In 1971, Notre Dame University held a conference to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Voegelin’s Walgren Lectures given at the University of Chicago and published the following year as *The New Science of Politics*. The purpose of the conference was both to pay tribute to Voegelin’s contribution to the restoration of political science and to discuss the key theoretical and methodological issues confronting political science twenty years after the publication of *The New Science of Politics*. Voegelin attended all the presentations by other scholars and then gave the final lecture. His address responded to a request by the planners of the conference for Voegelin to reflect on the state of political science and his own work as it had evolved over the intervening twenty years.

Voegelin began by stating that there was nothing about *The New Science of Politics*, as he wrote it twenty years before, that had to be retracted in light of subsequent theoretical, methodological or empirical developments. On the other hand, Voegelin acknowledged that there was much that needed to be added to the work he had begun in 1951 on the basis of subsequent empirical and theoretical findings. He then briefly identified some representative areas to demonstrate how the topics delineated in *The New Science of Politics* needed to be augmented or expanded. Before turning to these new developments, however, Voegelin briefly summarized the issues that concerned him when he gave the lectures and when the lectures were published as *The New Science of Politics* in 1952. First of all, the title *The New Science of Politics* suggested a more ambitious project than Voegelin had intended to address when he was invited to give the set of lectures. The lectures were given under
the title of a specific problem “Truth and Representation.” He used as a subtitle “The New Science of Politics” to signal how his approach differed from the prevailing approaches in political science. I want to briefly quote Voegelin at this point:

What was new about this was the conception that political science is not a straight statement of propositions concerning a reality which is somewhere lying around as a datum and can be simply stated as true....furthermore, on that occasion, a factor of newness was the consciousness that we do not deal with actions or rather behavior in the external world and in politics, but with states of consciousness, with states of experiences, so that the central problem in every analysis of social order would be the analysis of the experiences which produce the symbols in which a society expresses its order. That analysis of symbols is certainly a central problem for Plato and Aristotle, but is almost eliminated from contemporary political science. So, the complete presentation of the experiences as the origin of symbols, and then the changes of these experiences that are called “representation” with other changes in history, and therewith the changes in the symbols, are an important part of political science, and that was the new element I tried to introduce. However, in a very incomplete fashion.¹

Voegelin added that even within this one field of political science, that is, the problem of truth and representation, he had to be selective. The first three lectures, which became the first half of the book, dealt with truth and representation in the classical and Christian sense; the second three lectures, which became part two of the book, dealt with one modern aberration, with the Gnostic formulation.

Voegelin again acknowledged that his efforts to articulate some of the key issues dealing with classical philosophical truth and Christian truth were incomplete; and, even twenty years later, there was much work to do. In fact, the correspondences and the characteristic differences between the truth of philosophy and the truth of gospel Christianity remained the core issue in the Western experi-
ence of order. Again, let me briefly quote some of Voegelin’s remarks:

The problem of the restoration of a philosophy of politics, or of order and history, cannot be conducted without being clear about what the problem of philosophy is because, besides philosophy, we have other conceptions, experiences, and symbolizations of order, for instance: the Judaic, the Christian, sectarian movements, radical Christian movements—and a lot of other things.... So, let me be clear about the meaning of philosophy and its relation to Christian experience. Now in the first place, the development of philosophy occurred before we had Christianity, and it is characterized by the coming to differentiated consciousness of the consciousness of existence as the center of all truth and symbolization concerning the existence of man. From the consciousness of the tension of existence are developed the categories in which we talk about the order of existence. And this body of symbols and experiences which engendered them, for example, the seeking for God, to be moved by God, the “In Between of existence” that are articulated in Platonic philosophy have become part of the Western culture.... However, a further differentiation occurred which was not to done by a philosopher. It occurred with gospel Christianity. (Transcript, 6-7)

Voegelin then gave a brief characterization of one of the key differences in the two levels of experience of the truth of existence. Again I quote:

[If you look at classical philosophy—in the Platonic dialogues—you will find all the superb analyses of existential order of the human being...are still built into the conception of the embracing the order of the cosmos.... In the Timaeus, for instance, Plato develops the concept of a demiurge that operates within the cosmos...as an internal mystical figure in the cosmos. But Plato also knows that behind the cosmos and all the talk about the cosmos and the demiurge, there is the divine Father who is not the demiurge, and about that divine Father we know very little, and
therefore one can barely mentioned him, and otherwise he is never been praised worthily by man.... Now if you compare this formulation of Plato: the cosmos is the son of God, say with the Gospel of John, where you find that Christ is the Son of God, you see the difference. In the one case—in classical philosophy, in Plato—still the cosmos remains the son of God. In the Christian context the symbolism of the Son of God is shifted to the consciousness in the existence of man, of a specific man, a concrete man. Here is a differentiation of the problem of truth...which has not been created by any philosopher...it comes out of the prophetic, Judaic tradition and Christianity. Now what is the relation of a philosopher, in the classical sense, to the problem presented by this further differentiation? And here we get all sorts of interlocking relations. Nothing is simple in this matter. In the first place,...the original community around Jesus after his death probably would not have gotten very far unless it adapted itself to the cultural environment. The cultural environment was that of pagan philosophy. At that time already Stoicism, Epicureanism and so on was the environment of philosophy into which Christianity had to enter in order to become communicable, socially articulate, and socially effective.... Without such a language, the philosophical language, one could not have communicated in the Roman Empire what the truth of Christianity really is. Because the Jewish symbolism was almost inaccessible to non-Jews at the time. So philosophy entered the Christian community as its means of entering culture and becoming socially effective. So from the outset we have no problem. The Christian revelation is expressed in philosophical language. It becomes a problem only when for certain reasons this mixture of symbolisms stemming from the writings of the New Testament and philosophical language developed difficulties. I will come to this problem a little later on. Because now, one cannot simply revive classical philosophy. One cannot become a Platonist again and return to the cosmos, but one has to remain in the truth of existence differentiated by Christ and the early Christian community. (Transcript, 7)
Then Voegelin noted that one key aspect of classical philosophy, is not altered by the coming of Christianity or by further differentiation. This is the discovery of reason. “Reason is in philosophy the consciousness that man does not exist out of himself but out of the divine ground of his existence....and I cannot substitute for that analysis of reason any arbitrary conception of reason. So the existential tension of existence to the ground of existence...that is reason.” Voegelin then adds that one of the primary tasks of philosophy in the present age is to re-establish the meaning of reason and to re-establish the philosophical consciousness of existence in the “In Between” of reality. There is need for this to be done in the contemporary era because reason has been redefined in ways that eliminate the experience of the ground of existence and thereby deforms the nature of human experience. So, much of the work of philosophy in the present age is to strip away and to recover the foundations of classical philosophy.

Having briefly described the central issues in part one of *The New Science of Politics* and related them to the ongoing debates, Voegelin turned to the developments in recent scholarship that open the field and carry it beyond his conception in 1951 and 1952. The first that he mentions is the enormous deepening of the historical horizon. When Voegelin *The New Science of Politics* and *Order and History*, he started with the cosmological symbolizations that existed about 3000 B.C. In the relatively short span of twenty years, archeological and anthropological evidence had shown that these same symbolisms exist 10,000 to 15,000 years earlier and they exist all around the world. The evidence of these symbols, which cannot be attributed to some kind of cultural diffusion because they are so expansive, provides compelling evidence of humanity’s primary experience of the cosmos, and they place into broad historical perspective ideological attempts to deny the primary experience of the cosmos in the 19th and 20th centuries in the West.

Voegelin’s fullest discussion of developments that expanded his project as originally conceived centered around the analysis of modernity, which was the subject of the second half of his lectures and of the book, *The New Science of Politics*. Voegelin’s analysis in
The New Science of Politics dealt with the Gnostic dimensions of modernity. As I turn to Voegelin’s reflections on this topic, I want to quote Voegelin’s remarks rather than paraphrasing or summarizing them. His first comments occur near the beginning of his lecture where he had some remarks to make about the original structure of the lectures, and then he moved to a more general discussion of the reception the book had received over the past twenty years. In reflecting on the reception of the work, Voegelin turned to the second half, the part on Gnosticism first. Here is what he had to say:

Let me first reflect back on the second part because later I can deal with it more extensively [deal more extensively with the analysis of modernity. He does not deal further with Gnosticism.]. Here the dogmatization which sets in whenever a book is published was perhaps more dangerous than in the other situation [the first part dealing with classical philosophy and Christian political philosophy], which did not attract so much attention. Because immediately the problem of gnosis as characteristic of modern political ideas...was absolutized and everyday I get questions of this kind: is, for instance, the Russian government a Gnostic government? Of course things are not that simple. Gnosis is one element in the modern compound, but there are other elements of which we can talk later, for instance, the apocalyptic traditions and Neoplatonic experiences and symbolizations. So gnosis is not some panacea for dealing with modernity. There are other problems besides gnosis in modern political thought. (Transcript, 3)

These preliminary remarks are fairly brief, but they are revealing. First, they show that Voegelin was concerned that the focus on Gnosticism was interfering with the study of other dimensions of modernity. Second, Voegelin was a bit frustrated that so much attention given The New Science of Politics centered on Gnosticism. In this connection it is important to note that Voegelin seemed as frustrated with his sympathetic followers as with his detractors, because his followers were the ones who were plaguing him with questions like—is the Soviet government Gnostic.
Voegelin does not take up the subject of Gnosticism again. Instead, he devotes about half of his lecture time to a description of two important elements of the analysis of modernity that had not received adequate attention. In fact, he indicates that he was not aware of these two particular ones when he was writing *The New Science of Politics*; they had emerged only recently in the specialized scholarly literature dealing with the Renaissance. The first Voegelin identifies as the re-introduction of the divine cosmos by Ficino and the Neoplatonists. The second was the emergence of a new historical consciousness or a new epochal consciousness emerging during the Renaissance and found in the writings of Petrarch and Vasari. Unfortunately, the lack of time did not permit Voegelin to develop either of these in much detail. And with regard to the re-divinization of the cosmos through Neoplatonism, Voegelin was very brief and relied on his preceding discussion of the transformation of the understanding of existence in the cosmos under the impact first of philosophy and then gospel Christianity. As you recall, Voegelin indicated that one result of the Christian revelation is that truth becomes incarnated in Christ and human beings experience the resonance between the human soul and the transcendent ground of being. The result of this differentiation of consciousness is that the truth of cosmological existence recedes and the cosmos is no longer experienced as divine. Now let me begin to quote Voegelin:

The truth of the cosmos recedes as the Christian language becomes dominant as the instrument for the expression of truth. The language in which the cosmos is the son of God and the ultimate embodiment of the divine and the incarnation of the divine recedes and is lost...but then in the Renaissance, all of a sudden in the 15th century, we get a renaissance of Neoplatonism...by Ficino and Pico della Mirandola in which...the cosmos is re-introduced as a sacred reality permeated by the divine. So, just that part of the world, which had become non-divine during the Middle Ages under the concentration of the truth of existence, now all of a sudden emerges and becomes gradually a playground of divine forces, through the Neoplatonists. This is a problem of great importance that is still not sufficiently
realized. This divine cosmos had disappeared in the transition from the Stoic philosophical language to the Christian theological language in the later Roman Empire. One cannot revive the understanding of the cosmos as a divinely permeated reality infused with the pagan gods who permeated the cosmos of the cosmological civilizations. So, in the Renaissance the Christian language symbols remain, but the cosmos becomes divine or immanent. So, the great movements of immanentalism of all sorts of dubious types are the result of an undigested, re-introduction of the cosmos through the Neoplatonism of the 15th century. All modern immanentist speculation originates here. That is why I said that gnosis is not complete, is not everything. (Transcript, 18)

Voegelin adds that the Neoplatonic foundations of modern immanentalism were readily acknowledged by the 18th-century French philosophes and by 19th-century philosophers. Voegelin further notes that “in Hegel’s philosophy of history you will find an extensive presentation of Neoplatonism; and in the concluding summary of his presentation of Neoplatonism you find the following statement: ‘and my philosophy continues Proclus with the element of the self-reflective ego as the organizing center.’” (Transcript, 19)

Voegelin did not have time to develop fully the significance of this re-divinized cosmos that reappears with the Florentine Neoplatonists, and it is not a subject familiar to most philosophers and political theorists even today. Therefore, in order to understand the significance of the reference Voegelin made, it is necessary to develop this issue more thoroughly. In doing so, I will draw upon the specialized scholarly monographs that Voegelin alluded to in his lecture—to the work in Renaissance studies and the history of science that was most directly relevant to Voegelin’s analysis of modernity. This scholarly work focused on what is known as the *prisca theologia* or ancient wisdom tradition. This *prisca theologia* tradition is a compendium of a wide array of esoteric religious and pseudoscientific traditions, including Orphism, Zoroastrianism, Hermeticism, Cabala, alchemy, and magic. The term *prisca theologia*, which was used by Ficino and other theologians and philosophers of
the Renaissance, reflects their opinion that these materials contained the pristine theological and philosophical revelations to the great wise men, the magi, of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean. One of these traditions, the Hermetic, was so highly regarded that Ficino, the head of the Platonic academy in Florence, set aside his work on recently acquired Platonic dialogues to analyze newly found Hermetic materials. The reason for giving primacy to these was that Hermes was believed to be the first in a series of ancient wisemen, who received revelations regarding the true nature of the world and of humanity’s place in it.\(^3\) Scholarship on the Hermetic Corpus has long recognized that it was a compendium of a wide range of materials—some radically dualistic, others intensely immanentist. It was only fairly recently recognized, however, that Ficino and the other influential early modern thinkers concentrated on the highly optimistic, immanentist elements of the Hermetic tradition. This portion of the materials portrayed man as a terrestrial god (deus en terra) able to master nature and perfect society. It is this scholarship and these materials that Voegelin recognized as playing an important role in the shaping of modernity. I, therefore, want to briefly give a representative sketch of the content of these materials and show how this immanentist worldview differs from Gnosticism.

The Hermetic text that Ficino was responsible for translating and introducing into the mainstreams of modern thought was *Pimander*. This text contains a creation myth often referred to as the “Egyptian Genesis.” According to this text, a compact but comprehensive description of the creation of the world and of primal man is revealed after a spiritually restless Hermes has struggled to advance beyond the present state of ignorance and error. His efforts to find knowledge are rewarded by his being called into the presence of Pimander, “the mind of absolute sovereignty,” who asks Hermes: “what you want to hear and see; what you want to learn and know?” Hermes replies: “I wish to learn about the things that are, to understand their nature, and know God.” Pimander then reveals that God created the Demiurge, who created the seven celestial Governors who encompass the world and whose rule is known as fate. He is then told of man’s creation, which is by the supreme God
and not by the Demiurge. When man sees the creation of the Demiurge, he wants to participate in creation, and God orders the celestial powers to teach man how the cosmos is governed. After receiving knowledge and creative power from the cosmic Governors, primal man enters into the world of nature and matter. This part of the myth needs to be briefly quoted:

having all authority over the cosmos of mortals and unreasoning animals, man broke through the vault and stooped to look through the cosmic framework, thus displaying to the lower nature the fair form of God. Nature smiled for love when she saw him whose fairness brings no surfeit [and] who holds in himself all the energy of the Governors and the form of God...when man saw the form like himself as it was in nature, he loved it and wished to inhabit it; wish and action came in the same moment, and he inhabited the unreasoning form. Nature took hold of her beloved, hugged him all about, and embraced him for they were lovers. 4

Already, I think, the differences between the Hermetic myth of creation and the Gnostic myth are evident and I intend to look at these differences more closely further on. For now, however, other elements of the hermetic view need development. Following this account of creation, the divine messenger explains the implication of this union for human nature: “because of this, unlike any other living thing on earth, mankind is twofold—in the body mortal but immortal in the essential man. Even though he is immortal and has authority over all things, mankind is affected by mortality because he is subject to fate.” (Hermetica, 245) Further on, Pimander explains how loss of immortality can be avoided. This is a key passage because it reveals that the gaining of immortality or salvation is attained through man’s own efforts. When Pimander puts the question about immortality to Hermes, Hermes replies that man, in order to avoid sinking into the material, finite world, must turn toward the light (knowledge/nous ) because it is the essence of God and the essence of man. But Hermes is still troubled and asks if all human beings possess God-given minds and, therefore, are all capable of salvation. Pimander answers that “only a few men are capable of using their
intellect to ascend to their full human potential as terrestrial gods. “This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made God.” (ibid.) I have deliberately chosen these passages because they not only reveal essential components of the Hermetic material, but also help to understand the differences with Gnosticism. First of all, the creation of the cosmos is a work of beauty and harmony that is divinely inspired and maintained by celestial influences. The material world is not intrinsically evil or an inherent threat to man. On the contrary, primal man and nature love each other. Admittedly, there are aspects of the world that have turned away from the divine influence and that retain the properties of the primal material. Nevertheless, the myth affirms that the world is a work of beauty and a suitable home for man, especially when he becomes actively involved in perfecting it. The explanation of man’s loss of immortality makes it clear that the world is not inherently evil. For the man whose life is oriented toward the light (knowledge and God), the world is neither a temptation nor an obstruction. Only if man has turned from the light is he susceptible to the attraction of the flesh and inclined toward darkness (material existence). This pursuit of material pleasure is a willful choice; it is not the result of Original Sin or the inherent evil in the world. The myth, therefore, stands in dramatic contrast to dualistic views of the tension between the flesh and spirit, the secular and the sacred. Another feature to note is the emphasis which the myth places on man’s capacity for godlike knowledge and on knowledge as the means of salvation. After his creation, God provides man with the knowledge needed to exercise his role as a divine co-creator, and the myth contains repeated references to parallels between the divine nous and man’s nous and to the role of the logos as the link among man, the creation, and the supreme God. Man becomes damned to a material existence only if he willingly ignores or denies the noetic dimension of his soul.

The Hermetic material does parallel the Gnostic in its emphasis on saving knowledge but there are key differences. In the Gnostic myth, salvation—regaining one’s divine station—depends on escaping from the world. In the Hermetic myth the world is necessary for mankind to exercise its divine creativity, and it is in the world that
man creates the social microcosm that completes creation. The threat posed by the material world results not from its inherent evil but from human ignorance of the proper relation of the material and the divine. The Hermetic and Gnostic traditions also have very different understandings of the benefits of knowledge. In the Gnostic myth, knowledge frees humanity from a misguided effort to find meaning and purpose in the world. In the Hermetic writings knowledge enables humanity to master nature and perfect society—that is, to achieve innerworldly perfection.

The elements of modernity that enter through the Renaissance and the revival of Neoplatonism/Hermeticism are reflected in these mythic passages. Humanity exercises its godlike role when it is actively involved in shaping and completing the creation. It is also important to note that knowledge is power. Knowledge is not the wisdom to understand the complexities of existence and accept existence in the Platonic “In-Between.” The disorder that is prevalent can be transformed by the select few who receive the full extent of human knowledge. This can only be accomplished through human action. It is for this reason that Voegelin recognized this material and its re-discovery by the Neoplatonists as the beginning of all forms of modern immanentization.

Before leaving the subject, it is important to recall that Voegelin did not propose to substitute Neoplatonism as the panacea for understanding modernity. Just as Gnosticism is not the sole explanation, neither is Neoplatonism. But Voegelin rightly said in 1971 that this was a subject that had been little studied by philosophers and political theorists. Unfortunately, little work has been done in this area since Voegelin identified it at the end of 1971.

The second topic that Voegelin identifies as central to his analysis of contemporary disorder is the formation and character of modern epochal consciousness. This epochal consciousness and its construction of history also arises in the Renaissance period. As Voegelin notes, the term modernity or modern (moderna) has a long history of usage, but its connotation changes markedly in the Renaissance. Prior to the Renaissance, the term moderna simply noted the present in distinction to a previous state or condition. No
value judgment is implied in this designation of a historical transition. The present period might be better, worse, or simply different. Beginning in the Renaissance, however, the modern becomes associated with a dramatic advance that separates the new age qualitatively from the age that had preceded it. Another characteristic of this modern epoch that begins in the Renaissance is the conviction that this qualitative advance is permanent; unlike other periods in human history, it will not deteriorate and it will not be surpassed. The two figures that Voegelin briefly discusses in connection with the creation of this epochal consciousness are Petrarch and Vasari. Petrarch makes two major contributions to the formation of modern epochal consciousness. He creates the epochal distinction between his own time as an age of light and the preceding medieval period as an age of darkness. Petrarch also creates the first pattern of a three-stage history of progress in which there is first a classical age of excellence, followed by a period of darkness, which is superseded by a recovery and an enhancement of human excellence attained and given expression in the classical age. Vasari adds to the emerging epochal consciousness by creating another vivid symbol to mark the new age of excellence. Vasari describes the period of human accomplishment of his own time as a “renascita” or rebirth. He then places this age of rebirth in a pattern of history that makes the present age of excellence a permanent state. Because modern epochal consciousness is so central to Voegelin’s analysis of modernity, this brief sketch needs to be more fully developed. In doing so, I will draw on the monographic literature that Voegelin alluded to in his lecture but did not have time to develop fully. I will begin with the significance of Petrarch for the forming of modern epochal consciousness.

As already noted, Petrarch juxtaposed the dawn of the new age to the dark age that was at last coming to an end. Petrarch also provided the first formulation of a three-phase history moving from a classical period through a Christian dark age to the modern age of humanity’s rebirth and renewal. His revolutionary interpretation of the stages of Western history was evidently precipitated by his trip to Rome for his coronation as poet laureate in 1341. His correspon-
dence shows that he was awed by the sight of the civilizational remains from the imperial period, which preceded the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Empire. For Petrarch, the stone and marble monuments stood as imperishable testimony to both the nobility of man and the majesty of his cultural and political achievements. In an effort to reawaken the consciousness of the dignity and creativity of man reflected in the grandeur of the Roman monuments, Petrarch proposed to prepare a history that would highlight this period and distinguish it from the period of darkness \((\text{eta tenebrae})\) that followed “the celebration of the name of Christ in Rome.” This formulation is extraordinary because it is the first time that the term dark age is used to refer to the period of the Christian Empire. In fact, this characterization inverts the standard periodization of history that contrasts the age of Christianity to the preceding age of pagan darkness. In his famous poem, the \textit{Africa}, Petrarch develops this imagery further and adds: “my fate is to live amid varied and confusing storms. But for you perhaps,” he says “who I hope and wish will live long after me, there will follow a better age. This sleep of forgetfulness will not last forever. When the darkness has been dispersed, our descendants can shine again in the form of pure radiance.”6 In expressing this hope, Petrarch is now distinguishing three periods in western history—the classical age, the dark age, and the emerging modern epoch.

In developing this pattern, Petrarch introduces two major innovations in western historiography. First, he has changed the conventional model that divided western history into two epochs, the ancient and the modern. Second, he has transformed the site and source of the basic epochal distinction. In conventional history, the coming of Christ and the establishment of Christianity as an ecumenic religion divided the ancient and modern epochs. In this formulation, the period before the birth of Christ is referred to as a dark age. In Petrarch’s conception, the age of darkness begins with the establishment of the Christian religion in Rome, and the modern period begins with the reawakening consciousness of the grandeur of Western civilization and the majesty of the human spirit. Petrarch’s formulation, then, is the first instance of the three-stage pattern of
history that separates two periods of light by a period of darkness. Petrarch’s reconceptualization would not be of great significance if it remained restricted to his own work or even to his own time. But this characterization supplies the root symbols of the Enlightenment and introduces the historical pattern that has dominated western historiography down to recent times.

While Petrarch viewed his own time as the tenuous beginning of the transition from darkness to light, later Renaissance humanists confidently boast that their age as one of “rebirth” and even proclaimed the accomplishments of its greatest figures to be superior to the achievements of the classical age. The historian who first uses the term *renascita* to distinguish his own the age from the preceding age of sterility and death was the 16th-century historian Vasari. His book, *Lives Of The Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptures and Architects*, is more than the “first modern art history,” as it is often described. For Vasari and many of his contemporaries, art represented the highest form of human creativity. Therefore, his record of the achievements of Leonardo and Michelangelo, whom he regards as the greatest artists to have ever lived, is a demonstration of a burgeoning human creativity that leads to a thorough-going cultural renewal and revitalization.

Vasari’s designation of this new era as a period of renaissance marks another significant appropriation of religious imagery and another blurring of categorical distinctions between the sacred and the secular. Petrarch had borrowed and reversed the distinction between the age of darkness and the age of light. Vasari draws upon the conversion imagery of resurrection and rebirth and applies them to a cultural rather than a spiritual revitalization. Prior to Vasari’s formulation, there had been references to other cultural renewals, for example, the Carolingian era; but contemporary interpreters regarded them as a revitalization (renovatio) and not as a revolutionary epochal break. The basic framework in which society was understood was not questioned, and the conventional historical pattern was not broken by these events. Vasari’s formulation, by contrast, presents the new age as a radical departure from the Christian (Gothic) period. Moreover, his application of the language
of salvation to secular developments marks an extraordinary inversion of the sacred and secular history paralleling Petrarch’s inversion of the periods of darkness in light.

Another important feature of Vasari’s historiographical innovations is his alteration of the conventional analogy of the history of culture to biological cycles of birth and death. Greek and Roman historians had equated the rise and fall of civilizations to the movement from infancy through childhood to adulthood, old age and death. Vasari traces the infancy of the Renaissance from the work of Giotto through the transition in Masaccio (adolescence) to its maturity in the work of Leonardo and Michelangelo. There is no discussion of the fourth and final stages, however, because Vasari finds no inherent reason that this extraordinary artistic achievement would go into decline. The only precedent for Vasari’s truncated historical pattern is found in Christian salvation history, which purposely uses the truncated pattern to mark the essential contrast between sacred and profane history. Tertullian, for example, describes three phases of religious and spiritual evolution culminating in “the Paracletan period,” a period of spiritual maturity that will endure forever. St. Augustine contrasts the city of God to the city of man by stopping the cyclical pattern with the third stage of maturity because the city of God can never reach a period of senility and death. With Vasari, then, we find another instance in which the modern epochal consciousness is expressed in a historical pattern that had been reserved for salvation history. For Vasari, Petrarch, and other Renaissance revisionists seeking to mark the uniqueness of the events unfolding in their own time, conventional secular historical patterns were inadequate. Their experience could only be expressed in the language of conversion and spiritual awakening.

It is worth taking time to develop, briefly, subsequent uses of this pattern of epochal consciousness. In the 17th century, the consciousness of an epochal break with the past intensified and with ironic results. The central event at this stage is the Scientific Revolution, which divides the intellectual camp into “the ancients and the moderns.” In the early stages, the scientific modernists would concede to the ancients that classical civilization had impres-
sive achievements in politics, culture, and philosophy, and would grant that the principles established in the models provided continued to set the standards in those fields. Soon, however, modernists became convinced that the basic principles of the natural sciences were applicable to every area of human endeavor and produced new insights into human nature and society. As a result, ignorant and distorted conceptions transmitted from the past could be overcome and true knowledge attained. Of course, when the split becomes this pronounced, early “modernists” like Petrarch and Vasari, who are so instrumental in the founding of the age and in articulating its epochal consciousness, are exiled to the camp of the ancients. Sometimes they are given an elevated status in the “dark ages” because they were able to advance somewhat beyond the superstition and negativism of the Christian religion. Ultimately, however, they are relegated to the ancient period because their efforts do not rest upon a scientific base. By the 18th-century, the accumulated pressures to integrate the recent political, cultural, and intellectual advances into a coherent, intelligible pattern of historical development becomes a major preoccupation. Voltaire’s proposal to develop a “philosophy of history” to replace the outmoded theology of history is emblematic of the direction taken. Voltaire and his contemporaries shifted the focus of history from the saving acts of the Judaeo-Christian God to the unfolding progress of human reason and morality. In the 19th-century, Auguste Comte refined the 18th-century model and presented the famous three-stage pattern of historical evolution that supplied the basic historiographical model for most of the 19th and 20th centuries. This Comtean paradigm, like Vasari’s prototype, traces three stages in the maturation of human consciousness from its infancy in religion through its metaphysical adolescence to its scientific maturity.

Conclusion
So what are we to make of Voegelin’s 1971 lecture in relation to the topic of this symposium? In 1971 Voegelin chose to stress the importance of investigating elements of modernity that are not to be traced to Gnosticism. The first he mentions is the origins of
immanentization in the re-divinization of the cosmos by the Florentine Neoplatonists. The second is the origins of modern epochal consciousness and its sacralization of the secular through historical constructions of progress from darkness to light and from death to rebirth. What I find most interesting about Voegelin’s remarks are his cautions against making Gnosticism a panacea for diagnosing all the ills of modernity and his effort to direct investigations into materials that came to light after the publication of *The New Science of Politics* in 1952. This position is especially noteworthy in light of what was going on in the 1970’s with regard to the study of Gnosticism and modernity. The most significant event was the publication of the Nag Hammadi Library. The manuscripts had been discovered in the 1930s; but a series of blunders, coupled with extraordinary professional jealousy, and turf protection kept the materials from being widely accessible to scholars for about 40 years. At any rate, a scholarly edition of the texts was undertaken and published in the 1970’s. Concurrent with their publication, Yale University hosted an international conference on Gnosticism. Most of the scholars present were biblical scholars or scholars of late antiquity. Nevertheless, many of the sessions dealt with the impact of the scholarship on the understanding of modernity. I will quickly cite as evidence of this fact that three of the four plenary lectures focused on modern themes. Gilles Quispel offered the first lecture under the title “Gnosis and Psychology: Self-Experience and Projection in Gnosticism According to Jung and His School.” Carsten Colpe gave the second lecture under the title “The Challenge of Gnostic Thought for Alchemy, Philosophy and Literature.” The third lecture by the irrepressible Harold Bloom was entitled “Lying Against Time: Gnosis, Poetry, Criticism.” The only lecture dealing directly with ancient Gnosticism was Henry Chadwick’s, “The Domestication of Gnosticism.” So, the 1970’s brought a new scholarly basis for the study of Gnosticism and modernity, and the Yale conference was only one of several and its volume of proceedings was only one of several that came out in this time period.

Voegelin was, of course, aware of the work being done on Gnosticism and he was aware of the momentum that had been
building under the influence of Hans Jonas and of Carl Jung to apply the ancient Gnostic categories to dimensions of modern experience. In fact, by the 1970’s, the study of the Gnostic dimensions of modernity had become quite fashionable—to the point that Harold Bloom and other literary critics had incorporated it into the most recent wave of literary criticism. Therefore, if Voegelin had chosen to do so, he could have underscored the importance of Gnosticism and of his own work and demonstrated how the opening of the field confirmed and enriched his studies from the 1940’s, 1950’s, and 1960’s. But Voegelin did not choose to do this. On the contrary, he used the occasion of the Notre Dame conference in 1971 to stress that Gnosticism was not a panacea for the analysis of modernity. Voegelin took a similar position a few years later in another keynote lecture. In 1978, Vanderbilt University hosted a conference on the topic “Gnosticism and Modernity.” The purpose of this conference was to examine Voegelin’s concept of Gnosticism in light of the renewed interest precipitated by the publication of the Nag Hammadi Library and other scholarly developments of the decade. Voegelin spoke in the evening of the first day of the conference, and he again explained the need to avoid focusing exclusively on Gnosticism and pointed to areas that new research in various fields was making available. He again mentioned specifically the Renaissance and Renaissance Neoplatonism. He also mentioned apocalyptic constructions of history that he pointed to as Renaissance developments. Moreover, if you consider carefully Voegelin’s writings from the mid-1970’s to his final publication, you find little mention of Gnosticism. Certainly, you do not find it as a defining trait or characteristic of Voegelin’s work to the degree that it was in the 1940’s, 1950’s, and 1960’s.

In my opinion, it was not only that new fields were opening that needed to be taken into account. I believe that Voegelin realized that the explosion of interest in Gnosticism in the 1970’s had the peculiar result that it made the term less viable as a theoretical or an analytical category. When Voegelin first applied the term, there was a relatively narrow context in which the term was understood and applied, and which Voegelin explains in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. 
But what was known about ancient Gnosticism in the 1930’s and 1940’s was changed dramatically in the 1960’s and 1970’s. At the same time, the application of Gnostic categories to modern experience had become fashionable. But when a concept becomes fashionable, its theoretical value is compromised because all sorts of people use it in all sorts of different ways that erode the specific framework out of which the term was first developed and applied. So, I think, Voegelin was cautious about the use of the term Gnosticism because he saw what was coming. He saw that two such different literary critics as Harold Bloom and Cleanth Brooks could use the term in entirely different ways and apply it to entirely different features of modernity. He also saw that with the growth of the Jung cult that the term would come to be associated with a vague psychological notion of self-realization. Finally, he knew that the serious philosophical application of the term centered around Hans Jonas and his application of the term to modern existentialism. This use stands in sharp contrast to the use Voegelin made of the term. So, in my view, Voegelin, as always, was far ahead of the rest of us. His determined pursuit of the foundations of modern disorder carried him beyond the construction of the 1930’s through the 1950’s. His experience with trends in scholarship warned him that the attention being focused on Gnosticism in the ’70s would cause more confusion than clarity when the term was applied to modern forms of disorder.

Stephen A. McKnight
University of Florida

NOTES
1. I am quoting from a taped recording I made of the lecture. A slightly modified transcript is included in the Voegelin Archives at the Hoover Institute. Subsequent citations will be made within the text.

2. By this, Voegelin means that the differentiation of experience and consequent language symbols have so transformed the experi-
ence of the cosmos that what is revived is not the experience of the cosmos that was experienced in the cosmological civilizations. Rather, there is a confusion in which the language symbols of Christianity are present at the same time there is an effort to re-divinize the natural world.

3. This is the source of the immanentism that Voegelin associates with the re-divinization of the cosmos.


6. Quoted in Momsen, op. cit., 114.