

WHAT REBELLION?

Paul H. Lewis

The Conservative Rebellion by Richard Bishirjian
(South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2015)

Dr. Bishirjian is the president of Yorktown University, an online for-profit college. He has been active in conservative politics since the early 1960s, as a participant in Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign, a Senate staffer, an academician, an author of a history of political thought, a member of the Reagan administration's International Communications Agency, and a contributor to *Modern Age*. In *The Conservative Rebellion* he describes his youthful introduction to conservatism and how his instincts deepened into a well-developed philosophy through his acquaintance with some of modern conservatism's most notable thinkers. He then applies that philosophy to American history, identifying certain crisis points that produced shifts in the dominant political paradigm. His goal is to find a way out of the contemporary mess resulting from liberalism's apparent ascendancy in the "culture wars" since the 1960s.

As a political science undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh, seeking both intellectual and spiritual enlightenment, Bishirjian was put off by the department's smug, pervasive liberalism that shielded itself behind a hypocritical logical positivism that claimed to be value-free. Treated with contempt by the faculty and a majority of their fellow students, young conservatives

like Bishirjian threw themselves into the Goldwater campaign as an act of rebellion. They later viewed his crushing defeat as evil triumphing over good—the evil, in this case, being an unholy alliance of Democrats, the media, and liberal Republicans. In this respect, one might say that they anticipated today's "Tea Party."

After graduating from Pitt, Bishirjian sought a more satisfying academic environment as a doctoral student at Notre Dame. There he met conservative theorists Eric Voegelin, Stanley Parry, and Gerhart Niemeyer, who would have a lifelong influence on his worldview. Voegelin, especially, shaped his thinking about modern philosophical and ideological movements by pointing out that their utopian goals were really corruptions of Christian faith in salvation—except that they appealed to science, not revelation, as their standard of truth. Although their ideas really embodied a faith, they claimed a special "scientific" knowledge of the forces shaping history and to what end those irresistible forces were leading: a heaven that was to be achieved in this world, rather than the next. As such, these movements were secular religions, modern-day versions of the old Christian heresy called Gnosticism. Since perfection is unattainable in this world, these "religions" could never achieve their ends. Instead, their adherents would engage endlessly in agitation and upheaval. If the leaders managed to get hold of political

Paul H. Lewis is emeritus professor of political science at Tulane University.

power, they would seek to make it total. And as utopia continued to elude them, they would employ more drastic means to snoop out alleged saboteurs and try to force a supposedly malleable human nature to conform to their prescriptions.

Marxism is an obvious example of the kind of secular religion that Voegelin had in mind, but Bishirjian's conservative rebellion is concerned mainly with a home-grown variation that threatens American freedom. Progressivism, he argues, is a type of Gnosticism that constitutes a fourth paradigm in our history. The first paradigm was "the Spirit of '76," whose ideas were best summarized by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence as "inalienable rights." Unfortunately, in Bishirjian's opinion, Jefferson's Enlightenment principles also caused him to insert an egalitarian message in the Declaration, an inclusion that eventually would cause trouble.

The second paradigm, a reaction against instability under the Articles of Confederation, was embodied in the U.S. Constitution. It sought to strengthen the federal government's role in facilitating commerce and defending the nation while also limiting the scope of its powers through a system of checks and balances. The Civil War gave rise to the third paradigm, which was best summarized in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural Speech. In language that bordered on the theological, Lincoln announced a new nationalism in which "We, the People" were the ultimate source of legitimacy.

Eventually, Bishirjian thinks, the revolutionary potential of Jefferson's egalitarianism and Lincoln's nationalistic uplift combined to produce Progressivism. Beginning in the late nineteenth century as an attack by reformist intellectuals against the excesses of the Gilded Age, Progressivism under Presi-

dent Woodrow Wilson burst forth as a secular religion. Bishirjian highlights two especially prominent characteristics: (1) a belief in an executive-centered federal government with no limits to its power, and (2) a belief in America's redemptive mission to establish justice and democracy around the world. The two are mutually reinforcing. Foreign wars are used to justify the federal government's greater control over the economy and citizenry.

Like other secular religions, Progressivism is always frustrated in its efforts to establish "social justice" abroad and at home. Indeed, Bishirjian argues, those efforts, inasmuch as they commonly run contrary to established customs and an imperfect human nature, usually make matters worse. Sometimes the Progressives are forced to back off, but those retreats are only tactical. Sooner or later they will try again. Since President Wilson got America involved in World War I, our country has fought in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Each intervention was supposed to lead to a "New World Order" that would guarantee global peace and democracy, but that New World Order remains elusive.

Bishirjian is no isolationist or pacifist, though. He criticizes the Truman administration's containment strategy against the Soviet Union at a time when our superiority in nuclear weapons could have wiped out Stalin's regime. His rule of thumb is that we should intervene overseas when our national interest is clearly at stake but never for merely idealistic reasons. And when we must go to war we should employ the full might of our military arsenal. The irresolute nature of the containment strategy meant that halfhearted efforts would guarantee failure. As a consequence, there is now a great gap between America's political elites and a thoroughly war-weary public.

On the domestic scene, big government has grown bigger and more intrusive, from Wilson's "New Freedom" to the "New Deal," the "Great Society," and Obama's "fundamental transformation" of America. Since the 1960s Progressives have been winning the "culture wars." All of that leads Bishirjian to conclude that "since World War II we have seen the decline of every institution of American society" and that we now are in "an era of decline, where we endure bad religion, bad education, bad politicians, bad culture and, unfortunately, bad conservatism." With regard to this last feature, he laments the invasion of neoconservatives into the Republican Party, for they are just big government liberals and foreign interventionists who fled the Democratic Party as the extremist Progressives took it over. Because of neoconservative influence, the Republicans have abandoned their defense of small government.

For most of us conservatives there is little to disagree with about Bishirjian's description of the contemporary American scene and the Progressive mind-set that dominates the culture. One might object that it is not always easy to distinguish whether a particular foreign policy decision is based on pure national interest or on some idealistic urge, because in either case action is always accompanied by appeals to both democratic ideals and necessity. Still, we would agree with Bishirjian that our leaders should keep their interventionist urges under control and (with apologies to John Quincy Adams) not go around the world seeking monsters to destroy.

Where he disappoints, however, is where many other conservative analysts of the political and cultural situation fail: he has no workable solution to our problems. Obviously, to use his own vocabulary, we very much need a "fifth paradigm" inspired by

conservative ideas to replace Progressivism, but how will we achieve it? There seems to be no great conservative figure, or school of thinkers, with sufficient popularity to start a crusade to rescue Western civilization and traditional American values. Bishirjian dismisses economic conservatism, which promotes "the consumer society," as spiritually sterile. And neoconservatism is part of the problem. As for the Tea Party, he admits to being "dumbfounded" by its sudden appearance. Where were they in the past, when true conservative rebels needed help to resist the growth of government and the futile wars in Asia and the Middle East? "Clearly, they were not thinking about politics and were assuming that civil society was on autopilot."

Voegelin predicted that modern Gnosticisms—progressivism, positivism, and scientism—would eventually collapse because they repress "the truth of the soul." Then we would see the rebirth of Christianity. Like Voegelin, Bishirjian is a Christian conservative, but he sees no new "Great Awakening" on the horizon, nor does he think it would have a lasting effect if one appeared. There are some politically radical and millenarian Christians, but so far they have been marginalized by the secular culture. Just as Voegelin refused to speculate about just when modern Gnosticism would explode, so Bishirjian agrees that Christianity is not likely to triumph soon. All he can offer is a faith in what he calls "daimonic" men and women who still believe in the truths of Christianity and who struggle against the "corrosion of civil society by ideological movements." They are, for him, the true heroic conservatives, holding on to their faith in Christ and the cultural traditions of ancient Athens and Jerusalem. "Nurturing them is essential for renewal," he writes.

Then what? Will they ally with the Johnny-come-lately Tea Party contrarians

and constitute a powerful revival of the conservative rebellion? Maybe, or maybe not. In the end Bishirjian is unsure whether America will become once again a vibrant, powerful, healthy, and Christian nation by the end of the twenty-first century or continue its decline. To put it another way, the conservative rebellion may or may not

materialize. And if it does, it may or may not succeed. Over the past hundred years conservatives have lost most of their political battles against the Progressives, and their few victories have usually proven ephemeral. Bishirjian leaves us with no reason to believe that the future will be much different. †

REHABILITATING THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

Ann Hartle

The Enlightenment: History of an Idea

by Vincenzo Ferrone, trans. Elisabetta Tarantino
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015)

Western civilization, we are told, has entered a post-Enlightenment, post-modern, and post-Christian era. The horrors of the twentieth century—totalitarianism, the Holocaust, two world wars—have destroyed every illusion about the ability of autonomous human reason to transform the world into the heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers. A post-Enlightenment era must be a postmodern and post-Christian era because the origins of the Enlightenment are to be found in the sixteenth century: the meaning of the Enlightenment is inseparable from the meaning of modernity as such. The Protestant Reformation had destroyed the unity of Christendom, and modern philosophy had turned from the contemplation of

reality to the Cartesian “subject,” freeing philosophy from its status as handmaiden to theology.

Ferrone’s book is a defense of the Enlightenment, not for the sake of Western civilization, but for the sake of the European Union. “The new united Europe that is on the rise,” he says, “badly needs to find again its authentic roots” in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. To make this defense, he must argue against the view that sees in the Enlightenment the cause of the French Revolution with its Reign of Terror, the horror that foreshadowed the unspeakable atrocities of our own day. Because philosophers such as Hegel, Horkheimer, and Adorno argue that there is indeed a necessary connection between the Enlightenment and the Terror, Ferrone must argue for the separation of the historical understanding from the philosophical understanding of the Enlightenment. Somehow, by giving a historical account, with all the com-

Ann Hartle is professor of philosophy at Emory University and the author of *Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy*. She is currently working on a book on recovering civility.