The year 2002 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of Eric Voegelin’s *The New Science of Politics* (1952), which sets out the theoretical and methodological principles for the restoration of the analysis of political and spiritual order and disorder. In his introduction, Voegelin explained that restoration required both recovery and innovation. The first step in recovery was a return to the classical meaning of “political science.” This restoration was needed because the science of politics had been derailed in the 19th and 20th centuries through the effort to emulate the natural sciences. The result was a reductive approach that defined science in terms of the methods borrowed from the natural sciences. As a consequence, the uniqueness and the integrity of the subject was compromised and only those dimensions that could be quantified by the standards of empiricism were regarded as valid fields for the social sciences. Voegelin, on the other hand, argued that in order for science to be science it had to give priority to the subject under investigation rather than force the subject to conform to a particular method; and the subject of the social sciences is ultimately humanity and humanity’s search for meaning and purpose. While political scientists rightly study institutions and laws, Voegelin argued that these cannot be understood as primary or autonomous fields. They must be recognized as a manifestation of humanity’s effort to create enduring and stable structures that give order to existence.

The starting point then for the recovery of the first principles of political science was to return to classical philosophy because Plato and Aristotle recognized that a science of society must be based upon an understanding of human nature and humanity’s quest to ground
the meaning of existence in the enduring structures of eternal order. But Voegelin’s rehabilitation of science involved more than a simple return to classical thought and experience. Voegelin proposed to augment the classical foundations of political science by adding the field of “historics” to the traditional fields of “Politics” and “Ethics.” In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin identified three new historical elements, which reflected major developments occurring in history after the period of Plato and Aristotle. The first was Christianity’s further differentiation of humanity’s understanding of itself, the world, society and God. This new understanding affected not only the inner life of the soul, but also affected the understanding of political order. The second major historical development was the breakdown of the medieval Christian concept of order and the consequent rise of political ideologies and political mass movements that convulsed Western Europe in the 20th century. The third element of the new science of historics was the enormous deepening of the historical horizon. By the 1950s the historical perspective on order and disorder had moved back to at least 3500 BC and spanned the earth’s geography. So, the empirical field from which this study of politics could be based had expanded enormously beyond the classical understanding. Not only had major developments occurred after the philosophical discovery of order in the soul; the pre-philosophical basis of order was far more complex than Plato or Aristotle could have imagined.

Another element that was new in *The New Science of Politics* was Voegelin’s pointed attack on modernity. Central to this critique was Voegelin’s dramatic characterization of the age as Gnostic. This term derives from the Greek “gnosis,” which at its most general level simply means “to know.” But it is knowledge of a distinct type, which is based upon non-rational, self-confirming experience. This mode of knowing stands in marked contrast to knowledge that can be acquired through reason and through empirical analysis. Voegelin, therefore, used the term in juxtaposition to knowledge that is theoretically and empirically based. This latter form of knowledge in Greek is equated with “episteme” or with “sophia,” which contrast to gnosis in two key ways. Gnostic experience is subjective and
cannot be confirmed in the experience of humanity at-large. Philosophical truth, on the other hand, is accessible and confirmable by human beings, whose souls are open to the full range of rational experience. Another difference is that Gnostic experience is a pneumatic experience of the spiritual in the absence of or without the encumbrance of the physical or the natural. Rational, philosophical experience, on the other hand, integrates and orders the physical and the spiritual, by giving meaning and purpose to the physical or the natural through its attunement to the transcendent or the spiritual.

So, when Voegelin applied the term Gnosticism to his criticism of modernity, he was challenging and contesting modernity’s claims to be scientific and rational. Voegelin’s analysis of the great systems of political reform of Hegel, Comte, and Marx demonstrated that they were not grounded in science. They are, rather, private, self-confirming fantasies that are non-rational and anything but scientific. Another reason that Voegelin applies the term Gnostic to modernity was that the term had a specific meaning within the field of “historics.” In late antiquity a sectarian movement, which was a rival to Christianity, claimed to have unique revelatory insight into ultimate truth through the experience of gnosis. The members of this sect believed that they were chosen for a special revelation of truth inaccessible to the rest of humanity. They were, therefore, the children of light, while the rest of humanity lived in darkness. A fundamental difference with Christianity was that the Gnostics experienced the world as alien and hostile. The world was the creation of an evil deity, not the creation of the loving Father and Redeemer of humanity. The Gnostic sects—at least the ones known to the Christians of antiquity—rejected the incarnation. The god of light was alien to the darkness of the material world and would never become immersed into it. For Voegelin, much of the disorder of the modern world appeared to derive from equivalent experiences. Modern Gnostics believe themselves to be the recipients of a special enlightenment that separate them from the mass of humanity and provide the means for escape from the disorder that plagued the world. Modern Gnostics also reject the ordering principles of
Christianity and of Christian political order that derived meaning and purpose from the transcendent ground.

The purpose of this symposium is to examine Voegelin’s concept of Gnosticism in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of *The New Science of Politics*. This is the single element of Voegelin’s work that has attracted the most attention and controversy. The symposium intends to consider the continuing validity and usefulness of the concept in light of empirical and theoretical developments occurring over the last five decades. The basic question that the essays individually and collectively seek to address is this: to what extent does Gnosticism remain an essential concept for understanding and analyzing modernity?

The first essay, “Gnosticism and Modernity: Voegelin’s Reconsiderations Twenty Years After *The New Science of Politics*,” which is my contribution, examines Voegelin’s address at the 1971 conference held at Notre Dame to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Walgren Lectures, which were published as the New Science of Politics. In this address Voegelin stated that there was nothing in *The New Science of Politics* that would need to be retracted because subsequent scholarship had proved it in error. At the same time Voegelin indicated that recent scholarship had opened additional perspectives on the origins of modernity that now needed to be carefully examined. In the lecture he called particular attention to Renaissance Neoplatonism and the new epochal consciousness that emerged as part of the Renaissance. Eugene Webb’s essay, “Voegelin’s Gnosticism Reconsidered” offers a measured criticism of Voegelin’s problematic use of the term Gnosticism, and demonstrates that recent research undermines the monolithic and monochromatic use of the term by Hans Jonas and those who borrow heavily from him—including Voegelin. Professor Webb then calls attention to Voegelin’s later writings and his efforts to articulate the difficulties of maintaining consciousness of the precarious nature of existence in the *metaxy*. Professor Webb maintains that the later writings, especially: “Reason the Classical Experience” and the fourth volume of *Order and History, The Ecumenic Age*, mark a substantial advance in Voegelin’s analysis that transcends the limitation of his early termi-
nology, including Gnosticism, and he urges those who want to advance Voegelin’s work to focus on these later developments rather than on the work of the 1950s. Michael Franz’s essay, “The Concept of Gnosticism and the Analysis of Spiritual Disorder,” maintains that Voegelin’s analysis of spiritual disorder, which is introduced in *The New Science of Politics*, stands as one of the greatest accomplishments in political science in the 20th century. Professor Franz then notes that the attempt to understand and explore spiritual order and disorder remained the fundamental element in Voegelin’s work, but the term Gnosticism becomes increasingly problematic. First, continued advances in the understanding of ancient Gnosticism and its modern varieties moved the discussion beyond the level of understanding of the 1950s. Secondly, Professor Franz finds substantial developments in Voegelin’s analysis of the spiritual order and disorder, especially as set out in *The Ecumenic Age* (1974) and maintains that the emphasis on *The New Science of Politics* and Voegelin’s work of the 1950s has caused a diminution of appreciation of the refinement in his analysis, which appeared in his later writings. Stefan Rossbach essay, “‘Gnosis’ in Eric Voegelin’s Philosophy,” takes issue with the scholarship, which draws a sharp contrast between Voegelin’s early and later writings and criticizes the concept of Gnosticism as outmoded. Professor Rossbach then investigates the “empirical validity of Voegelin’s analysis of the relationship between Gnosticism and modernity as presented in the *New Science of Politics*” and situates the insights from *The New Science of Politics* and “especially the insights concerning Gnosticism” within the context of Voegelin’s thought as it developed from the 1950s through to the 1980s. Emphasizing the continuity underlying the changes in Voegelin’s work, Professor Rossbach concludes that Voegelin’s work on Gnosticism sheds light on the overall direction, purpose and self-understanding of Voegelin’s philosophical quest.

The four essays individually and as a whole provide an overview of the issues scholars must address in assessing the relation of Voegelin’s concept of Gnosticism to his later works, and they also offer helpful discussions of the state of scholarship in fields that
affect the understanding of Gnosticism and its transmission, including biblical studies, Patristics, and Renaissance Neoplatonism, and Hermeticism.

Stephen A. McKnight