

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2018/19

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

William  
Voegeli:  
**Politics after  
Trump**

Michael  
Barone:  
**Hubert  
Humphrey**

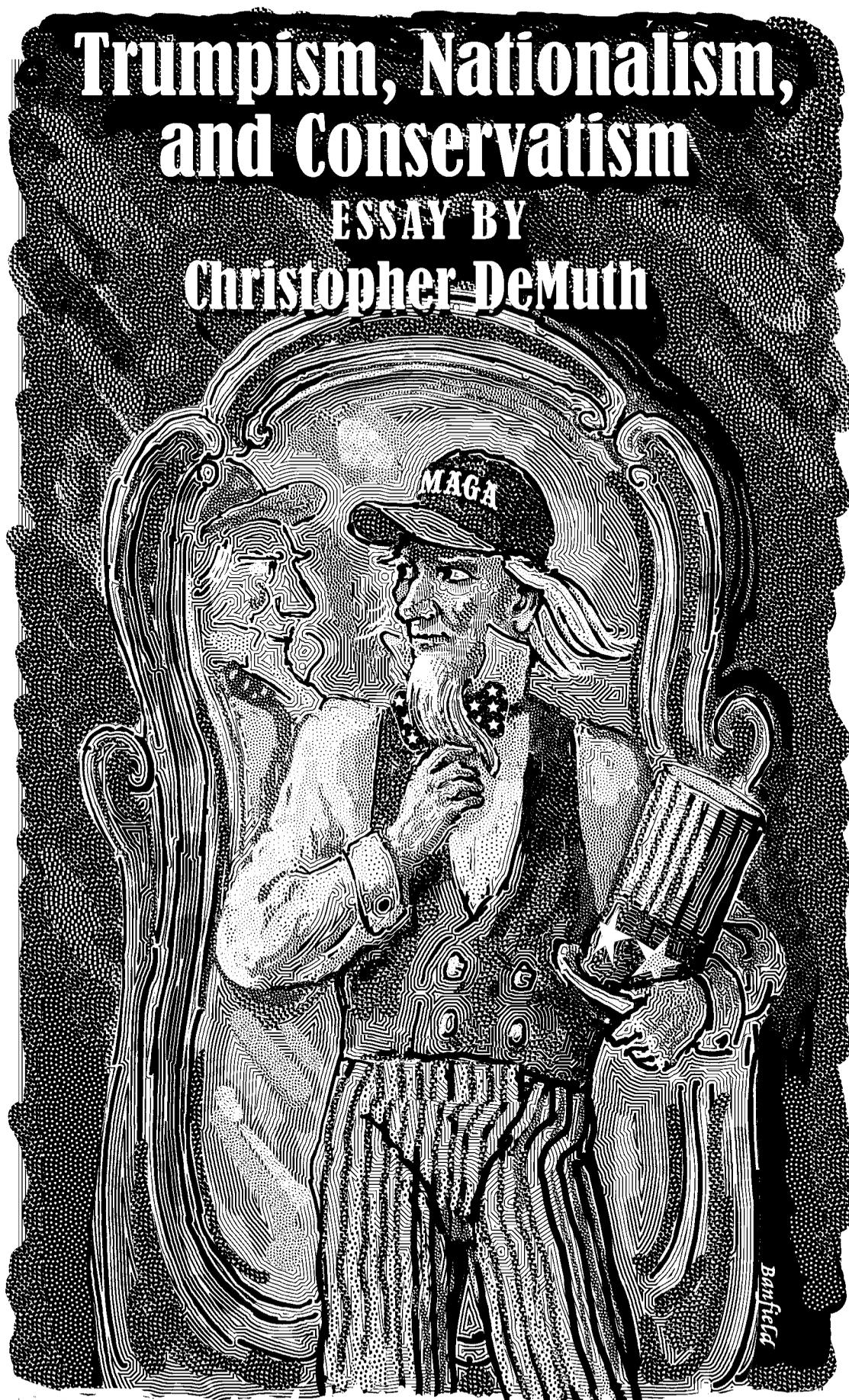
David P.  
Goldman:  
**The  
Pentateuch**

Richard  
Brookhiser:  
**Benedict  
Arnold**

Kevin D.  
Williamson:  
**Don't Mess  
with Texas**

## Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism

ESSAY BY  
**Christopher DeMuth**



Charles R.  
Kesler:  
**The Road  
to 2020**

Mark  
Bauerlein:  
**Camille  
Paglia**

Charles  
Hill:  
**State  
Secrets**

Angelo M.  
Codevilla:  
**Yoram  
Hazony**

Michael  
Anton:  
**Draining  
the Swamp**



A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$8.95

## YE SHALL BE AS GODS

*The Idol of Our Age: How the Religion of Humanity Subverts Christianity*, by Daniel J. Mahoney.  
Encounter Books, 163 pages, \$23.99

**M**ONSIGNOR ROBERT SOKOLOWSKI, AT the Catholic University of America, has long maintained that the “religion of humanity,” as described by John Stuart Mill in his *Three Essays on Religion* (1850-70), has replaced Christianity in the West as the key explanation of reality. In *The Idol of Our Age*, Daniel Mahoney brings this theme up to date.

To illustrate his point, Mahoney, who teaches politics at Assumption College, draws on an impressive roster of thinkers, including Orestes Brownson, Aurel Kolnai, Jürgen Habermas, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Pierre Manent, Alain Besançon, Raymond Aron, and Eric Voegelin. The particular version of the religion of humanity that he examines comes from Auguste Comte, the early 19th-century philosopher and sociologist who tried to develop a new moral force for secular societies that could provide the cohesive bond Christianity once had. For Mahoney, “Comte takes the place of Christ, just as ‘the love of Humanity,’ the jealous Grand-Être, takes the place of ‘love of God.’ In this sense, Comte has divinized his own existence, making himself the herald of a new Humanity worshipping itself.” Man’s “self-deification” by man is the antithesis of man’s divinization through the power and gift of God.

At least since J.B. Bury’s *The Idea of Progress* (1920), modern political thought has been an attempt to reach transcendent Christian goals by human means. The traditional four last things—heaven, hell, death, and purgatory—are relocated to this world. No divine initiative is needed, or even possible. God is seen as alienating man from himself. Pope Benedict XVI ably spelled out this politicizing of man’s final destiny in his encyclical *Spe Salvi* and in his earlier book *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (1977).

What are the dimensions of this religion of humanity? First, it is based on the view that the nation-state is either obsolete or hinders man from achieving himself. Second, evil is not abiding but is subject to human or technological elimination. Third, man’s goal is to keep his species, if not every individual, alive and flourishing in this world for as long as possible.

**T**O SHOW HOW CHRISTIANITY HAS, IN turn, been influenced by humanism, Mahoney focuses on the intellectual incoherence of the Catholic Church during the reign of Pope Francis. “We have a pope,” he writes, “who is half-humanitarian and thoroughly blind to the multiple ways in which humanitarian secularized religion subverts authentic Christianity.” Particularly in the areas of ecology, economics, and social order, Francis invariably sides with modern political leftists. When it comes to abortion—in many ways the real touchstone of modernity—the pope has remained orthodox, though he has downplayed its relative importance, making it seem equal to other social issues. But once Catholicism sounds pretty much like other modern ideologies, what good is it, frankly?

Mahoney notes that Francis favors global ideas and institutions—the United Nations is his preferred arena of action—while disregarding constitutional means to limit state power. “Instead of self-satisfied humanitarian affirmations,” Mahoney writes, “[w]e must make more of an effort to see virtue in all its amplitude, in the person of the hero and the statesman as well as the saint. In the modern world, heroes and saints stand or fall together.” A political realist, Mahoney applauds Christianity for not rejecting the validity of nation-states even when they persecuted Christians.

He warns that “the idea [that] political authority has no natural or divine authority other than human agreement, can place no limits on the arbitrary will of the few or the many.” Arbitrary will is tyrannical. It stands behind not only the legal thinking of Islam, but modern positivist and historicist thought throughout the West.

Today, war or violence is often presented as an unmitigated evil that should be eliminated. Mahoney sees the dire consequences of such a view. “[Russian philosopher Vladimir] Soloviev was not a pacifist. He believed that war was a necessary instrument for the exercise of charity and the protection of the common good.” Similarly, “Solzhenitsyn [was] so hard on the pacifistic distortion of Christianity” because he knew “evil is real, rooted in fallen human nature, and must be resisted if the things of the soul are to be preserved.”

If war is “an instrument, not of inhumanity, but of the common good,” Mahoney concludes, evil cannot be eliminated by technical, political, religious, or economic means. “Christianity has nothing to do with unlimited faith in progress, or a false and naïve confidence in moral optimism.”

To try to understand modern political thought as if it had no antecedents in Christian theology is to render it unintelligible. Readers of René Descartes’s “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am) are often surprised when they come across Augustine’s “*Falor, ergo sum*” (I err, therefore I am). If man’s very being depends on his will alone, however, there’s no reason why we ought to remain what we are. This belief that man can make a better man than the one God created is what prevents us from appreciating what we are.

**W**HAT IS PERHAPS MOST STRIKING about *The Idol of Our Age* is that when it comes to explaining and defending what it is to be Christian today, Mahoney instinctively turns not to the current pontiff but to Benedict XVI and John Paul II. Pope Francis has spent a good deal of time disassociating himself from his two most recent predecessors, not to mention the Church’s long intellectual tradition. By doing so, he has uncritically accepted, in Mahoney’s view, many of humanism’s aberrant tenets.

“Christianity itself does not eschew philosophical inquiry or in any way endorse irrationality,” Mahoney summarizes. “Like his predecessor Pope John Paul II, Benedict believes that there is something ‘providential’ in the encounter between Greek philosophy and biblical religion.... Christianity is nothing if it is merely a ‘humanitarian moral message,’ an invitation to this-worldly amelioration or revolutionary transformation.” Under Francis, in Daniel Mahoney’s view, Christianity has failed to distinguish itself fully from “the idol of our age.”

*James V. Schall, S.J., taught political science at Georgetown University, and is the author of over 30 books, including, most recently, of The Universe We Think In (Catholic University of America Press).*

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE  
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to  
*the Claremont Review of Books*

*“An invaluable center of  
conservative thought on a rich  
and varied range of subjects to the  
discussion of which it unfailingly  
brings to bear the highest order  
of critical intelligence.”  
—Norman Podhoretz*

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25%  
off the newsstand price. A one-year  
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier  
conservative book review, visit  
[www.claremont.org/crb](http://www.claremont.org/crb)  
or call (909) 981-2200.

CLAREMONT  
REVIEW OF BOOKS

1317 W. FOOTHILL  
BLVD, SUITE 120,  
UPLAND, CA  
91786

NON PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT NO. 504  
UPLAND, CA