

# THOMAS MOLNAR'S PLACE IN AMERICAN CONSERVATISM

Balázs M. Mezei

THOMAS MOLNAR WAS ONE of the influential intellectuals who contributed to the spectacular emergence of American conservatism after World War II. As a young scholar he joined the circle of conservative thinkers and received praise for his broad horizon of knowledge, his sharp criticism of utopian liberalism, and his defense of a revised notion of authority. Born in Hungary in 1921, Molnar graduated from the University of Brussels in 1946 and earned a doctoral degree at Columbia University in 1949. His main field of expertise was post-Enlightenment conservative French philosophy and literature, especially the thought of Georges Bernanos. His career was assisted by some of the prominent personalities of the conservative movement, the most important of whom was Russell Kirk, his mentor and longtime friend. It was the founding father of modern American conservatism who asked Molnar to write for *Modern Age*, fostered his appearance in *National Review*, and supported his academic career. Kirk repeatedly invited

Molnar to his home in Mecosta, Michigan, and found publishers for his first books. For a time their friendship was so close that they decided to go together for a long trip in Africa, and even in later years they corresponded regularly.<sup>1</sup>

With a university degree from Brussels, Molnar was open to a number of inspirations: aristocratic conservatism between the two world wars, the Scholastic renewal of the nineteenth century, the ontological turn in philosophy in the 1920s, the air of a new beginning among refugee intellectuals in the United States, and Central European legal traditions. Accordingly, Molnar's writings gained influence in the United States, France, to some extent in Spain, Italy, and Germany, and after 1990 in Central Europe as well. Many of his more than forty books were translated into various languages; his articles regularly appeared in American and European intellectual magazines. More than most contemporary American conservative authors, Molnar became a familiar name in the intellectual circles of many post-Soviet

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countries, such as Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.<sup>2</sup>

Molnar's emergence as an essayist and public philosopher was decidedly helped by what has been called the American conservative revolution. Without suitable knowledge of the history of this movement after World War II, it would be difficult to assess properly Molnar's work; and without knowing the intramural developments in American conservatism, it would be hard to understand the formation of Molnar's position as a traditionalist Catholic intellectual, a passionate opponent of utopian liberalism, and a thinker of order and authority.

Throughout his long and active life, Molnar gradually distinguished his philosophical position from traditionalism or paleo-conservatism, conservative liberalism, and neoconservatism. He strenuously labored to give a clear expression to his own understanding. I term Molnar's view "perennialism," and this perennialism, I contend, is a special kind of conservatism characteristic of only a few authors in Western history.

Molnar's intellectual journey, completed with his passing away in 2010, moved in a circle. He started his career with a strong criticism of modernity as "paganism" and arrived by the end of his life at the most perceptive assessment of utopianism available in our day. Molnar's way to Anti-Utopia was a peregrination gradually uncovering the central insights he already possessed in a seminal form at the beginning of his philosophical voyage. Already in this way Molnar shows a specifically conservative character: instead of moving along the line of a simple progression, his intellectual odyssey realized a return, more elaborated in form and content, to what he had already possessed in his youthful intuitions.<sup>3</sup>

To gain a better grasp of Molnar's conservatism, let me focus on his critical stance

toward the "American Dream." As George H. Nash writes,

No one ever talks about the British Dream, the Russian Dream, or the Japanese Dream. But the American Dream—that is something else. Instinctively, we comprehend what it means: It means opportunity—opportunity to achieve, to ascend the ladder, to transcend our origins, however humble. We sense that this is distinctively an American dream, that it is inextricably interwoven with our self-definition as a people. We sense further that ours is a land where dreams, often enough, find fulfillment, and our society is unusual because of it.<sup>4</sup>

It would be too simple to say that Molnar did not share the American Dream. For practically he did share it: he spent his adult life in the comfortable circumstances the United States offers its citizens. While Molnar attained fame in France, he never thought of permanently moving to that country. He never thought of moving back to Budapest either, where he taught for more than a decade and received some of the highest state and church decorations for his work. When the semester ended, Molnar returned to his New Jersey home, an old, many-storied, castle-like cottage on the outskirts of New York. In this sense he was an American and enjoyed the blessings of his chosen home. As he declared in a text which is still in a manuscript form,

We are all socialist, said Napoleon III; we however, the inhabitants of the planet, could say, especially after 1968, that "we are all Americans" and our lives are close to, almost identical, to the life of the Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Molnar tended to agree with some criticisms of the American Dream coming especially from liberal circles, such as the New York intelligentsia. Molnar was a New Yorker for more than two decades and could not remain indifferent to the city's cultural influences. When Molnar started his teaching career in the 1950s, he was no more critical of America than his fellow academic intellectuals. In 1956, however, he experienced the dramatic distance between the declared purposes and the Realpolitik of the American government. When the government let the revolt in Hungary be smashed by the Soviet tanks, Molnar's dissatisfaction with the ideal of the American Dream entered a more intense phase. Yet it was only his association with Russell Kirk and the new conservative journals that helped him form a sharper judgment. Essentially, his criticism pointed out that the "opportunity" offered by the United States concerned rather the material aspects of life. In the spiritual dimension, Molnar suggested, prospects of a morally and spiritually ordered community were blocked by the lack of genuine authority, various forms of utopianism, and the destructive powers of mass culture supported by the ever more sophisticated means of a technological civilization.

Molnar's reaction to this situation was in many ways similar to what we learn from Irving Kristol's writings. Molnar's response was "counter-revolutionary" in the sense Kristol describes it in *Two Cheers for Capitalism*:

Modern, liberal, secular society is based on the revolutionary premise that there is no superior, authoritative information available about the good life or the true nature of human happiness, that this information is implicit only in individual preferences, and that therefore the

individual has to be free to develop and express these preferences. What we are witnessing in Western society today are the beginnings of a counter-revolution against this conception of man and society. It is a shamefaced counter-revolution, full of bad faith and paltry sophistry, because it feels compelled to define itself as some kind of progressive extension of modernity instead of, what it so clearly is, a reactionary revolution against modernity.<sup>6</sup>

These lines were published in 1978; but already in 1969, in his important book *The Counter-Revolution*, Molnar plainly anticipated Kristol's observation:

Generally, the counter-revolutionary hesitates when placed before a revolutionary situation: he knows, in his mind and heart, what course would be right and effective to take, but at the same time he also ponders the possible legitimacy of the revolutionary demands.<sup>7</sup>

We see a similarity here between Kristol's "shamefaced counter-revolution" and Molnar's "hesitating counter-revolutionary." Both authors conclude, however, that shame or hesitation is not the proper attitude in view of the destructive power of revolution. Counter-revolution has a right to turn against this revolution and defend conservatism. Although Kristol had other sources too, for instance Willmoore Kendall, yet the idea of using the term "counter-revolution" as a catchword originates in Molnar's writings on the historical origins and theoretical ramifications of the notion.

In another work, Kristol describes how at the end of the 1960s he and his circle suddenly realized their alienation from "leftist ideology"; they discovered that they had been

“cultural conservatives all along.”<sup>8</sup> Molnar did not have to discover that he had been a conservative “all along”; yet facing leftist criticisms of the “American Way of Life,” Molnar’s trust was shaken in the ability of the United States to form a better society that can further develop the most important feature of Western civilization as he saw it: the unity of worldly and spiritual power on the basis of genuine authority.

Molnar’s critique of the American Dream manifests many central problems of his thought: the importance of the “original” in the metaphysical sense; the relationship between the original and its replica; the fate of the replica to become emptied, fallen, degenerate, “pure snobbery”; and the reference to the corrosive role of utopian ideologies. For Molnar, America’s political, moral, and religious self-understanding is hardly capable of preventing the emergence of various forms of utopianism. In order to purify this legacy, Molnar suggests a return to “reality,” to God’s perennial presence, and he points out the need to shape education, politics, culture, and religion in accordance with the perennial structures of divine reality.

The central subject matter of Molnar’s work is “utopia.” The term was sporadically used from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and conservative authors had applied it for some time preceding Molnar’s efforts to develop his systematic critique. Already in his first book, entitled *Bernanos: His Political Thought and Prophecy*, Molnar writes: “From Descartes to Renan, from Bacon to H. G. Wells, mastery over nature and the happiness of mankind were proudly together on the flag of Utopia.”<sup>9</sup>

In Molnar’s *The Decline of the Intellectual*, published in 1961 for the first time, “utopia” and “utopian” are mentioned on almost every page. It is the central tenet of the book that the decline of the intellectual consists

in his submission to utopian ideologies. Molnar demonstrates this process in a comprehensive fashion in the history of European intellectual life. “Utopianism” expresses this historical process of ideologies becoming ever more popular and influencing, from a certain point of time even determining, the life of whole societies and thus contemporary humanity as well.<sup>10</sup>

Molnar’s systematic book on the problem appeared under the title *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* in 1967, with this summarizing passage:

. . . we may describe Utopian thought as a belief in an unspoiled beginning and attainable perfection. It is to be noted in study of the Utopian mentality that advances from the hypothetical, or postulated, state of perfection to the state of restored perfection is always accompanied by pessimism and optimism to an exaggerated degree and in bewildering mixtures. Very often the pessimistic conception of the universe, as found in thoroughgoing materialism and its belief that chance so created everything that even man himself is a fortuitous aggregate of atoms, leads to an irrational optimism regarding the possibility of establishing a happy community. In such a case, pessimism and optimism do not really stand in contradiction; each has its appointed role: the Utopian may be pessimistic about individual human nature, but optimistic about the ability of man’s social nature, as embodied in society, to overcome the recalcitrance of the individual.<sup>11</sup>

Molnar’s understanding of utopianism emphasizes the importance of a utopian *mentality*, which leads to utopian *thinking* and utopian *action* at every social level,

beginning with politics and religion down to education and the everyday organization of life. All these aspects are consummated in utopian metaphysics concerning the nature of God and the relationship between ultimate good and evil. In atheistic versions of utopianism, the ultimate ground of being is understood as matter or spirit or some other ultimate substance. Theistic versions refer to God as the origin of everything; however, God is opposed to an evil principle that attempts to overcome him. Manichean utopianism overemphasizes the role of evil in the universe, history, and society, a view that entails a struggle for the eradication of evil in all its forms in the soul, society, and history. Utopianism is precisely about the attainment of a perfection in which evil is annihilated; and this perfection is not to be realized in a transcendent realm, but already in this life, in a concrete historical period, and in the form of a state. Once such a state is formed by a successful revolt of the utopians, the victorious realization of the utopian ideal cannot be halted—the notion of a global revolution belongs to the heart of utopianism. The ideal end is the creation of a universal utopian society from which evil is eliminated and human beings reach a new kind of perfection.

It is important to note that Molnar's characterization of utopianism as a political and social phenomenon does not focus on America. The main target for Molnar is communism and its foremost representative, the Soviet Union. Historically, the Soviet Union was the heir of antique and medieval gnostic and millenarian movements, which evolved into socialist philosophies and later into the politics of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Utopianism can be studied by focusing on the output of these movements in the twentieth century, especially the Soviet Union: its military might, alleged scientific superior-

ity, social justice, and its purpose to create the new type of human being, the "New Soviet Man." Obviously, Molnar interpreted the historic collapse of the Soviet Union as the verification of his theory of the impossibility of a political community organized along the lines of utopianism. However, he considered the European Union an equally utopian construction that, as he emphasized already around 1990, would inevitably face economic dissolution and political turmoil in the future.<sup>12</sup>

Molnar elaborated his understanding of communism in a philosophically as well as historically consistent fashion. If his theory was not greeted with more applause in America, the reason was that Molnar connected his criticism of communism to a disapproval of the role of gnosticism in modern societies in general. Molnar also used a rich variety of sources for his critique. Names like Bergson, Ricoeur, Girard, and Ellul were certainly known in conservative circles. Yet conservative authors rarely referred to them and almost never scrutinized their works in a detailed fashion. Molnar's copious references to these and similar thinkers may have raised the impression that Molnar's familiarity hid a latent sympathy. That was not the case—with the possible exception of Carl Gustav Jung.

One of Molnar's keen critics, the South African philosopher David J. Levy, expressed the view of a number of readers of Molnar's books:

Nothing testifies more to the continental European roots of Molnar's political thought and outlook than his concern to emphasize the anti-liberal as well as the anti-socialist themes of conservatism. In this sense Thomas Molnar's work is closer in spirit to that of men like the Frenchman Gustav Thibon and the Belgian

Marcel de Corte than to any English or American writers. And this impression is reinforced when it is realized that, like these men, Molnar is a strong Catholic of the old school, distrustful when not downright condemnatory of the wind of change that has swept through the Church in the last twenty years.<sup>13</sup>

Molnar's critique of utopianism does indeed reflect "old school" convictions. Marcel de Corte's criticism of communism, based on his views of the need of a monarchy and his condemnation of the French Revolution, was close to Molnar's. Nevertheless, a direct influence of de Corte on Molnar cannot be traced. Molnar's merit was rather a rich synthesis of various criticisms of modernity in general and ideologies in particular. If not his first influential book, *The Decline of the Intellectual*, then the book on utopia seemed to verify the prediction of Russell Kirk in his introduction to Molnar's book *The Future of Education*: "His [Molnar's] reputation, I think, soon will be of one of the first writers and scholars in America."<sup>14</sup>

Why did not Molnar become "one of the first writers and scholars in America"? My answer is threefold. First, Molnar was not only a Catholic; he was a traditionalist Catholic with a strong French background. Second, his numerous publications in France, some of which he never translated into English, showed him as a "foreign" philosopher. The twin peaks of his French publications were his book *Sartre: Ideologue of Our Time* (1969) and another book, coauthored by Alain de Benoist, *L'éclipse du sacré* (1986). Both works ensured Molnar an eminent place among Continental philosophical essayists, and his name was quoted by his friends as well as his enemies with emotional undertones. Some trends of American traditional conservatism, along the lines of a dignified patriotism, had

a certain reservation against such openness to various European influences. Third, Molnar's interest turned more and more to general philosophical questions, for instance in *God and the Knowledge of Reality* (1973) and *Theists and Atheists* (1980). While his earlier peripheral works, such as *Africa: A Political Travelogue* (1965), appeared to have been written for amusement, his more abstract, philosophically ambitious volumes did not fit well in the available traditions of American conservatism. Molnar was not a Burkean; he was not a dedicated Thomist, not even a Straussian.<sup>15</sup> In spite of their initial friendship and long correspondence, Molnar did not become a follower of Voegelin, and their letters betrays a gradually emerging dissent.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Molnar was a systematic thinker, and his criticism of utopianism entailed ponderous metaphysical decisions concerning the nature of ultimate reality. The basic principle of utopianism was the belief that human beings can achieve perfection in all respects and that history tends to realize an ultimate fulfillment. In the theistic versions, human beings are invited to become similar or even identical to God, and history is nothing else than the evolution of the divine-human union. Accordingly, the past must be devalued, and its institutions and traditions, social and psychological orders, must be destroyed.

Behind the banner of the war on ideology there lay, however, Molnar's deeper conviction of the nature of God's reality. In the book, coauthored with Alain de Benoist, Molnar describes in detail his experience of the sacred—an experience obviously determining Molnar's entire outlook:

The nature of the sacred unveils itself for me with the kind of humility we experience when we are confronted with something exceeding our wildest dreams. In other words, the sacred is what incarnates

for us the presence of God. . . . Against all forms of gnosticism, Catholicism stands alone with an exhaustive account of the sacred, and this from the very moment of the Incarnation: the body is also from God, man is not only spirit. That is the *ex post* rationale for all sacred objects, because, being the bearers of the transcendent, they also are captured by our senses as the body of Christ in the Incarnation.<sup>17</sup>

This confession of Molnar shows the two sides of his experience: a mystical kind of perception of the sacred and the discovery of the best representation in Catholic Christianity. This is the experience that lies behind Molnar's theoretical reflection of the problem of God.

In *God and the Knowledge of Reality*, Molnar discusses three approaches to the "God-problem":

The three positions may be identified in the following manner. *A* holds that God (or the gods) has a certain role to play in the universe and in the life of men, but that essentially he (or they) is remote from both; I shall call it the position of the *inaccessible God*. *B* holds that God is not only not remote from man, but that he is not even distinct from him. This position has been variously described, among others, as pantheism, and R. C. Zaehner, the Oxford historian of religion, has termed it *pan-en-benic* (all-in-one), or immanentist. I shall refer to it as the position of the *immanent God*. Finally, *C* holds that God is neither remote nor one-with-man, but that he is *transcendent and personal*; crudely phrased, he is an "anthropomorphic" God.<sup>18</sup>

The grounds Molnar gives for accepting position C are historical inasmuch as he shows what grotesque positions followed when one accepted either the dangerous mysticism of unity or the notion of a neutral, over-transcendent God. God and human beings are radically different, yet God is incarnate in Christ and offers salvation. Salvation consists in the right relationship to God as the purpose of everything. God, on this view, is the primordially real being humans can never attain fully; the full perfection of God implies the necessary imperfection of humans. History or personal mysticism can never abolish this chasm between God and man, and the condemnation of utopianism follows from the right theological understanding of this view. The way to Anti-Utopia ends up in the genuine experience and right understanding of God's reality.

Molnar's ontology, espoused for instance in *Philosophical Grounds* of 1991, offers an underpinning of the theological point about the right understanding of God in terms of position C. Accordingly, reality as such contains the original and its replica. It is a growing emphasis on the original that gives the ever more visible outlines of Molnar's position:

We cannot make sense of the world and of our existence and experiences therein unless we postulate the *original*, the source and principle (*arche*) of all, not as a creator, rather as an ontological substratum. For it to be the original, it must be forever and by essence distant, farthest removed, secret, hidden, but nevertheless real, with a reality surpassing everything else. . . . Yet, at the same time as we exalt the hiddenness and the mystery of the original and weave stories and mythologies around it the better to

approach it through poetry and art—we are busying ourselves to bring it nearer, unveil its Face, make it answer questions. Most of all, we compel it to answer us by way of its *reflections* which contain, we firmly assume, some of the original's essence.<sup>19</sup>

From this theological point Molnar proceeds to the ontological one, and the ontological point entails the outlines of the social and historical consequences. If we put these factors together, we can grasp another position of Molnar's: his understanding of the traditional, pre-Vatican II Catholic Church as the most important institution in history. It is thus easier to understand Molnar's confusion when he witnessed some outcomes of Vatican II. Molnar called the period of the council "the great crisis of the century."<sup>20</sup> After some reflection, however, Molnar accepted the council and many of its consequences. He corresponded with Cardinal Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and visited him before returning to Hungary as professor of political philosophy in 1992. For Molnar, thus, the church eminently represents the perennial order of things. In spite of its complicated history full of human imperfections, the church has been able to show the right proportion of continuity and change, of perennial structures and their proper adaptation to various circumstances. Molnar's political ideas followed the same route: state, society, and politics must be based on perennial principles of order, grounded in the right theological conceptions. These conceptions must be represented in a society and turned into political action. The person to accomplish political action is, for Molnar, the politician of genuine and authoritative personality.<sup>21</sup>

Authority is a further crucial term in Molnar's thought, a term entirely consis-

tent with his metaphysical views. However, his book *Authority and Its Enemies* of 1976 did not receive the attention it deserved. In a milieu of anti-authoritarianism, it was indeed provocative to publish a book with a title that recalled polemically Karl Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies*. Reading about Molnar's experiences in the introduction, we understand better Molnar's intention with the publication of this volume:

The antiauthority attitude usually originates in emotions and instances of indignation, and in such cases reason itself sounds like a provocation. In a lecture on the subject at Davidson College some years ago, professors and students showed themselves extremely hostile, but when I later had opportunities to speak privately with some of them, it turned out that my interlocutors were quite in agreement. What had happened? Simply, that as a group (the class), those who thought I was right in my analysis of authority *submitted* in silence to those who said aloud that I was wrong, that is, to those who had authority, the egalitarian-minded professors.<sup>22</sup>

Molnar then defines the notion of authority as

the cement that keeps people together and is the factor allowing them to rely on each other in the vast give-and-take of social, material, and cultural transactions. It is then a positive factor, "invented" by nature, that divides us according to our functions, responsibilities, aspirations in life, equalities, and inequalities.<sup>23</sup>

This notion of authority differs from those of other authors, otherwise close to Molnar's



interests, such as Yves Simon and Robert Nisbet. Simon untiringly emphasizes the need for openness and dialogue in a pluralistic, democratic, and industrial society and attempts to define a maintainable notion of authority in the network of complicated human relations in a contemporary setting. Nisbet, as a sociologist, analyzes the process of the changing forms of authority; in particular, the process of how "Platonic" or uniform authority gives way to the "Aristotelian" or pluralist, localized forms of authority. He connects the latter to some important conservative authors, such as Burke and Tocqueville, and gives the impression that genuine conservatism consists in the latter form of authority. As opposed to Nisbet, Molnar offers a metaphysical treatise on the notion of authority; as opposed to Simon, Molnar's view is closer to conservative Catholicism.

How could we define, then, Molnar's specific conservative view? I suggest the expression "perennialism." This term refers to the notion that there is a supernatural order of things originating in its eternal source, God. This supernatural order gives a perennial example as to how human affairs are to be organized. The supernatural order, the realm of the *lex aeterna*, is itself eternal; but it is *perennial*, inasmuch as it is considered as an exemplary pattern for the worldly affairs. The home of the realization of this perennial pattern is, most importantly, the political realm—the context in which human individuals and their groups can freely accomplish their purposes. The questions of individual morality are secondary in this perspective; as soon as the political and social order is properly conceived and realized, the possibility of right moral action is secured.

One might say that perennialism is identical with the traditional Thomistic understanding of natural law. There is indeed a

kind of identity here, but perennialism is a broader term and entails only to some extent the notion of natural law. As St. Thomas explains, there are two levels of natural law: the one of the highest principles and the other of the conclusions.<sup>24</sup> The principles can never be blotted out from the human mind; the conclusions, such as moral rules, however, can be ignored. In both cases, we deal with the natural realm, and natural law (*lex naturalis*) is thus called because it is a law *in* nature. When I speak of perennialism, however, I emphasize the supernatural order, the origin of natural law, God and his perennial precepts. These precepts, God's thoughts or ideas, are disclosed in revelation, declared by the church, and maintained by tradition. The notion of natural law can be interpreted in an immanentist fashion, as for instance in Deism or in the natural right tradition. Perennialism, however, points to the ultimate ground of these precepts in God's reality and underlines the importance of their formulation given by the church. Perennialism is supernatural law, *lex supranaturalis*. Its center is "the sacred," God, inasmuch as it offers its perennially valid design for human beings in history. Perennialism is thus the view that emphasizes the historical and archetypal nature of *lex aeterna*.<sup>25</sup>

In Anglo-American conservatism, the author who stands closest to Molnar's views is perhaps Christopher Dawson. Dawson had a very detailed knowledge of history, a keen sense of the sacred, an appreciation of the historic role of Christianity, and a balanced approach to the weaknesses and strengths of human beings. Molnar too understood history in an organic way, as a process controlled by divine providence. Due to his personal experiences, however, Molnar was more pessimistic about the possible outcome of the historical process and emphasized the weakness of human beings

to form by themselves an appropriate social and moral order. At the same time, Molnar attributed a central role to the institutional and personal representation of the divine in history, morality, and politics.<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, when Molnar addresses the problem of the desirable political and social order, for instance in *Twin Powers* (1988), his arguments focus on the eternal principles and point out the sacred origin of political power as well as the need for the embodiment of the sacred in a charismatic political leader. This view cannot lead to a version of the cult of personality, because for Molnar all human beings are fallible, and they require moral control. If the reference to the sacred is strong enough in a political community, and if there is a guarantee for the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the danger of a totalitarian political system, based on the tyranny of a strong leader, can be avoided.

The problematic point in Molnar's perennialism is the role of history. There is a lacuna in Molnar's reasoning on modernity if modernity is understood merely as embodying the features of a historical decline. If there is an ongoing communication between God and men, the original and the replica, and if history is the chronological framework of this connection, then Molnar's strong emphasis on a universal deterioration cannot be coherently maintained. One may propose that, in the historical framework, there must be *phases*, historical periods of decline, but also periods of emergence and development; a certain fluctuation in history appears more consistent with Molnar's basic principles.

However, Molnar never rejected the possibility of a restoration in his books. For instance, in *The Archetypes of Thought* he writes:

Such a restoration [of genuine philosophy] is indeed ever needed because, if

the Platonic analysis is correct, there is always a decline as there is always a return to the real. . . . But the Platonic soul is a free agent, it loves and takes the risks; it does not know the rhythms in advance, it participates in the decline, it participates in the restoration.<sup>27</sup>

As can be seen in other passages of his works too, Molnar cherished the view of a possible return of the intellectual and political order to the ultimate ground of the sacred and thus the possibility of the restoration of perennial order in our worldly circumstances. By facing the misery of our age, however, he tended to overemphasize the dark labyrinth of modernity where the human race seems to have lost its way.

Drawing on these perspectives, we have a better chance to see Molnar's place in American conservatism. In the circle of European émigré intellectuals, he belonged to the group of traditionalist Catholic conservatives.<sup>28</sup> With respect to the movement of the political conservatives, such as William F. Buckley Jr., Molnar emphasized the importance of anti-utopianism instead of antiliberalism. His antagonistic emotions and sometimes strong formulations were paralleled perhaps only by Willmoore Kendall. However, Molnar lived a life long enough to witness all the historic changes after Vatican II and the Cold War, and he was able to revise his earlier positions and develop a more flexible, self-critical reflection of perennialism. He learnt to understand that human persons as well as societies need experience to overcome the utopian inclination we are born with.

Molnar's character was outlined to some extent in a passage in the introduction Russell Kirk wrote to one of Molnar's first books:

Once Thomas Molnar came to visit me on my native blasted heath at Mecosta,

in Michigan; and while walking across the frozen pine-barrens, that cold and clear day, we talked on the corruption of the modern intellect which soon produces terrible confusion in the civil social order. Thomas Molnar has seen that dread disorder at its worst, and has come back from a terrestrial inferno to help in the recovery of Truth. At Mecosta, I have planted a great many spruce and pine saplings to restore the balance of nature in that barren land. Dr. Molnar's *The Future of Education* is a courageous endeavor to plant the seeds of real learning, of normative understanding, in a world devastated by false theories and blundering practice; to restore the balance of the mind.<sup>29</sup>

“The recovery of Truth” is perhaps the most elevated phrase Russell Kirk used to characterize someone's vocation. It was indeed the common vocation of conservatives to work for “the recovery of Truth.” Russell Kirk was part of this vocation, like Voegelin, John Lukacs, Stanley Jaki, and many other authors of the many-roomed and many-towered Camelot of the Conservative Affirmation. The search for truth was the

cement that held together the moss-grown stones of this castle, and Thomas Molnar was not only a tenant in one of the rooms but contributed to its historic reconstruction in important ways.

Molnar's special character as a philosopher in America can be compared to the role Bernanos played in French conservatism. Like Bernanos, Molnar never became as influential as some of his conservative friends. Yet Molnar had a strong voice that could be heard in important matters. Molnar was not a novelist or a literary man, but he mediated Bernanos's prophetic role to modern American conservatism. We see Bernanos's indignation, admonition, and sometimes even his forgiveness in Molnar's works; and we see that Molnar, too, tended to neglect the scholarly details and preferred somewhat grand visions. Like Bernanos, Molnar was capable of utterances that came to be fulfilled in due course of time. Molnar was, indeed, a prophet in the conservative movement—a prophet with three homelands, a prophet unheard yet indefatigable, and a prophet sometimes neglected, sometimes praised. He belongs to those who more often than not forgot to listen to him.<sup>30</sup> ■

- 1 Molnar dedicated his published books “to the memory of his mother,” née Aranka Blom. She was born around 1900 in Székesfehérvár, Hungary. Molnar's father served as an officer in the Austrian-Hungarian army and later became a businessman. The family moved to Romania in 1926 and returned to Hungary in 1940. Due to his knowledge of French language and literature, Molnar was sent to the University of Brussels in 1941 by his parents. As a Hungarian citizen, Molnar was arrested in Belgium and transported to the Dachau concentration camp when the Wehrmacht occupied his homeland in 1944. Molnar witnessed the last period of the Dachau camp, a tragic memory for the rest of his life.
- 2 Molnar published more than 1,500 articles in various languages in such journals as *Commonweal*, *University Bookman*, *Intercollegiate Review*, *Religion and Society*, the *Review of Politics*, the *Political Science Reviewer*, *World*, *Politikon*, *Pensée Française*, *Esprit*, *La Table Ronde*, *Itinéraires*, *Écrits de Paris*, *La Pensée Catholique*, *Contrepoint*, *Schweizer Monatshefte*, *Dokumente*, *Zeitschrift für Politik*, *Die Welt*, *Criticon*, *Futuro Presente*, and *Intervento*.
- 3 In Molnar's memoirs (still in manuscript), we read the following: “My real ‘university’ were the travels, a few tours around the world, some places visited many times, like Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Warsaw, Belém, Salvador, Rio De Janeiro, where I made friendships that endure to this day. Whether meeting the people in big cities, or witnessing the rising of wild life on the African Savanna, traveling deepened my understanding of surrounding phenomena. I conducted interviews, gave lectures, explored historical ruins, debated political opponents, read documents, visited party headquarters, and always, always, drew from the experiences of statesmen, religious leaders, rebel chiefs and scholars. Among my experiences stand out, perhaps, moments and encounters with history” (§ 30).
- 4 George H. Nash, *Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009), 5.
- 5 The French manuscript has no title, but from the introduction it can be seen that Molnar's idea for the title must have been “The American Way of Life.”
- 6 Irving Kristol, “Two Cheers for Capitalism,” in Russell Kirk, ed., *The Portable Conservative Reader* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 633.
- 7 Thomas Molnar, *The Counter-Revolution* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), 29.

- 8 Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 31.
- 9 Thomas Molnar, *Bernanos: His Political Thought and Prophecy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 177.
- 10 In *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th ed. (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1986), 10, Russell Kirk does not yet use the term, but he describes the notion. Utopianism, as Kirk writes, originated especially in the French Revolution and developed into the following radical impulses: 1) The perfectibility of man and the illegitimate progress of society: meliorism. 2) Contempt for tradition. Formal religion is rejected. 3) Political leveling. Order and privileged rights are condemned; total democracy, as direct as possible, is the professed radical ideal. 4) Economic leveling. The ancient rights of property, especially property in land, are suspect to almost all radicals. Just some years later Kirk already writes about “the Deweyite utopia.” See Thomas Molnar, *The Future of Education* (New York: Fleet Publishing, 1961), 12.
- 11 Thomas Molnar, *Utopia, the Perennial Heresy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 3.
- 12 I recall Molnar’s words from 1998 about the establishing of the common European currency: “The Euro is the sign of the betrayal of centuries of economic development and the key to an overall economic collapse of the Union.”
- 13 David J. Levy, Thomas Molnar, 1973. *Modern Age* 26 (1982): 3–4, 289.
- 14 Molnar, *The Future of Education*, 10.
- 15 Molnar was a longtime friend of Frederick Wilhelmsen. This may have been the reason why Molnar was seen as a representative of a “Thomistic worldview” (as in Gregory Wolfe, *Right Minds* [Chicago: Regnery, 1988], 169). In fact, Molnar did not use St. Thomas very often but respected him as the central figure of traditional Catholicism.
- 16 See again Molnar’s memoirs: “I met Eric Voegelin, one of the great German philosophers of our time, at a reception in New York City, in the late 1960s, before a lecture he was giving to a group of conservative young Americans. I had no idea who among the many present was Voegelin until someone pointed him out to me. . . . Overhearing my name, Voegelin turned to me and said that he was greatly pleased with my book, *The Decline of the Intellectual*, which he had read in the German translation. I was in heaven. He seemed to imply a philosophical agreement which I found very flattering. From then on, I often found myself on the same podium with him, as he gave his lectures to various American universities and groups, often at odds with his colleagues and audiences” (§ 24). See also Thomas Molnar, “Eric Voegelin: A Portrait—An Appreciation,” *Modern Age* 25 (1981): 381–87. With respect to *Theists and Atheists*, Voegelin pointed out in a personal letter to Molnar on September 9, 1980, that there is a tendency to schematize in Molnar as soon as complicated metaphysical problems emerge. See the correspondence between Voegelin and Molnar: *Kommentár* (Budapest, 2010), 3, 22–37. Some of Voegelin’s letters to Molnar can be found in Thomas A. Hollweck, ed., *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 30, *Selected Correspondence 1950–1984* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007).
- 17 Thomas Molnar and Alain de Benoist, *L’éclipse du sacré: discours et réponses* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1986), 13.
- 18 Thomas Molnar, *God and the Knowledge of Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.
- 19 Thomas Molnar, *Philosophical Grounds* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 4.
- 20 Thomas Molnar, *Dove va la Tradizione Cattolica?* (Roma: Settimo Sigillo, 2005), 5.
- 21 The politician Molnar respected most was Charles de Gaulle. He certainly had some respect for leading Christian Democrats in Europe, such as Konrad Adenauer, but never was convinced of the viability of weak political systems.
- 22 Thomas Molnar, *Authority and Its Enemies* (New Rochelle, NY: Crown Publications, 1976), 2.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 *Summa Theologica* I-II, 94, 6.
- 25 Ibid. I-II, 93.
- 26 “Man is incapable of living without the sacred or, to be more precise, of living outside the sphere of the sacred,” Molnar and Benoist, 13.
- 27 Thomas Molnar, *Archetypes of Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996), 147–48.
- 28 Molnar joined L. Brent Bozell Jr. in founding the traditionalist Catholic magazine *Triumph* in 1966. Soon, however, he judged the orientation of the journal isolationist and one-sided. Yet he remained connected to various Catholic centers in the United States and Europe.
- 29 Molnar, *Future of Education*, 11.
- 30 I express my gratitude to Mrs. Annette Kirk, who made possible my research in the library of the Russell Kirk Center for the present article. I thank Professor A. James McAdams, who supported my research at the Nanovic Institute of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, in 2012.