Hyperdemocracy and the Gnostic Impulse
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My aim in these brief remarks is to make three connected points. First, that arguments connecting Gnosticism to modern politics must be developed in the context of a theodicial effort to absolve God of responsibility for evil. Second, that Voegelin's thesis that modern totalitarian politics has been rooted in a transformation of ancient gnosticism does not quite fit this context.[1] And thirdly, that we have ended up with a kind of "hyper democracy" in both Canada and the United States that is a peculiar dependent form of the gnostic impulse serving political motives.

The Absolution of God

From the beginning, Western civilization has vacillated between two logically possible dualistic solutions to the most fundamental question of all, which is: "How can we have a good God and a bad world?" The Christian and the Gnostic[2] solutions to this conundrum each manages to absolve God of responsibility for the presence of worldly evil - but in utterly irreconcilable ways.[3]

The first, the **Good God, Good World, Bad Man** - or standard Christian solution - achieves this absolution by laying the blame on fallen man.[4] It then offers him a way out in the form of faith, redemption, and eventual bodily resurrection to eternal life hereafter. It is a solution that generates joy in God's worldly creation, long-term optimism, and a profound expectation in all believers of a future salvation.

The second, the **Good God, Good Man, Bad World** - or standard Gnostic solution[5] takes the opposing view. It argues for a God so good He simply could not have willed or created such a manifestly evil world. Evil must therefore have been introduced not by man, but by a rebellious "trickster" god who needed to create humans as a material device to trap the sparks of the true God that fell into this world. In this solution, immediate rather than future salvation is possible through recognition, celebration and embrace of this *spark of divinity, or gnosis* within.[6] The eschaton of Gnosticism, its morality - and especially its politics - is necessarily and logically rooted in *repudiation* of this evil world, from which the gnostic eagerly escapes inwardly. He feels a deep spiritual urge *not to repair or redeem this world, but to avoid all connection with it.*

The Result in Democratic Theory and Practice

The contrasting Christian and Gnostic solutions to the problem of evil have led to contrasting Western political responses to the democratic impulse in modern times, which may be put as opposing formulae:

The Sinful Man Model, dominant from its roots in the Reformation until early in the 20th century can be thought of as Democracy (+) the agency of human sin (+) liberalism[7] This model admixed with classical republican thinking produced:  founding republicanism as in USA, and Constitutional monarchy/democracy, as was central in Canada until the advent of its 1982 charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Sinless Man Model is the opposite. It can be thought of as Democracy (-) the agency of human sin (-) liberalism, and it produced modern progressivist, secular humanist, "gnostic", and hyper democratic movements, including the modern "procedural republic."

The strategic usefulness of the second model will become apparent at the end of this paper

Contra Voegelin: Can It Be Gnosticism?

In **Science, Politics and Gnosticism** (p.86 ff.) Voegelin lists his six well-known characteristics of modern gnostic movements. He says the gnostic is (1)"dissatisfied with his situation" because the world is (2) "intrinsically poorly organized," and to blame for all wickedness; that (3)"salvation from the evil of the world is possible;" and that (4)"the order of being will have to be changed in an historical process," especially through (5)"a salvational act...through man's own effort" by way of finding (6)"a formula [the actual *gnosis*] for self and world salvation." This change of the existing order, assisted by "the murder of God", he claims, is "the central concern" of the self-exalted gnostic prophet.

He does attribute a certain complex of symbols to "modifications of the Christian idea of perfection," but at least in this brief study does not elaborate. But to those who know the gnostic religion it soon becomes apparent that his six features are contradicted by the gnostic faith itself, and the idea of "immanentization of the eschaton" does not seem to resolve this contradiction ... unless someone can explain how this process can be selective. In other words, the fact of immanentization in itself does not explain *how extreme anti-mundane pessimism becomes extreme pro-mundane optimism*.[8]

For if we recall, the true gnostic believes this world is forsaken as a matter of gnostic theology. He does not wish to murder God, as Voegelin put it, but rather to join Him as soon as possible, and his sense of radical pessimism and repudiation with respect to this world, and to the body,[9] is the badge of his faith.  Hans Jonas put it well when he wrote, "the pneumatic morality is determined by hostility toward the world and contempt for all mundane ties"[10]  And Kurt Rudolph describes the essence of this mundane repudiation even more fully.  Gnosticism,  he says,  "took no interest of any kind in a reform of earthly conditions but only in their complete and final destruction. It possessed no other 'revolutionary' programme for altering conditions, as they appeared to it, than the elimination of earthly structures in general and the restoration of the ideal world of the spirit that existed at the very beginning."[11]

This is a clear description of the gnostic eschatology that necessarily produces its axiology. More simply put, it can only mean that for a gnostic merely to imagine, let alone attempt, political perfection in this world *would betray the gnostic solution to the absolution of God*, *unravel the internal logic of the gnostic faith*, *and trigger a profound theological crisis.*

But there is another, more likely candidate for such mundane "gnostic" behaviour which, as I have suggested, is not really gnostic at all. I believe that the Voegelin's six features are rooted not in Gnosticism, but rather in an immanentized form of Christian millenarianism, likely of a Protestant variety.[12] Its main features are: the expectation of a prophet-saviour; a fervour to totally transform this world for a coming time of social harmony, equality and perfection; a need to evangelize this new world order in radical - often hysterical - optimism; and (the grueseome part) a commitment to actively reform or eliminate non-believers. The true transcendent millenarian formula requires only the substitution of man for God in order to continue as a debased secular framework for a political absolutism rooted in optimism of a kind that simply cannot be found anywhere in the Gnostic religion.

This framework explains not only modern totalitarianism but, in the combination suggested below, even the evolution of modern post-war democracy. For the latter, we need to imagine a strategic interplay between secular-millenarianism and the well-known gnostic notion of "kingless" sovereignty on which the debased millenarian form has been able successfully to superimpose itself in modern times.

The Descent of Sovereignty

For beginning in the 17th century the sort of self-exaltation that flows naturally from the gnostic solution for absolving God suddenly began to erupt in a deeply Christian and democratic impulse expressed in successive repudiations of established notions of higher sovereignty. Accordingly, we can track the "locus of sovereignty," so to speak, as it cascades downward in levels from God, to Kings, to aristocrats and elites, to "the people" as divine, where it is summed up in the phrase *Vox Populi Vox Dei*.[13]

But this downward movement has not stopped, and there is great irony in the fact that the contemporary, and likely final resting place of sovereignty under modern hyperdemocracy[14] has now moved beyond the "demos", or people, and is located deep within the autonomous individual.[15] We are frequent witnesses to how this new and formidable gnostic sovereignty is dignified in constitutionally-entrenched abstract language about freedom, choice, equality, and rights, and increasingly upheld *against the people and their communities*.[16]

Hyperdemocracy: A Gnostic "People" Under Millenarian Elites

This brings me to the final thesis that in modern times what is being played out, particularly under the tenets of so-called modern "liberalism" is in fact a strategic interplay between two active, but  interdependent political zones, each with its own belief system.

The first is comprised of the *a-political* features of Gnosticism and forms a *public belief system of the people*, the chief features of which are self-exaltation, atheism, moral relativism, social determinism, scientism, pantheism, the elevation of individual rights over responsibilities and duties, and the rejection of any common good or virtue. This system is the political embodiment of pessimism.

However, superimposed on this is a second zone, in which the extremely *political* and optimistic features of secular-millenarianism form a *public belief system of elites*, the chief features of which are meliorism, collectivist politics, progressivism, the political cult of the personality, New World Order talk, and a highly tax and debt-leveraged manipulation and regulation of national, and even world masses to these ends.[17]

An obvious example of the hard form of this process was in our midst for 70 years in the form of totalitarian rule. Recently, when asked the reason for it all, former Soviet General Makashov gave a millenarian's answer when he said, "What is our maximum program? The Kingdom of God on earth - or Communism, as we call it, before the third millennium."[18]

In its softer, hyper democratic welfare state form, we notice that downward-moving sovereignty, having passed right through "the people" has come to rest in a generic, autonomous, and deeply gnostic Individual in whose name courts, law professors, and rights tribunals eagerly attack the only two levels of authority traditionally competitive with what is in effect a secular millenarian State for allegiance of the people. Attacked above are all forms of transcendent belief, law and obligation (God, natural law concepts, and so on). Attacked below are all forms of traditional organic social authority (based in such things as family, religion, custom, and moral standards). The result is that the democratic will of a now thoroughly gnosticized people expressed in their various assemblies has become largely subservient to unelected millenarian visionaries. In other words, democracy has been hi-jacked, or rather, efficiently contained for ideological purposes.

In conclusion, in both the earlier totalitarian, and the more recent hyper democratic political regimes of this century what we see is not gnosticism immanentized, but the ancient war between Gnosticism and Christianity *politically resolved* and expressed as an activist secular-millenarian form above, that promotes and feeds on a quietist Gnosticism encouraged in the people below.

Those prepared to read the entrails will see in this a Western civilization foundering under a debased transformation of its own winning solution to the absolution of God.

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[1]As a newcomer to Voegelin's work I am relying on his treatment of Gnosticism and politics in **The New Science of Politics** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952/1987), and **Science, Politics and Gnosticism** (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1968). I am most grateful to Ellis Sandoz, President of the Eric Voegelin society, whom I first met on the internet, for so kindly indulging my curiosity, and for his seasoned and instructive replies  to persistent questions about Voegelin's use of gnosticism.

[2]See especially the structural analysis of Gnosticism in Ioan P. Couliano, **The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism** (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992). Therein, Couliano discusses movements of ideas from a structuralist (or synchronic) as well as historical (or diachronic) perspective, relying on the systems-analysis techniques of de Saussure (Structural linguistics), Levi-Strauss (anthropology) and Propp (myth and folk-tale).  The gnostic impulse, so to speak,  is characterized by him as one of a number of hard-wired "solutions" to a theodicial problem. Any movement of ideas (akin to what in modern times we describe as an "ideology") such as Platonism, for example, can be described as "a

system of thought starting from simple premises. Once such premises are switched on, the system continues to produce solutions that require no prior 'experience of the world' in order to be held ... it is the system that creates the world-view, and not vice versa" (p.74). This accounts for the "ideological skewing" (my term) so evident in all aging idea-systems as they are modified to explain a world that continues to slip the grasp of the system (viz. Marxism). His important first chapter "Dualism: A Chronology," sets out succinctly how "Dualism is a device serving theodicy, which is the attempt to reconcile the existence of a good Creator with the patent imperfections of the world and of human existence"(p.23).

[3]In his recent book **Omens of the Millenium** (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), Harold Bloom cites as his personal reason for becoming a practicing Gnostic, his inability to reconcile the Holocaust and Schizophrenia with the idea that God is "all-powerful and benign" (p.23), and complains that "a cosmos this obscene" is so easily acceptable to the monotheistic orthodox as part of "'the mystery of faith'" (p.23-4). He lauds the early gnostics as people who, like himself, rightly protested the injustice of such a mystery. But he overlooks the telling distinction, which is that Christians wanted to so deeply love God *and* all his creation that they were willing to take the origin of sin upon themselves, whereas Gnostics wanted to so deeply love God they could not accept the existence of evil as permissible by Him, and therefore chose to condemn worldly creation as the origin of sin, thereby becoming free to exalt themselves as pure. The difference lies not in the question of "mystery," or faith, but in one's willingness to despise this world and exalt oneself as divine, in whether (as both kinds of believers are optimists about the afterlife) one is willing to live as an optimist or pessimist with regard to this life.

[4]The logical argument that if God is truly omnipotent He must be responsible for everything, including evil, is trumped by the higher logic of free will: in order for God to permit man to be fully man - and to fully love God - he must have free will, and with it may indeed choose to create an evil world or, conversely, a good (Christian) world. One standard if unsatisfying argument to explain evils obviously disconnected from human conduct, such as the deaths of little children, tornadoes, and the like, is that these are a test of faith.

[5]For opinions on the Gnostic religion and culture I am relying on the inspiring work of Hans Jonas, **The Gnostic Religion** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), but in particular on the more sombre and textual, if less philosophical, post Nag-Hamadi rendering of Gnosticism in Kurt Rudolph, **Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism** ( San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987).

[6]Of interest with respect to the gnostic revulsion for the body is the treatment of the soul after death. The Christian view is that all the faithful will be resurrected bodily as well as spiritually on Judgement Day. The Gnostic view is that on death the spirit leaves the evil imprisoning body behind and is free at last to join with God. However, practicing Christians today when asked what they believe will happen to them upon death will give the Gnostic interpretation rather than the Christian one. The Christian notion of the soul has somehow become gnosticized, and it's not as if Christians are protesting.

[7]I have added or subtracted true (as contrasted with modern) liberalism from these formulae because true liberalism evolved from a Christian-medieval respect for the human person, the need to protect such persons from the State, and most importantly, to ensure the obedience of worldly rulers to the laws of God. There is no question of a need for liberalism - or man against the state - in the gnostic model, however, because all gnostics unite as one in a common higher truth - against the whole of creation. The mere idea of opposing the higher truth of the gnostic State, which can be the only truth, is absurd and heretical.

[8]After drafting this paper I was pleased to find Stephen A. McKnight, "Voegelin's New Science of History," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., **Eric Voegelin's Significance for the Modern Mind** (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), pp.46-70, in which McKnight discusses the materials that comprise the The Ancient Wisdom, or *prisca theologia* and the notion of "saving knowledge" these religious and magical materials share in common with Gnosticism. He helpfully points (p.65) to the difference as well, in that the former "are directed at the transformation of the world, not escape from it," but - so germane to this paper - that for the latter,"the belief that the world is or can be made into a suitable home for man is, to the Gnostic, one of the fundamental demonstrations of a profound state of ignorance (agnoia)." With respect to pessimism and optimism, he writes that we need a demonstration as to how and why "the radical dualism of ancient Gnosticism becomes transformed into a doctrine of inner-worldly fulfillment." Precisely. And yet while the teachings of the *prisca theologia* fit better than Gnosticism the analysis of transformation that Voegelin made as I understand it, they nevertheless do not fill the bill. The followers of these religions and cults enjoyed their spiritual status as "terrestrial gods", but they made little effort to "perfect society" outside their private persons and communities; certainly not to perfect whole nations or to make war on whole civilizations. Politically speaking, they seem to have been largely passive, perhaps reflective of their Eastern origins. The modern totalitarian movements, however, including the softer forms we see in modern democratic welfare states I believe take their radical impulse from an immanentization and secularization of Christian millenarianism, especially from the Protestant form stressing individual knowledge and divinity developed in the last few centuries. These are distinguished from true religious sects by their direct evangelical fervour and fierce political and ideological conversion behaviour in this world.

[9]Certain brands of libertine gnosticism do indeed embrace and indulge the body and all its passions. However, this is only possible because as anti-cosmic and anti-somatic gnostics they so deeply despise the slave-grip of the body and its passions over their whole existence. Indulgence is rebellion. For only utter and total disrespect for the body enables complete immersion in the passions. The prototype for moderns is the Marquis de Sade, arch sexual gnostic and revolutionary of the modern age.

[10]Jonas, **The Gnostic Religion**, p.46

[11]Rudolph, **Gnosis**, p.264-5

[12]I am indebted to the engrossing study by Norman Cohn, **The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and the Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages** (United Kingdom: Random House, 1970 edition).

[13]An especially useful collection concerning the movement from claims of divine right to those of popular sovereignty in England during the 17th century, is David Wootton, ed., **Divine Right and Democracy** (London: Penguin, 1986). The OED states *Vox Populi Vox Dei* appeared frequently in English works from the 15th century on. It is unlikely to have been current in ancient democracies, however, because definitions of "the people" were then highly exclusionary. In ancient Athens, for example, *demos* often meant "poor people" and certainly not the whole people. The last idea entertained by ancient democrats was that the voice of the masses was "divine." The political problem, rather, was how to contain that voice and subdue it while yet recognizing it. For an excellent collection on the role of the people and society under Greek democracy see Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick, eds., **Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern** (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996). Also, very useful are Mogens Herman Hansen, **The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes** (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), and of course, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, **The Ancient City** (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980). Corollary to the thesis developed in this paper is the fact that Modern democratic ideas seem to have flourished not first as calls for political or economic freedom, or to relieve class oppression as in ancient times, but rather as instruments to facilitate freedom of conscience and religious expression during the Reformation. The insistence on the right of the people to sovereignty, and on the "divinity" of their voice and will, supports the historical creation of the gnostic-millenarian format explored here. It was the post-reformation combination of Christianity and Democracy which established the millenarian format that needed only to be emptied of God to become political absolutism.

[14]I use the word "hyper democracy" to imply the somewhat hysterical and certainly radical extension of the concepts denoted by the root word beyond their acceptable or logical sense. By definition "democratic" sovereignty cannot be rooted in any individual, and at best only in a collection of individuals. That democratic troublemaker Rousseau attempted to circumvent this problem by famously distinguishing between the "will of all" (the arithmetic sum of wills) and "the General Will," and argued somewhat mystically that the former, the mere sum of wills (pluses and minuses) would obviously cancel itself out, whereas the latter was a recognition by all that even when a course of action was not in an individual's best personal interest, he was called morally to recognize the benefit of supporting the General Will.

[15]The recent historical roots of such a movement can be found in what is commonly called "Romanticism" in literature and the arts. Beginning in the late 17th century, the Romantic Movement generally fought to shift the "locus of reality" from outside to inside the self. Against neo-classical defences of literary and moral truth and verisimilitude as discoverable in external standards of moral principle, esthetic form and logical unity, the Romantics asserted an inner, and higher unique truth. Typical expressions are the expansive emotionalism of Rousseau in France, the sensibility trend pursued by Shaftesbury in England, and its continuation in Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and others. Various latter irruptions can be seen in the psychological novel of the late nineteenth century, and then in the stream of consciousness novel as practiced by such as Joyce and Woolf in the early twentieth (not to mention extensions of this impulse into Symbolism, Surrealism, Dada, and so on). In the present context, the entire Romantic movement may be seen as part of the modern gnostic resurgence that began in the Reformation, and that has continued to this day, so visible in the well-nigh fundamentalist

"selfism" discoverable as the operational foundation of modern psychology, criminology and sociology, which are among its institutional expressions.

[16]In 1992 the Honourable Antonio Lamer, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, held forth: "*I think a person is the most important thing. Anything else is there to assist the person to fulfill one's* [sic] *life ... everything else is subordinate. Even collectivities.*" However, surely the most bombastic instance of such individualist fetishism is the loftily oblivious opinion formulated by the U.S. Supreme Court in Casey vs. Planned Parenthood, 1992, wherein it declared that "*at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life*" - a right, not of mere opinion, but of *definition*, considered in all former periods to be the precinct of God alone. Elsewhere, I have argued that there is an inherent conflict between hyper democracy and any possibility of forming or sustaining human community. That is because all social groups rely on a common four-step **induction process** to recruit and bind their members as insiders within specific expectations and limits. In other words, all forms of genuine human community are boundary-phenomena. They require a willingness among members to *sacrifice* self-interest to the group (a plain example is the Rotary International motto: "Service Above Self"); for internal control and order they require *subordination* to the group's authority and rules; for loyalty they demand some process or ceremony of *commitment*, whether by a solemn vow, a contract, or a ritual; and finally, when all this is done, as reward they reserve *privileges* and a special status for accepted members *that must be rigorously denied to all outsiders*. None of this is, or could possibly be, "democratic." Ironically, this hierarchical format applies even to radical egalitarian polities which see non-egalitarians as outsiders and inferiors. This means, paradoxically, that the same process that binds contemporary democracies vis a vis outsiders, rends them internally. This was not true of organic, religious, hierarchical, non-egalitarian democracies in their early stages, such as existed in Canada and the USA until the early decades of the twentieth century.

[17]The extreme form of this millenarian-gnostic dynamic has existed of course in all modern totalitarian movements, in which can be found the full Voegelinian panoply of a *Dux*, or *prophetae*, ideological *euphoria* of believers, the "murder of God," and especially an expectation of *secular deliverance* from the evil outside us through a program to change "the order of being" through some *historical or political process*.

[18]**Time**, April 8, 1996