



## Study Guide on Eric Voegelin's *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*

*The page numbers in this study guide refer to the 1968 ISI Books Edition.*

Although one could read *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* from beginning to end, I have found that starting with “Ersatz Religion” is a more useful way to introduce students to Voegelin’s thought, exposing them to his concept of Gnosticism first.

### ERSATZ RELIGION (61-87)

1. In his introduction, Voegelin writes that “the loss of meaning that results from the breakdown of institutions, civilizations, and ethnic cohesion evokes attempts to regain an understanding of the meaning of human existence in the given conditions of the world” (7). Gnosticism—the human attempt to reconfigure reality in its own image—is one of these attempts.
2. According to Voegelin, what are the characteristics that reveal the nature of the Gnostic attitude towards the world? Is there anything that is absent or should be removed from Voegelin’s list? (64-65)
3. For the first set of Gnostic symbols, how does the Gnostic derive its idea of perfection from Christianity? What are the teleological, axiological, and activist mystic components of this set and how do they interrelate with one another? (65-68)
4. For the second set of Gnostic symbols, how does the Gnostic adopt Joachim of Flora’s historical speculation for its own construction? How do the symbols of the third realm, the leader, the prophet, and spiritually autonomous persons form a Gnostic theory of history? (69-74)
5. What is immanentization? How is this a reflection of the Gnostic attitude towards the world? How is this similar to or different from the Christian attitude? (74-76)
6. What are the essential elements of reality that More, Hobbes, and Hegel suppress in their Gnostic projects? Is Voegelin’s interpretation of these thinkers correct?<sup>1</sup> (76-81)
7. What is the definition of faith for Voegelin? Do you agree with him? How is this understanding of faith portrayed in the Jewish and Islamic religions and by Plato? How are these accounts of faith similar or dissimilar to Christianity’s? To a Gnostic? (81-87)

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<sup>1</sup> The Arts of Liberty Study Guide on Utopia can help with this question.



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### SCIENCE, POLITICS, AND GNOSTICISM (11-37)

According to Voegelin, political science is to fashion “an image of the right order of the soul and society—a paradigm, a model, an ideal—that could function for the citizen” (11). To accomplish this, the assumption is “the order of being is accessible to knowledge” and that “the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order” (13). Once the political scientist knows reality (“the order of being”) and that it includes God (“the transcendent source”), then “current opinions about right order [can] be examined as to their agreement with the order of being” (14). In other words, politics is about the examination of opinions about the right ordering of the human soul and society grounded in transcendence.

1. Should this be the purpose of politics? How do we know whether the paradigm, model, or ideal offered is one of right order? What do we do with those who disagree—whether a majority or minority—about this image of right order?
2. Voegelin cites that society resists “the therapeutic activity of science” (15). What is the traditional resistance towards political science? What is the modern one and how does it differ from antiquity? What does Voegelin mean by “therapeutic”?
3. How is Karl Marx a Gnostic? Why does he prohibit questions about his theory? (17-21, 33-35)
4. What is *libido dominandi*? (21-24) What are the three stages of deception about which Voegelin writes? Does Marx suffer from these ailments? (25-27) How is Marx’s rebellion against God different from Prometheus? (27-30)
5. What is Hegel’s “new philosophy” (30-36, 55-57)? How are Hegel’s and Heidegger’s philosophies Gnostic? (30-36) What are the similarities among Marx, Hegel, and Heidegger?

### THE MURDER OF GOD (39-54)

1. What is parousiastic Gnosticism and its aim? What does it mean to murder God and why is it necessary for the Gnostic? (39-41)
2. How is Scholem’s account of the golem legend not the same as parousiastic Gnostic speculation? (41-44)
3. How is Nietzsche’s madman different from the golem legend? How is it a type of parousiastic Gnosticism? (44-48)
4. Marx claims that God was never “anything but a human product” (48). Why, for the Gnostic, “must the murder of God be made “retroactive speculatively” (41, 48-51)?
5. What essential elements of reality does Marx suppress in his theory? Why? (50-51) How does he interpret the death of Christ?



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6. What does Voegelin mean when he states the “death of God is not an event, but the feat of a dialectician” (51-55)?
  7. How does the Gnostic destroy reality? How does this make the murder of one’s fellow human being permissible? (53-54)