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November 8, 2013: Legislative Prayer

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Title: Legislative Prayer

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11/8/2013— Reading about the oral arguments in the legislative prayer case, *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, I am reminded of my lecture last Tuesday on Heidegger's essay entitled, *The word of Nietzsche: The Death of God*. Heidegger wrote this essay, which was based on a 1949 lecture, to put the death of God in a larger context. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche was announcing not just the death of a God who could influence the world and who therefore would have to be taken seriously before human beings could act to master the world, but was announcing the death of the suprasensory world itself: the death of the traditional values of truth, beauty and the good. All of these had been understood as restraints on what human beings could do in the world. Now, instead, humans are dominated by the will to power and understand themselves and everything else as objects to be used according to a revalued sense of value. We see the validation of Nietzsche's insights, as interpreted through Heidegger, in many areas, including the decline of church attendance and the growth of secularism in America. But, far more faithful to Nietzsche is the unrestrained industrialism that is willing to risk changing the climate of earth. There we see will to power. How does all this relate to legislative prayer? For some people, it is undoubtedly the case that what they want is an endorsement by the government of Christianity. And it is also true that some people look to prayer before legislative sessions as a way of reminding people about the existence of God. These motives are of course unconstitutional even if the Supreme Court has sometimes hesitated to say so. But, according to Nietzsche, the invocation of God is more than just a reminder of Christian truth. It is also always a reaction against the triumph of the will to power. It is always also an invocation of the reality of the good, the true and the beautiful. It is always also a reminder that there are in fact limits on what human beings can do in the world without disastrous results. We should all of us, including nonbelievers, be very happy for such reminders. From this point of view, the controversy over legislative prayer is really a misunderstanding of the nature of religion and of ontology. Yes, of course, a city council should not simply endorse Christianity indirectly through legislative prayers. What that city council should do is open up the category of prayer to its genuinely appropriate breadth. Prayer is about human arrogance. And all invocations of objective truth to which human beings are subject should be welcome as a reminder of appropriate human limit.