The Drama of Secular History: 
The Return to Nature and Exit from the Other Side*

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On the Birth of Secularism and the Purpose of This Essay

Modern secularism, as theory and practice, was conceived and launched by the twin movements of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, at the beginning of the modern age. It expressed a process of reorientation in Western culture, namely, its emancipation from spiritual servitude to the heaven-oriented idealism of the Christian church, while giving legitimacy to the view that happiness in this world, as it was, should be the goal of human life. This was a revolt against the Christian churches, both Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox, which ruled by force and—though formerly allies of the secular power—had now become its opponents. The Church maintained a pious, otherworldly pose while accumulating awesome economic and political power. In the view of its Enlightenment-minded critics, the Church—in its corruption and hypocrisy—afforded worldly prosperity to its priestly hierarchy, while denying it to the popular masses, giving them in its stead promises of a portion in Paradise.

According to the alliance enacted between the Christian Church and the Roman Empire in the time of Constantine the Great, in the early 300s, the worldly empire was granted authority over the worldly civilization, with the help of the Church that represented it on earth. More precisely, the Church presented itself as an institutionalized embodiment of the promise of salvation from Jesus, Son of God. Jesus came down from heaven to earth in order to atone by his death for Adam's sin. By returning to his Father in Heaven, he saved the souls of humanity, who from the prison of their corporeality believed in him and responded to his Gospel. But the work of salvation was not complete. The cursedness of the earth and the sinful corporeality of mankind remained as they were. In order to complete his mission, a second coming of the Savior was required. Until then, the status quo continued. The universal Church, which was the embodiment of Jesus' first mission, would save the souls of human

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beings by the strength of their faith and the power of its sacraments. All individuals were equal before God, and they would receive their reward in Paradise in accordance with their faith and piety, not in accord with their material success in this world. It was the task of the Church to teach faith in the Savior, to sanctify the believers through the sacraments, to educate them to observe the laws and morals, to perform works of charity among the people, and to promise them hope in this world and eternal spiritual bliss in the World to Come.

But the universal heavenly Church does not abolish corporeal mankind’s belonging to families, communities, peoples and states, for these are necessary for their survival in the terrestrial world. In order to enable them to survive, the Church, acting in God’s name, appointed the secular kingdom and divided duties between herself and it. The priestly hierarchy of the Church was assigned to matters of moral and spiritual education, which included all knowledge necessary and fitting for humanity. The Church conducts the religious ritual, establishes and runs the institutions of charity and good works, and supports the armies of monks who are obedient to her word. The monks, in their lifetimes, abstain from sensory delights and sanctify themselves to Christ through fasting, prayer, and good works. The kingdom is entrusted with matters of worldly civilization as instruments of its rule. As it must contend with the nature of this cursed world, it must resort to means of force and effective punishment. The kingdom rules with an iron hand. There is in this a certain amount of cruelty for the cruel and wickedness for the wicked, but this is an undeniable necessity. As opposed to the kingdom, the Church has no need of such means. Even against heretics, it exercises the secular state on its behalf; as for itself, it only acts in kindness. To be sure, the Church authorizes the King and his servants to employ the means of justice that the state controls, so that the kingdom shall defend the worldly interests of the Church, including persecution of heretics and persuasion of pagans to abandon their sinful religions and to believe in Christ through the Church. For in order to fulfill her tasks, the Church has need of worldly estates, no less wealthy and strong than the kingdom.

This is a dialectic of relations that embrace an inner contradiction. The universal, supra-terrestrial Church, exuding faith, mercy, and kindness, quickly became an economic, political, and even military player, competing with the state, setting limits to it, and sometimes even acting against it. But even then the Church justified itself by a hierarchical distinction: the Church represented the holy “Kingdom of Heaven,” whereas the “earthly kingdom” represented secular civilization.