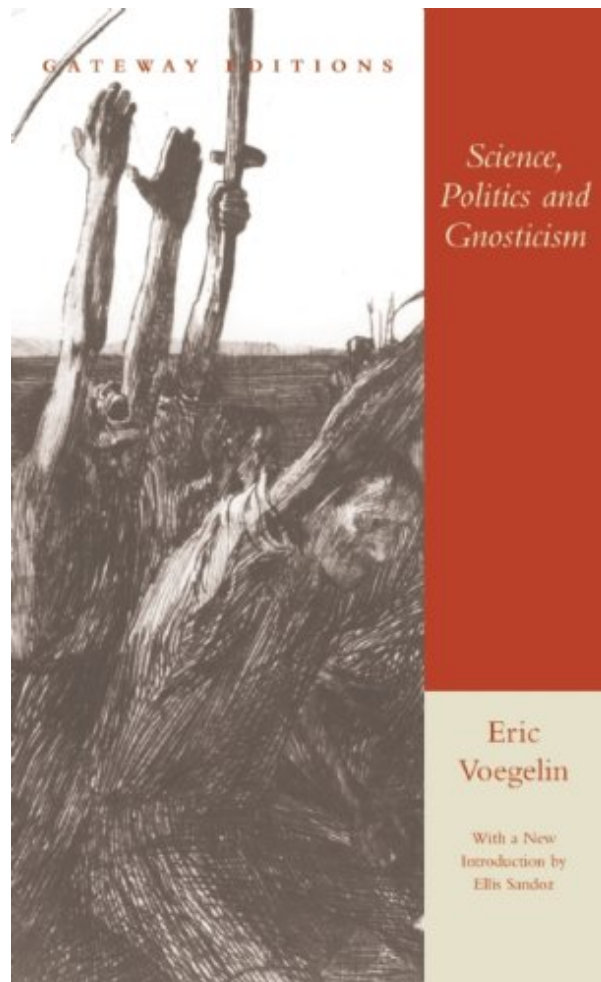
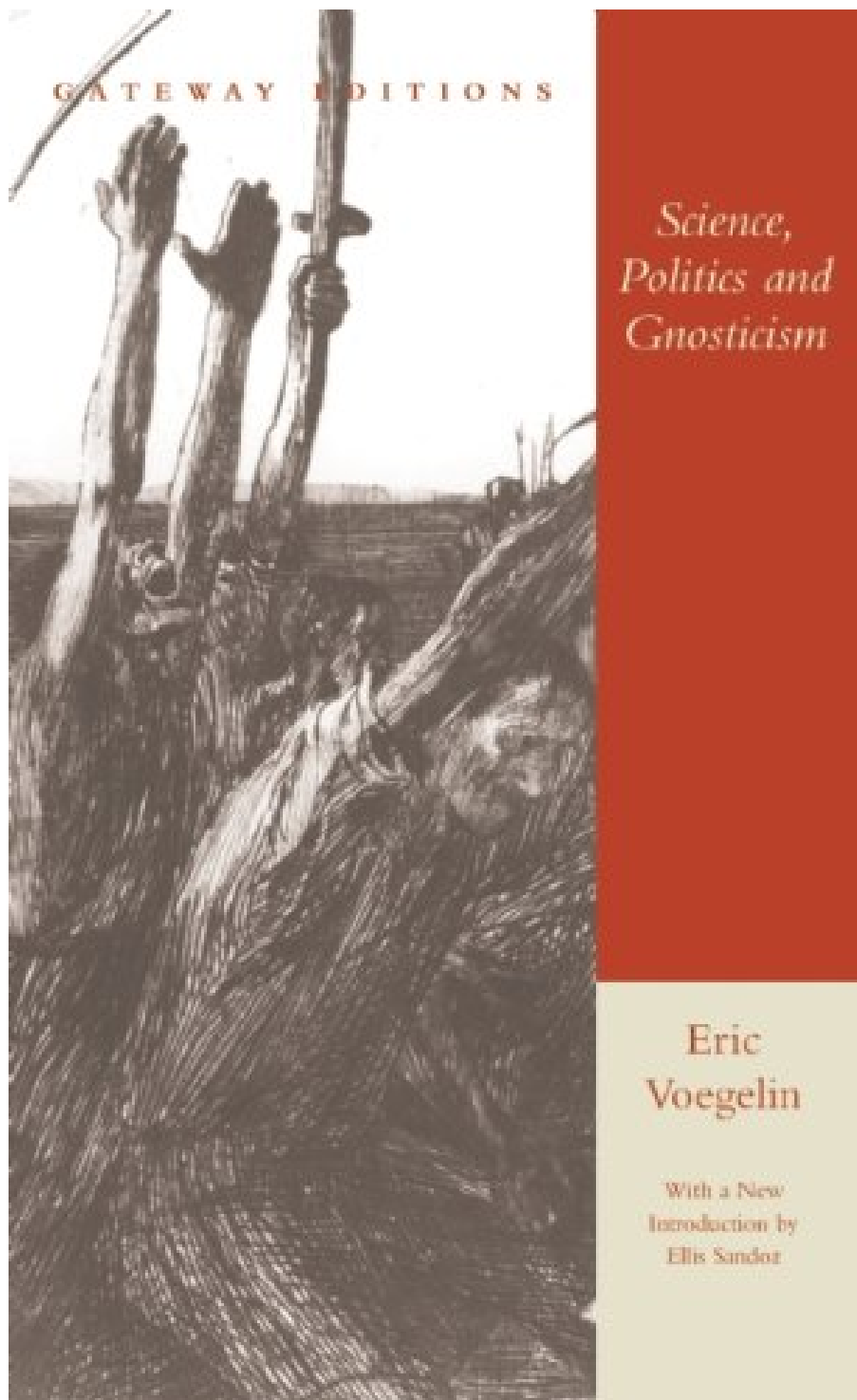


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About the Author

Voegelin was one of the most influential philosophers of our time.

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Eric Voegelin, one of today's leading political theorists and author of the contemporary classic *The New Science of Politics*, here contends that certain modern movements, including Positivism, Hegelianism, Marxism and the "God is Dead" movement, are variants of the Gnostic tradition of antiquity. He attempts to resolve the intellectual confusion that has resulted from the dominance of gnostic thought by clarifying the distinction between political gnosticism and the philosophy of politics. Highly provocative, this book is essential reading for students of modern politics, philosophy, and religion.

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Heady and Hardy

By Michael Philliber

Ten years ago I picked up this teeny book as part of my background reading for my doctoral thesis. It was a stretch to read then, but I sensed Voegelin was on to something. Now, ten years later, in the midst of a hot presidential campaign season, with loads of climactic social changes erupting in the country, and racial tensions flaring, I picked it up again and read it with a better appreciation for what the author was communicating. This 102 page paperback is a densely argued, heady work that revolves around two major essays penned by the author in 1959.

"Science, Politics, and Gnosticism" is a work that delves into modern political theory with the author

standing in a specific position: one that is open to the divine other while scanning the horizon of modern mass ideological movements. Voegelin is convinced, and seeks to convince the reader, that these modern mass movements are, at the end of the day, Gnostic. The major premise is that these movements are following the trajectory of the lust for power. Since there is a prevailing feeling of alienation from creation because it is a hostile place, and because being is given, therefore these movements seek to take control of being by destroying the givenness of being; “the aim is destruction of the old world and passage to the new” (10). And it is believed that by crafting our brave, new world, the alienation will be, at long last, assuaged.

To reach for this salvation, reality (givenness of being, etc) must be destroyed: “But reality must be destroyed – this is the great concern of gnosis” (26). This destroying of reality is for the purpose of making space to fabricate a second reality so as to gain control of being, to make “being” whatever humankind wants to define it as and construct it into. For this undertaking, Voegelin has a jarring description: “And taking control of being requires that the transcendent origin of being be obliterated: it requires the decapitation of being – the murder of God” (40). The murdering of God then opens existence up to the gnostic re-creation of the order of being (41). The disposing of the transcendent now makes the order of being only immanent – that which is here-and-now is all there is. It is to shift from the uncertain truth of transcendent being to the constructed certain untruth of immanent being; “The nature of the order of being as it is given, together with man’s place in it, is obliterated: the being of world and ego is restricted to the knowledge of the immediate and existent...” (51).

The end result of this gnostic trick of destroying the old world to progress into the new-made eon will only result in greater alienation and frustration, for the “attempt at world destruction will not destroy the world, but will only increase the disorder in society” (10). And the murder of God can only bring about the termination of humankind; “The nature of a thing cannot be changed; whoever tries to “alter” its nature destroys the thing. Man cannot transform himself into superman: the attempt to create a superman is an attempt to murder man. Historically, the murder of God is not followed by the superman, but by the murder of man: the decide of the gnostic theoreticians is followed by the homicide of the revolutionary practitioners” (47-8).

And there is the rub, “The nature of a thing cannot be changed; whoever tries to “alter” its nature destroys the thing.” As Divine Wisdom declares, “all who hate me love death” (Proverbs 8.36). In this era of renewed and heightened societal re-scripting of the nature of decency, marriage, the common good, Christianity, justice, and whatever else in the name of progress, is – according to Voegelin – a rejection of the givenness of being, a denial of the nature of our embodied existence, etc. The goal of this rejection and denial is to grasp for the reins and redesign reality for the purpose of concocting our own salvation, a social salvation. But in the end it will only intensify the alienation, and bring death.

"Science, Politics, and Gnosticism" is truly a thick read, thick in the sense that there is rich substance between the covers of this short book. It requires a slow reading to fathom what Voegelin is presenting, and the pay-off is that it provides a new way of hearing and discerning the mass movements on the right and the left. I warmly endorse this work!

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Remarkable and Eminently Readable

By James Deirmendjian

I came to this book after years of having conversation and debate with something of a student of Voegelin's - someone who was much better read, I'll confess, than myself. Furthermore, as a person who has completed degrees in philosophy and psychoanalysis, I can say with confidence that there have been few short books of philosophy I've ever read that have been articulated with as much conviction, clarity and rigor as this one.

Just what sort of a positive vision of cosmic order Voegelin is advocating, in place of the "Gnosticism" of those he criticizes, is something that I need to read more of his work, I think, to really grasp. But his readings of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, particularly as contained in this book, are among the most provocative and original pieces of philosophical critique I've ever come across -- as is his criticism of the intellectual corruptions endemic to "social science" as it's practiced in the modern university. If you've ever wanted to get into Voegelin, but don't know where to start, look no further.

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The Murder of God and Other Exhilarating Ideas

By GP

These two essays describe the inability of modern political thought to get a grip on the disorder and horror of the twentieth century. Part of the problem is that the thinkers themselves have been susceptible to the diseases under study. The roots of modern disorder are found in "gnosticism," which is narrowly defined as a Christian heresy, but thought of by Voegelin as a typical and recurring pattern of response to the universal problems of alienation, meaninglessness, and uncertainty.

In the title essay, Voegelin outlines his own approach to the "science of politics," derived mainly from Plato and Aristotle. He then proceeds to isolate the dominant motives and symbols of modern thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. The one great theme of all gnosticisms, ancient or modern, is the desire to do away with the notion of an objective world. For the project of world-transformation to be made plausible, the transcendent order of being must be treated as a human construction. If God is of human making, then God can be unmade.

In the second essay, "Ersatz Religion," Voegelin describes the complex of ideas characteristic of modern mass movements. Given his wider conception of the term gnosticism, he is able to interpret such seemingly disparate modern movements as positivism and fascism within a larger gnostic framework. As the title of the essay suggests, the religious impulse does not die after the murder of God; it gets redirected into "political religions." Politics then becomes a matter of fanatical belief, instead of debatable opinions.

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