wiker points out in *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists*, “Rights, according to Hobbes, were simply the name we give to our amoral desires, desires that...are in and of themselves no sin.”¹⁶ 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. Indeed, for Hobbes, because there is nothing beyond the material realm in which to participate, order is merely a mechanical regulation of the motion of material bodies. 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.”¹⁷

In other words, Arkes fails to see that positivism is a congenital disorder latent in the notion of natural rights. In John Locke’s 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, 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.”¹⁸ Thus, Arkes’ Kantian rational interpretation of natural rights is not the whole story because the modern idea of natural rights is heavily contaminated by the secular devotion to individual self-interest. 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. Thus a human life has value only because the individual, or someone else, prefers that that life continue. When no one actually expresses, or experiences, such a preference the life becomes devoid of value.

Although Arkes makes a strong case for a morally objective Kantian understanding of natural rights in the tradition of Lincoln, Wiker shows that 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. This question of freedom and rights is trenchantly analyzed by Robert Kraynak.

Kraynak's book *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* is essentially a critical work by the philosopher concerned with the truth of order in the soul, and thus it is a critique of modern democracy and its philosophical foundations. Kraynak takes Christianity to be the truth concerning the soul's openness to transcendence and clearly sees that this *requires* a certain tension, or distance, between Christianity and modern politics. Therefore, there is no necessary connection between Christianity and democracy. However, democracy, because its alleged emphasis on the freedom and dignity of the individual merely conceals its unleashing of the self-interest of the individual, lacks spiritual substance, and therefore it is compelled to seek legitimacy in Christianity.

Part of Kraynak's thesis is that there is, in fact, an enormous gulf between democracy's understanding of human existence and Christianity's. Because modern democracy is hollow at the core it needs Christianity to serve as a legitimating public philosophy (or civil theology), but for Christianity to be pressed into this service it must be seriously distorted. Modern liberal democracy is essentially intramundane in its concerns and its roots. Its notion of human dignity in the meaningless materialist universe of modern science is one of 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. It also 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.¹⁹ This is the opposite of Voegelin's characterization of the nature of man as "openness to transcendence."

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 (in the Pascalian sense) 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 rightly 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.

Where Arkes considers Kant's philosophy as the ideal rational basis for the understanding of the natural rights on which democratic freedom is founded, Kraynak considers Kant's philosophy of freedom as "the decisive factor in changing Christian politics" by reconciling Christianity with democracy and human rights. 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. 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 recognizes 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*.

Kantian philosophy transposed the Christian understanding of human dignity into a different key, one dominated by the notion of the inherent rights of all rational beings. But since for Kant the ground of human dignity is the capacity of each rational being to legislate universal moral laws individually and to obey only himself (for Kant is quite explicit that following moral laws does not mean obedience to God), "pure Kantianism is incompatible with Christianity." In

fact, I don't think Kraynak would object to the statement that the use of Kantian philosophy has tended to corrupt Christianity, precisely because Kant's philosophy is entirely devoid of the *amor Dei* that Christianity, and classical philosophy, regard as essential for the good life. The Kantian psyche is closed against transcendence, for it is not engaged in responding to divine appeals but instead seeks to achieve moral self-sufficiency in adhering only to its own autonomous will. Therefore, Kraynak's enterprise is to disentangle Christianity from the Kantian, Enlightenment justification of democracy on the basis of its promotion of human happiness through autonomy and the natural right to have one's autonomous will respected, rather than the natural law mandated duty to respect the God-given natural inclinations of others.

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 primarily 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 government that is actually possible. 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."²⁰ 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 participate in a truth beyond the political. But this, in turn, means that the political realm has no significance of its own, for the secular order would be only a limited reflection of religious truth. This seems to contradict the meaning of Voegelin's reference to Plato's discovery that "a society must exist as an ordered cosmos, as a representative of cosmic order, before it can indulge in the luxury of also representing a truth of the soul."²¹

In a Gnostic age is it possible to develop a civil theology that would provide significance for political existence and yet not be so secular as to be in conflict with *amor Dei*? Can a civil religion in the gnostic age not be Gnostic in its prediction of historical progress? If, as Voegelin

states, the society must be *microcosmos* as well as *macroanthropos*, is it possible to build into the civil theology the sort of openness to a higher order that characterized cosmological societies without attempting an impossible restoration of cosmological compactness? 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 constructed, 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 consequences of basing the understanding of order on the fullest possible satisfaction of *amor sui*. 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: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 128-131.

² Eric Voegelin, *Published Essays 1953-1965*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 11*, ed. by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 2000), 54.

³ In this paper I use these terms interchangeably.

⁴ Quoted in Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *The Puritan Oligarchy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 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.

⁵ *The New Science of Politics*, 187-189.

⁶ 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.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 220 and 228.

⁷ John L. O' Sullivan, "The Greatest Good of the Greatest Number," in *The Annals of America, Vol. VI* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1968), 333-334. Emphasis in the original.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 510.

¹⁰ 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: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 24.

¹¹ Hadley Arkes, *Natural Rights & the Right to Choose* (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

¹⁶ Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity press, 2002), 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

¹⁹ One of the most notorious examples 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.

²⁰ Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 167.

²¹ *The New Science of Politics*, 162.