

Conservatism and Spiritual and Social Recovery
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The problem I wish to address in my paper titled "Conservatism and Spiritual and Social Recovery" is the spiritual crisis of the West in this period of decline of Christianity. In 2005, I published *The Conservative Rebellion* that examined political periods in American history by reference to a type of Rebel who rose to the challenge of their times. The pre-revolutionary era was characterized by Rebels who acted bravely at Lexington and Concord and is known as the Spirit of '76. As I traced changes in the conditions and challenges of American history I came finally to the 20th century with a religion of democracy identified with Woodrow Wilson. The disordered reason of Woodrow Wilson who saw America as a secular Christ nation, to use Richard Gamble's observation, had its genesis in the American Transcendentalism that imported German idealism to American soil. That idealism saw man as essentially divine and history as the working out the consciousness of man's divinity. Essentially anti-Christian, Transcendentalists helped fuel the animosities that led to civil war. That combined with Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, a brutal civil war that challenged the Christian faith of combatants, shaped America as we know it today: a secular culture in which technology and coercive power of the state dominates American life.

As I read newspapers, popular magazine, listen to National Public Radio, watch Cable television attend Catholic Mass and work with American academics and the deracinated institutions called colleges where they work, I am conscious that American secular culture is closing not only the American mind, but also the American soul.

Conservatism in that context is one of several responses to spiritual disorder in America and offers some small hope for recovery of consciousness from the shadows of Plato's cave. But first let me say I am aware that Conservatism is an "ism," a concept with which all of us are uncomfortable. I prefer to use the concept "Conservative community" to describe the social reality that offers some respite from secularism, ideology, and the many "isms" that, like viruses, infect American culture.

I am also aware that most, if not all, of Eric Voegelin's German students are far to my Left politically and unlike American Voegelinians seem comfortable living in a nation even more secular than the United States.

Let me tie all this together with an the observation that “over time, the American people have come to understand their nationhood as the mystical substance of their common existence. How this paradigmatic reality of the life of a nation is articulated shapes the American nation for action in history.”¹

I want to discuss the concept of nationhood as a mystical substance of a people's common existence, and I want to ask what it is that unites a people's past, its present and the lives of those not yet born. I will be guided by Gerhart Niemeyer's discussion of this reality in *Between Nothingness and Paradise* which begins in the observation that a bond between political order and the order of being has been a casualty of “ideology.”

What is this bond between social order and being that has been lost?

For that we must go back to the natural philosophers of ancient Greece who discovered “being” as the origin of “nature” and especially Anaximander who realized that “being” is divine.² From the beginning of philosophy's break with cosmological myth, philosophers were conscious of being as “mystical.”

St. Augustine expresses that idea of order by means of the concept of the “City of God,” a city centered on Christ and which he contrasts that city to a City of Man that, lacks a “common” consciousness and thus is a symbol of social disorder.

In order to proceed, let's ask what is that common element in society that continues in time?

¹ Richard Bishirjian, *The Conservative Rebellion* (St. Augustine's Press, 2015), p. 2.

² For an authoritative discussion of this discovery by Anaximander see Werner Jaeger, “The Theology of the Silesian Philosophers,” (Oxford, 1964), pp. 24-37.

Unlike human beings, a society does not by its nature have a personal memory. By analogy, Niemeyer writes, a society has a remembered past by reference to “a present unity of action” that is like the identity of a person. “[T]he past alone is what could give identity to a society.”³

Voegelin's concept of the anthropological principle, “society is man writ large,” moves us closer to understanding this aspect of society because we infer from our experience of our own existence that society exists also. But unlike man, the idea of society is a “created” thing, not a natural person. At the start, therefore, a society has no past, but over time materials of an historical past can be created into a consciousness of an historical past.

An example that Niemeyer gives is that of ancient Israel.

The fact is that the escapees from Egypt, when they finally stood in safety and freedom, experienced their deliverance as an act of God, an irruption of divine might into time and the affairs of men.⁴

How different was this experience of Israel's God from the gods of the other peoples of the ancient Near East? One aspect of this difference was the awareness that the God of Israel was not of a god of the cosmos. For millennia mankind understood that he lived in a cosmos full of gods and we can infer that the common aspect of that experience was the cosmos itself.

Because the civilization of the West has been shaped by faith in revelation of God's intervention in history, it is very difficult for us to understand the radical break from experience of a cosmos of cosmological gods.

I have found that to be true in my students who understand periodization of history, but cannot comprehend the concept “cosmos.” We simply do not interpret our experience of existence or nature by reference to cosmological gods. The moon, the sun, the wind, rain, thunder, lightning are, for us, physical phenomena, not gods.

³ Gerhart Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, p. 145.

⁴ Ibid., p. 155.

Yet for millennia the gods of the cosmos shaped ancient man's understanding of the origin of the world and of empires. Ancient Israel, however, interpreted its existence by remembering a one-time intervention by God in history. Niemeyer writes:

A cosmological myth can be celebrated by reenacting again and again the story it relates. But an event that happened once in time and place, "before our eyes," even though experienced as a theophany, cannot be repeated or reenacted. God acted one time and his action can be only remembered.⁵

Niemeyer writes that "Once the Exodus theophany had grown into the order of a people living under God on the strength of their public past, history had become a mold of human existence, as such novel not only for 'Jacob and his son' but for the entire human race."⁶

Consciousness of a public past deeply affects our present understanding and in that context there are some bad aspects of the past of some societies. Totalitarian movements in Europe after World War I left what some call a "dark past" of trauma that "cannot be assimilated or accepted."⁷ That explains, I believe, the discomfort that Eric Voegelin expressed when Niemeyer conducted an event at the Chicago meeting of the American Political Science Association in 1964 which featured writings of Voegelin. Voegelin complained that that the event had "a strong slant toward conservative politics."⁸ This explains, I believe, the discomfort with American conservatism of many of Voegelin's German students and their tendency to write "apolitical" political theory.

History—our consciousness of time past, time present and time future—became a condition of Western human existence.⁹ Niemeyer writes "Through its public past a community participates in the logos which remains the same in the flux of mutability;

⁵ Ibid., p. 160.

⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

⁷ Anthony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, ed. *The Neighbors Respond. The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*. (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 2.

⁸ Voegelin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, p. 472.

⁹ Lack of historical consciousness may explain why Muslim countries seem incapable of accepting culpability in genocide.

hence the community's identity imitates, as Boethius said, "the ever simultaneous present immutability of God's life" which is what one "should rightly call eternal."¹⁰

From this perspective our nationhood as citizens of the United States is a mystic participation in divine reality that, Niemeyer writes, "hinges on the all-important experience of a past at which a meeting occurred between time and eternity." Consciousness of that history shapes our understanding of the life of the American nation, an identity that imitates, again following Boethius, "the ever simultaneous present immutability of God's life."¹¹ This reality, Niemeyer explains, can only be explained by myth.

Though it may seem improbable that the identity of modern America is shaped by myths, Niemeyer lists a number of truths we Americans affirm that are essentially mythic. Some uniquely American myths include the belief that individuals have souls; we proclaim an essential personal dignity and independence of mind. We distinguish time from eternity, and we attribute authority to "the people," and to the "law." We affirm an enduring Constitution, and that we as a nation exist "under God."¹² These myths do not depend on the consent of every American to their truth. Niemeyer suggests that the carriers of the truths of our myths may even be concentrated in a "remnant."¹³

Aristotle's analysis of the soul into rational and irrational parts is also foundational to Western man since something similar to revelation of Yahweh occurred in ancient Greece and led to rejection of the cosmological gods in the wake of a new truth about God in the discoveries of the Greek natural philosophers. That enabled Plato and Aristotle to differentiate the human psyche as, in Voegelin's terms, the sensorium of participation in divine reality.

Nous, Aristotle observes in his great *Nicomachean Ethics*, is the highest part and is "divine or the most divine thing in us." Through our *nous* we participate in the divine ground and our lives and actions are shaped by that experience. The irrational or concupiscent aspects of the soul are equally real, and Niemeyer writes that, thus there

¹⁰ Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, pp. 177-78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

are two tensions in the human soul: that of soul's rational part and "man's opaque psychic forces."

They are not capable of lending life the transparency that characterizes the *noetic* consciousness, but Aristotle reminds us that they are capable of heeding the *nous* or refusing to heed it.¹⁴

This recalls what Aristotle explained about right by nature.

What is right can be known by mature men,¹⁵ he said, but often we know it by reference to someone who knows what is right. In life we often ask ourselves, "What would he do?" That he or she may be someone we knew who could be relied upon for good advice. That is a powerful force in our private and in our public lives. These are persons who guide others in ways that can be political, or moral, or simply "just." The reality of their presence in our lives is celebrated in art, literature and motion pictures. Education from the elementary to secondary through college should aim to grow good character and replenish the numbers of mature men and women in each generation.

Niemeyer takes this essentially Aristotelian formulation and sharpens it with the assertion that

Christianity is the center of our culture, the truth that has shaped our past and is still shaping our present, regardless of what the attitude of particular persons to it may be. We cannot realistically step out of this truth into "another one," we cannot in truth become Hindus or Buddhists, and least of all can an amalgam be made of all religions as a dwelling place for anybody. Western civilization came into existence through the unifying impulse of Latin Christianity. No other religion has ever wielded a similarly powerful influence in the centuries of our cultural identity. The historical metamorphoses of our culture can be understood only in their relations to the Christian origins, even where these metamorphoses have not worked for but rather against Christianity.¹⁶

It follows that as Christianity ceases to be a living experience in the West, so historical consciousness of Western nations will be diluted.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 185.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Martin Ostwald trans. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962). "Thus, what is good and pleasant differs with different characteristics or conditions, and perhaps the chief distinction of a man of high moral standards is his ability to see the truth in each particular moral question, since he is, as it were, the standard and measure for such questions." 1113a24. See also 1166a10, 1176a15 and 1176b20.

¹⁶ Gerhart Niemeyer, "Christian Studies and the Liberal Arts College," in *The Loss and Recovery of Truth*, p. 511.

At this late stage in the decline of the West, it is unlikely that the Western Christianitas can be recovered. There is no modern Clovis to convert to Christianity and the ancient tribes of Western Europe have consolidated into modern national states. In America the Bill of Rights included a provision that prohibited an establishment of religion. Though that restriction originally applied only to the national government, no states after 1818 maintained a church establishment. And no modern "Great Awakening" is likely to occur, nor have lasting consequences were it to occur.

Nevertheless we should not overlook the presence of a remnant of *daimonic*, mature men and women, who are carriers of the truth of Christianity and classical philosophy who daily contend against the corrosion of civil society by ideological movements. Eric Voegelin writes, "The new man who lives in the tension of the erotic tension toward his ground of being Plato calls the *daimonios aner*, i.e., a man who exists consciously in the tension of the in-between (*metaxy*), in which the divine and the human mutually partake of each other."¹⁷ Aristotle's equivalent for the *daimonios aner* is the *spoudaios*, sometimes translated mature man.¹⁸ Christian theology speaks of the reality of living in a State of Grace.

Those among us who are responsive to the *daimonic* aspect of our souls call us to a higher standard and share with us the humility that comes from understanding that a higher aspect of our humanity is shaped by the transcendent God. These men and women are essential for renewal, for reducing the influence of political ideology on American life and our recovery from centuries of decline. That many are political "conservatives" suggests that American Conservatism is playing a role in correcting the disorder of our times.

The response to disorder by American conservatives has had greater influence in actions rather than theories. The interpretation of this regime in light of the Declaration of Independence is not well founded, and the call of some for economic liberty misses the reality that man is not simply a material being. So, I conclude that the visible signs of

¹⁷ Eric Voegelin, "What is Political Reality?" in *Anamnesis*, p. 352.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a 19-26.

a vibrant experience of order can be found in the actions of many American conservatives whom their fellow citizens in order to respond to social disorder. One example is the response of conservatives to the 1973 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in **Roe v. Wade** that has led to the rise of what we call the "right to life" movement.

At the end of the twenty-first century, will there be a vibrant, powerful, and spiritually healthy American nation? Will we even remember the civilization of the Christian West? Or will we suffer a loss of history and learn to accept bad economics, bad religion, failure in American foreign policy and the uncertainty of a world of forces seeking to destroy our country?

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