

Confessions of a Coward

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David P. Goldman

Early in April, with the publication of the May issue of First Things, I stepped out from behind the pseudonym Spengler to begin arguing my more considered ideas under my own name. The experience has been an interesting one: constricting in some ways and yet freeing in others.

My Spengler columns actually began as a joke. In 1997 the *Asia Times* asked me to write a humor column, and the name Spengler seemed a funny touch: the author of ***The Decline of the West*** as a comic writer for an Asian daily. The print edition of the newspaper soon went under, but I revived the persona for the online-only edition in 1999. Contrary to my expectations, it won an audience and became a vehicle for more than I had originally imagined it would be.

One reason for the Spengler name was that I was working on Wall Street at the time, and a pseudonym allowed me to keep my two worlds separate. But I soon found that the Spengler mask also gave me freedom to employ striking ideas and provocative formulations – to take intellectual as well as literary risks. Along the way, I developed a core thesis that the response of nations to their own mortality was the key to understanding the great events of our time, and the existential theology of Franz Rosenzweig provided unique insights into geopolitics. What’s more, I had a great deal of fun writing as Spengler.

What I didn’t have was a great deal of responsibility. Not that those columns were irresponsible; looking back on a decade of writing as Spengler, I see many misfires and over-phrasings, but little to revise in the core thesis to which I came. Still, when writers take on a successful mask, they also shrug off a certain burden of accountability. A small group of friends slowly convinced me that to argue publicly for things one really believes requires standing behind them publicly. It demands a commitment, and to continue arguing under a pseudonym eventually came to seem to me an attempt to have it both ways.

Yes, I’ve found that the emergence from the Spengler name has constricted my writing in some ways: forcing me to be more considered and more careful in how I say what I want to say. But I’ve found that the rejection of pseudonym has, in another way, freed me – freed me to make a fuller commitment to the ideas I think worth fighting for in the public square.

Even during the Spengler years, I never entirely stopped writing under my own name, penning financial columns under my real byline in *Forbes* magazine and publishing research for Wall Street firms. But all that was different from the writing I’ve begun to do now. This experience – disappearing for a decade behind a mask and then reemerging – remains an odd one. Trying to evaluate it, I’ve found myself forced to retrospection: a looking back at some of the ways in which I’ve used and misused my life.

Can you bear a little more autobiography? The critic Harold Bloom once argued that the characteristic American religion is a species of gnosticism, and I have good reason to believe it to be true, having spent some years – from 1976 to 1986 – in a gnostic cult

under the leadership of a man named Lyndon LaRouche.

Was it all bad? In March 1984, Norman A. Bailey, then special assistant to President Reagan for international economic affairs, told NBC news that the LaRouche organization had “one of the best private intelligence services in the world.” The supply-side publicist Jude Wanniski – my future business partner – had introduced me to Bailey in 1981, when I ran the economics desk for LaRouche’s publications. Among my colleagues were several researchers who went on to distinguished careers. The Asia desk chief, for instance, was Dan Sneider, afterward a distinguished correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *San Jose Mercury*, and now director of a university research institute. European economics was handled by Laurent Murawiec, now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute; the Middle East desk was headed by Bob Dreyfuss, now a regular contributor to the *Nation*, *American Prospect*, and *New Republic*; and the chief science writer was Jonathan Tennenbaum, a brilliant mathematician who had taught at the University of Copenhagen.

We were all about thirty, and most of us were Jewish. The question, of course, is what were a group of young Jews doing in the company of a cult leader with a paranoid view of the world and a thinly disguised anti-Semitic streak.

Here is one answer: We were all long-in-the-tooth student radicals. LaRouche’s organization was the flotsam washed up by the wave of the collective madness that had swept through the youth of the world in 1968 and left many of its participants maladapted to ordinary life for years afterward.

During the 1960s, LaRouche was a one-man Trotskyite splinter group, teaching free-lance courses on Marxist economics at whatever venue would have him. He culled student radicals with an intellectual bent who were repelled by the mindlessness endemic on the left in the late 1960s. LaRouche’s pitch was insidious: How can you justify yourself morally unless you know that what you are doing is right? There existed a science of mind, LaRouche claimed, that would enable the adept to reach the right conclusion.

We were atheists, of course – the concept of “religious intellectual” was unknown to me in my student days at Columbia and the London School of Economics – and the idea that truth might come through revelation seemed beyond snickering. The Vietnam War, the crisis in race relations, and the cracks in the economic structure of the 1970s persuaded us that we had to do something and that indifference was morally inexcusable.

And that is where LaRouche had us. His intellectual method resembled the old tale about stone soup: Having announced that he had the inside track on the hidden knowledge that underlay Western civilization (one of his essays was titled “The Secrets Known Only to the Inner Elites”), he attracted a small parade of intellectual orphans, whom he then put to elaborating the details. By the late 1970s he had collected some highly credentialed acolytes, including a group of physicists and mathematicians at his front organization, the Fusion Energy Foundation.

LaRouche claimed to trace a tradition of secret knowledge across the ages, from Plato and Plotinus, through the Renaissance, and down to the German scientists and philosophers of the nineteenth century. Of course, that raises a question: If there exists this kind of knowledge, then why isn’t it universally shared? The reverse side of

the gnostic page is paranoia: There must be a cabal of evil people who prevent the dissemination of the truth.

In LaRouche's Manichean view of the world, a conspiracy had suppressed the truth in the service of evil oligarchs. Starting with Aristotle, it continued through to the nominalists, the British empiricists, and that supposed pinnacle of modern evil, Bertrand Russell. The Venetian Inquisition, the British Empire, the Hapsburg family, the Rockefellers, and the Trilateral Commission all figured variously in this grand conspiracy against LaRouche's supposed intellectual antecedents. Jewish banking families kept popping up in LaRouche's accounts of the evil forces.

You might think you should think that this would have sent us running for the exits. But, Godless and faithless, we were all possessed by a fear of being Jewish, and LaRouche offered us a rock to hide under. LaRouche feigned a sort of philo-Semitism, praising marginal figures who could be fit into his mold: the Platonist Philo of Alexandria, for example, and the German rationalist Moses Mendelssohn - Jews, that is, who sounded more like Greek philosophers than like Jews. He also portrayed himself as the opponent of Nazi tendencies that lurked everywhere. In a caricature of the *reductio ad Hitlerum*, everything he didn't like pointed to the Nazis. The economist Milton Friedman, whose students had advised the Pinochet regime in Chile, must be a fascist because LaRouche didn't like his economics, and I coauthored a book with LaRouche in 1978 with that silly allegation.

LaRouche's anti-Semitism was rarely in the open, but it often lurked just beneath the surface. Sometime in the early 1970s, he had played political footsie with the Liberty Lobby, a group headed by the anti-Semite and Holocaust denier Willis Carto. In a Carto-influenced article LaRouche later tried to suppress, he put the number of Jewish dead at around 1.5 million. I knew about all this, and I looked the other way.

In 1978, I did a study for LaRouche of the economics of the narcotics traffic. The numbers I crunched showed that narcotics was a hundred-billion-dollar-a-year business - not a controversial conclusion today, but at the time it seemed startling. LaRouche took my quantitative study and combined it with the paranoid musings of other researchers into a book, *Dope, Inc.*, that had unmistakable anti-Semitic overtones. I knew about this, too, and again I looked the other way.

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, LaRouche was doing well, with a pocket publishing empire, a more-or-less accepted scientific front in the Fusion Energy Foundation, and a remarkable capacity to raise money (a good deal of which, it later turned out, was obtained by fraud). Nonetheless, within a few years nearly all his key people had quit. Once they began to engage the real world at a serious level, they broke free of LaRouche's spell. For my part, I owe a great deal to Norman Bailey, then director of plans at the National Security Council. My political education began in his lair at the old Executive Office Building in 1981, when he explained to me that the United States would destroy the Soviet Empire by the end of the 1980s.

After I became convinced that the Reagan administration knew what it was doing, my break with LaRouche was inevitable. He cashiered me as economics editor for his publications in 1982, for the offense of predicting (correctly) that the Reagan reforms would bring about an economic recovery (since if the American economy was on the mend, it did not need a savior like LaRouche). But I was still stuck emotionally in LaRouche's flypaper. I moved to Europe, consulted for Bailey, and pursued musical

research under the auspices of another LaRouche front, the Schiller Institute, until 1986.

I had grown up as a red-diaper baby in a secular Jewish household (although my parents put me through the motions of a Bar Mitzvah at a Reconstructionist synagogue). I joined the left-wing Zionist youth organization Hashomer Hatzair and spent a summer on a kibbutz in Israel where the Israeli flag flew underneath the red flag of international socialism. Like so many leftist Jews, I came to believe that only a universal solution to humanity's problems would solve the problems of the Jews, and the more universal the solution, the less Jewish. In plain English I was afraid to be Jewish: The less Jewish I was, and the more universal, the less likely I would be to be killed for being Jewish.

And yet, physical fear in the background of the Holocaust was only one consideration. Another, deeper fear kept me at a distance from Judaism. My only sense of the sacred had come from classical music, the great avocation of my adolescence. The over-representation of Jews in classical music is no accident: Jews who cannot bring themselves to acknowledge God sometimes find music a safer means by which to evoke religious feelings without the fearful demands of encountering a personal God. To approach the sacred, Jewish tradition admonishes, is both exalting and dangerous, and it is less frightening to look for the sacred in Mozart's sonatas than on Mt. Sinai. I had studied piano intensively and composed a bit while young, and I continued my studies through college. This bound me to LaRouche more closely than many of his other dupes, for he was a great aficionado of classical music, using the ill-gotten proceeds of his fund-raising machine to sponsor public as well as private concerts by first-class musicians.

Around 1985, the ugly awareness that I had spent almost a decade in a gnostic cult coincided with a dark time in my personal life. Deeply depressed, I sat at the piano one night, playing through the score of Bach's St. Matthew Passion, and came to the chorale that reads: "Commend your ways and what ails your heart to the faithful care of Him who directs the heavens, who gives course and aim to the clouds, air and wind. He will also find a path that your foot can tread." For the first time in my life, I prayed, and in that moment, I knew that my prayer was heard. That was a first step of *teshuvah* of return.

I worked for Bailey's consulting firm after he left government service in 1984, and that paid for my graduate studies in music theory at the doctoral program at City University. Still, it took me a long time to find my way back to religious practice. I began studying the Jewish sources and joined a synagogue in 1993. A.J. Heschel's book *The Sabbath* began my slow accommodation to Jewish observance: Reading his account of the Sabbath, I kicked myself for thirty-five wasted years.

Still, it was not until I began to study Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* during the early 1990s that I was able to reconcile my experience of prayer with my sense of the sacred in music. By then I had published academic articles on Renaissance music theory, including a 1989 study in the Vatican's music journal about Nicholas of Cusa's contribution. Studying the origins of Western classical music also helped me put religious things in perspective. Magnificent as it is, music remains a human construct, with a hint of divine inspiration in some cases, but not a substitute for God. The great works of Western classical music are not revelation, but they are

perhaps the next best thing. Next best, however, no longer seemed good enough.

Rosenzweig may not be the best introduction to Judaism, but he was probably the only theologian who illuminated the path that ran from where I began to where I needed to go. The religious poems of Heinrich Heine, written during his final illness, were also a source of strength. These two German Jews who had returned to Judaism in adulthood were my guides. And Heine's take-no-prisoners prose became the conscious model for acerbic style I used in the Spengler columns.

In the meanwhile, the part-time employment in financial analysis that had paid for my graduate education during the 1980s blossomed, to my surprise, into a full-fledged career. By 2002 I came to head debt research at Bank of America and sit on the bank's fixed-income executive committee. Exile among the fleshpots of Wall Street had its benefits, but I had other ambitions that would find some expression in the Spengler columns for the *Asia Times* and now have found more in writing under my own name and working at First Things.

Looking back over it all, I see that though I was born Jewish, I am nonetheless a late convert to Judaism as a religion and a convert from the worst sort of religious background. Heine once quipped that the purpose of every memoir is to lie, and he cited Rousseau as an example. Rousseau had used his memoirs to represent himself as a monster for having consigned his natural children to orphanages. But, Heine claimed, Rousseau made himself out to be a monster in order to cover up the more humiliating fact that he was impotent and the children he sent to the orphanage weren't his to begin with.

In reviewing my own missteps in life, I feel that temptation to represent myself as a monster in order to cover up something even more painful: I was a coward. I was afraid of being Jewish. Everything else is rationalization. My intellectual life really began only a quarter-century ago when I reconciled myself to being Jewish. The truth is that I did not think my way into praying. I prayed my way into thinking.

David P. Goldman is associate editor of First Things.

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