
THE PAROUSIAN-REFORMIST-PURITAN MOVEMENT AS A POLITICAL-RELIGIOUS PROJECT TO CHANGE THE WORLD AND MAN, IN ERICH VOEGELIN'S VISION

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Abstract

The early seventeenth century was characterized, in terms of the dialogue God-man-world knowledge, by the emergence of new political-philosophical-religious theories that would, among other things, result in sharpening the old conflict between faith and reason. That conflict would result, among other things, in a division of European states according to their faith, i.e. the Roman Catholic or the Protestant confession. The eighteenth century would see that separation continued, this time most radically, by the French Revolution of 1879 which will render Reason with a true status of 'divinity', while the Christian faith would be outlawed. Against this background, the becoming of man and the history of his salvation, as a transition of his resemblance from 'the Image of God' to the 'image of the Image of God', would be substituted by the adventure of the social classes of modern capitalism, substitution that would replace the vertical and the horizontal of the 'Cross theology' with the autonomous horizontal of the self-knowledge. It is a time when many thinkers, philosophers, and followers of the Christian religion have created all sorts of designs favouring or against the new Reality of the world, God being seen as a Deus Otiosus or, even worse, as a God who should be removed from the equation knowledge-salvation in the God-man-world triangle. Henceforth, many started living with the 'modern' feeling that, if God is not dead yet, their duty will be to 'kill' Him in the sense of a total liberation from the ecclesial tutelage seen as an institution reluctant to the new ideals of humanity. Such an example is the Puritan movement in England, a parousianic movement that demonstrated how to make the Gnostic transition from the theonomous ideal of God's kingdom – promoted by the Great Church - to the autonomous ideal of a Terrestrial Paradise.

Keywords: religious reform, gnosticism, parousianic movements, gnostic Koran

1. Preliminaries

55 years after the appearance of the work *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* [1], we will try - not incidentally, in the context of the aforementioned - to

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honour the memory of an outstanding teacher, Erich Voegelin, one of the great supporters of the Gnostic theory within the politics of modernity. Although at the time of its publication, this work did not enjoy too great success in the New World, as well as in Europe actually, the various Gnostic type movements are dominating through their 'ideal', more or less from the underground, the nowadays scene of the American and European culture and civilization. His work has grown into a reference book by explaining the 'play of the gnosis falsely named knowledge' (1 Timothy 6.20) occurring between a political theology and a theological policy on the history of times, which has proposed for ideal the 'killing' of the True God in the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan faith symbol.

2. Some considerations on the ancient and modern Gnosticism in Erich Voegelin's vision

Erich Voegelin as a philosopher and also as a political analyst, for the first time in history of the research on Gnosis, has not just done an analysis of the coincidental structures shared by the antic Gnostic thinking and the modern political thinking; he is also the scholar who revealed the radical negativity in the eresiarthic-religious ancient Gnosticism as well as in the modern political Gnosticism. The reductionist Gnosticisms are responsible, in his vision, for much of the visible decline in the Occidental culture and civilization. Specifically, he started his approach from some arid and less appealing topics such as: the Behistun inscriptions, the Mongol orders of submission, the controversy on the altar of the goddess Victory in the Roman forum during Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine, and the neo-Gnostic revolt during the Puritan Reformation in England [2]. Erich Voegelin detects the causes for the perversion of the old and the new societies in the abandonment of the old *politikei episteme* of Aristotle and Plato. It is the result of the apparition in the history of the human thinking of the antithetical polarizing model of Gnostic-dialectical type, acting upon the old and new Reality according to the exclusion rule 'either-or'. This line of thinking materialized in a new paradigm model of knowledge will be opposed by *negation* to the old Greek thinking preoccupied as well with the duality of One-Multiple (Aristotle) or Being and Becoming (Plato, Timaeus), with the important note that those had not grown into 'dualism' - as it happened in Gnosticism - i.e. the opposition between a basically good principle and an evil one. Voegelin identified this change of paradigm on knowledge starting from the relationship established between the *knowledge of the chosen (neo) Gnostic man* and *his religious-political revolt* against the old structure of Reality, between the tension of the bond established between the Existence and the Truth of the world which, by means of Gnosis and neo-Gnosis, would embrace various forms from ancient, stoic and Christian times up to the period of the modern positivist, Hegelian, Marxist or National Socialist thought. At the end of his quest, the researcher concluded that all the aforementioned orders and movements are only reformulated versions of the ancient Gnosticism,

ereziarchic varieties that can be circumscribed to the wider gnosiological scope. *The idea of a gnosiology addressed to a certain intellectual paradigm whose roots lay in the Gnosis of the late Antiquity*, reverberating into modernity in the form of various Gnostic ‘pseudo-morphoses’ would invade, in time, all sectors of society, literature, religion and politics.

Extrapolating this observation of Bauerian origin made by Erich Voegelin demonstrates that the speculations produced by the German idealist thinkers are a continuation of the movement of the ancient Gnostic thinking that had begun in Antiquity. Those thinkers explored, from the perspective of the reason-faith ratio, in terms of *scientific analysis, and also of the usual-conventional analysis*, the history of the sectarian thinking and of the Church heresies starting effectively from Schelling’s philosophy of nature, from Schleimacher’s doctrine of faith and religion, and from Hegel’s philosophy of religion. It goes without saying, would Erich Voegelin point out, that with the Enlightenment and German Idealism, the Gnostic movement that circulated until then in ‘hidden underground as a tradition of Europe’, in different Gnostic heresiarchic forms, embraced a new form with a strong neo-Gnostic socio-political tinge that would invade the old institutions of the state.

The main representatives of modern Gnosis were identified by Voegelin, on the one hand, among the leaders of the religious movements of the Reformation and, on the other hand, in the ideas promoted by Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Through the latter ones, a transition is made from the Gnostic theological philosophical-religious project to the political-revolutionary phase of the change [1, p. 5] with the contribution of the ‘parousianic’ mass movements. At first the Gnostic nature of those movements was not visible, although there were many events taking new forms of social-political action such as the movements of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli or the English Puritan movement that will culminate in the ideological visions of Marx and of the anarchist Bakunin, the first activities of Lenin, the intellectual neo-positivist, the communist or fascist movements. To explain this new neo-Gnostic phenomenon starting with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new terms were invented, such as “neo-pagan movement”, “socio-political myth” or “political mystics” [1, p. 5]. Those notions, however, would not manage to explain the origins of these movements.

That confused state of the Political science, the inadequate understanding of this political phenomenon, notes Voegelin, lasted until the eve of the Second World War, when the meanings of gnosis and Gnosticism started to be both deciphered in their philosophical-existentialist key. The method was applied both to the ancient man - starting from the historical perspective towards the Gnostic typology - and to the modern man, to whom the hermeneutic interpretation in existentialist key [1, p. 36, 189] can be applied in reverse.

Under the influence of a deeper understanding of ancient Gnosticism in existentialist key and its connections with Judaism and Christianity - and not only - influence that has affected the political expressions of modern

Gnosticism, a new interpretation of the direction taken by the European intellectual history and modern politics has developed.

Starting from the works of some famous authors as Willhelm Busset, Hans Jonas, Hans Leisegang, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Albert Camus and Henry de Lubac, many aspects of Gnosticism will be decrypted - the central theme being that of rebellion and alienation of man - their studies becoming true 'philosophical-religious' and 'socio-political milestones' for understanding the historical continuity of Gnosis from Antiquity to Modernity.

Erich Voegelin identified, in his approach, no less than three stages in the evolution of the rebel and alienated Spirit, stages that would themselves grow into gnosticised and gnosticising models of the different ages and will make, effectively, the transition from the Truth of the Theonomous Reality by faith to the Non-Truth of the intellectual deceit, from the Truth of knowledge by dialogue between God and man to the Non-Truth of the disjointed and subjective knowledge. The first step is the self-deception, when the independent thinking of the author is tempted by the power of the Self, *libido dominandi*, which will open the way for further intellectual error. This first step becomes deceit because of the psychological context in which it occurs. In the second stage, due to his *con-science*, the autonomous thinker becomes aware of the non-truth of his statements and speculation, yet he persists in them, imposing them to his followers through 'dogmatization'. Thus, he will become an *intellectual impostor*, opponent of the Divine Absolute Truth. In the third stage, the Gnostic thinker will rebel against the True God of the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan faith symbol, such a revolt and alienation being finally recognized as reason for imposture, for the substitution of the Truth of God with the Truth of the Autonomous Man. This substitution, equivalent to firm belief that it is possible to save the world from the evil influence of disorder that dominates the 'lean thinking' of the old ruling institutions at the head of whom the Church stands, will be postulated starting from the new, 'hard thinking' of the autonomous neognosis. Starting from this thinking, the order of things must be changed by any means. Herein lies the essence of the revolutionary Gnosticism, which states that it is possible to change the order of things by human action, that the salvation is possible by the effort of man's own Reason.

The Gnostic's mission within this action will be meant to seek solutions, to identify them and fulfil the changes. Knowledge, which is really the central concern of the Gnostic, will be involved in finding and building an universal formula for the salvation of the Self, and of the world, starting from the Gnostic's availability to undertake not only the mission of the Religious Prophet but also that of Political Leader [2, p. 112-113].

A great deal of effort has been made in order to understand this alienating phenomenon, circumscribed to the loss of teleological and axiological sense vs. the ratiom. For the Gnostic man, the world is a prison, he lives a world deemed as inferior, a world where man has strayed and where he must find a way to the 'House of Light' the has come from. Unlike the ordered Hellenistic cosmos where man feels 'at home' or unlike the Judeo-Christian 'good' world created by

God, the Gnostic vision would not consider to contemplate the so-called order of the world subjected to various changes in which man has nothing to say. Therefore, the great existential questions of Gnosticism will repeatedly refer to the origin of man, the condition of man's being thrown into the world, to escape from this world and to return to the True World of Pleroma by means of a special Knowledge. In the ontology of the ancient Gnosticism, this is achieved through a Stranger God, hidden, who comes to the aid of man and shows him the Way out from the prison of this world, subjugated by the God of the Old Testament. Within this ontology, a special relation is established between Psyche and Pnevma. If, through his *Psyche*, he belongs to a predetermined order of the world - *nomos* - that which will spur him to freedom and progress, it will be *Pnevma* - the Spirit or the Light Spark - which would turn him *from inward, to outward*. For the Gnostic, the effort of such liberation from a decadent Psyche is equivalent to a separation of the 'body and the prison-world' he is chained in. It follows, thence, the need to build and release the Pneuma powers through knowledge, which leads either to the world of Pleroma, or to a change of the existence of the old world into a new world. Self-salvation through the release of Pnevma powers retains a negative magic of its own, which is not harmless in its action. Its goal, being the destruction of the old world and winning a new world order through the release of the knowledge of Self, would actually increase the disorder within society, the latter having to start a new cycle.

3. 'Killing God' from in religious-political perspective and the Puritan Reformist movement

If the ancient Gnostics tended to remain silent in the political environment, their concern being only the spiritual salvation from the material world of the body, the later modern Gnostics changed this paradigm, becoming destructive revolutionaries and using new teleological, axiological and militant-activist symbolic forms meant to change the world. Such forms would be extended from the fight of the autonomous man with the Divinity to the fight in different forms with the social-political forms or organization of the time. The revival of the ancient Gnosticism as a modern mythology, is due above all to the Protestant Reform, where the spiritual power of the soul, which in primitive Christianity and ancient Gnosticism was aiming at sanctifying life by means of fasting, ascetics and prayer, is now put under the sign of an ever-increasing tension between reason and faith, starting from the two models of thinking, of antinomic-Christian and dialectic-polarizing types. In modernity, such tension would inherit the tensions circumscribed to the primary Christian religion, seen as a Jewish Messianic movement. In this movement, the early Christian community life oscillates between the eschatological expectation of the second coming of Jesus Christ the Redeemer - Parousia, that was to bring the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Since the Parousia did not occur as expected by the early Christians, the Christian community of the early Church evolved according to the writings of the Holy Apostle Paul from *an eschatology of the reality seen within history to an eschatology of the trans-historical supernatural perfection*. As part of this development from the ‘not yet’ to the ‘already’, Christianity went beyond its historical origin to an ontological interpretation of it, that would be fulfilled with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost and the establishment of the Church as visible entity, Jesus Christ the Redeemer being actualized by means of the Holy Sacraments until the end of time. Beyond experiencing that eschatological pathos, Christianity would also promote the revolutionary proclamation of the Millennium, seen as a reward on a time in which Jesus Christ, descending from Heaven, will rule over the Earth with His saints. In modern times, this speculation on a divine-human Kingdom of Jesus Christ the Redeemer on the edification of the millennium is a constant feature taken over by neo-Gnostic thinking.

This thinking embraced unusual forms against the paradoxical logic of the Church and Kingdom of God *by the reduction of the Christian eschaton to the mechanisms of the human intellect’s binary logic and human endowment with the attribute of God, man who would implement the significance of another eschatological accomplishment* of political-philosophic nature.

The modern neo-Gnostic speculation overshadow the core thinking of the ‘Mediterranean tradition’ [2, p. 8] - the Greek philosophy, Judaism and Christianity - by withdrawing the prerogative of transcendence and endowing man with the meaning of fulfilment by Gnosis only. To the limitation of the core of this Mediterranean tradition and fundamental uncertainty of the human knowledge on the Divine Transcendence and all that exists, modern Gnosticism opposes the arrogant pride of losing contact with the Divine Reality and the overestimation of man’s own abilities in an effort to overcome the restlessness and quest of human life by building a terrestrial paradise and an attempt to forget that man is a created spiritual being. Unfortunately, no matter how valuable would be the projects sustained by the promoters of such a pseudo-program, which oscillates between the *excess of materiality and absence of spirituality*, they would not manage to serve as a substitute for the inner-spiritual quest, for that Transcendent Reality that motivated, for instance, Plato or Apostle Paul.

This would make Modernity to be a paradox, an era of progress by means of Science and technology advance that would bring life to an unprecedented level in terms of material comfort, health, acts of charity, but on the other hand, would also bring along civil wars and numerous diseases and passions with unimaginable destructive consequences for mankind [2, p. 7]. The modern society would become increasingly materialistic, leading to increasingly widespread alienation from the spiritual world, man redeeming himself into eternal destiny or materiality which would replace the spiritual life of transfiguration and sanctification of life in a hubristic attempt to build a terrestrial paradise.

Nietzsche, says Voegelin, best expressed that demonic diversion of separating man from God by the egoistic solution: “*Love thyself ... and you will be able to play the whole drama of the fall and redemption until its end within yourself*” [2, p. 130]. How could this miracle of salvation by oneself be accomplished, according to the modern neo-Gnostic thinking? One of these actions is to gain literary and artistic achievement, action continued with the discipline and economic success of the Holy Puritan, with the revolutionary utopian action hoping to give rise to some other kind of communist or Gnostic ‘millennium’ [2, p. 131]. Voegelin distinguishes two stages in the manifestation of the neo-Gnosis: one that extends to the Renaissance, where the Gnosis manifested religiously as a sectarian heresy and which the Church managed to temper down to some extent by the works of the Holy Fathers, and the modern stage, when it becomes a real world power - *Weltmacht* - and which actually means ‘killing God’, speculatively achieved by explaining the Divine being as a product of man. For Erich Voegelin, the process starts from the Gnostic revolution, revolt carried out in two stages. The first one is identified with the Reformation itself, seen as a successful invasion of the Western institutions by the Gnostic movements. Interesting in this respect is the interpretation given by him to such fundamentalist Protestants of the English Puritan kind, whose strong argument against their enemies was: “We belong to God: the one who knows God understands us” [3].

To understand such assertion, Professor Voegelin analyzes the Puritan impact on the English public order from the observations of a brilliant witness-in-person of those events, that of the ‘reasonable’ Hooker [2, p. 133-134]. Apart of describing the historical events during the conflict between King Carol and Cromwell, the ‘reasonable’ Hooker would add pertinent explanation on the impact of the psychological mechanism under which the Gnostic mass movements operate, emphasizing the particular religious attitude demonstrated by the new proselytes. At first, Hooker writes, any movement would need a ‘cause’ [2, p. 133-134]. This term was coined by the Puritans, a term which became subsequently a formidable weapon in achieving their goals. To promote the ‘cause’, the Gnostic supporting it poured in the ears of the crowd, criticism over the social evil and especially regarding the behaviour of the upper classes. The frequent repetition of these allegations induced among the audience the belief that those who talk are people of great integrity, zeal and holiness.

The next step was to assign the whole state of affairs to the incompetence of the government actions. After such preparation, appears the recommendation for a new form of government that is seen as a remedy for all evils perpetrated until then by the old government. The next step is to strengthen the Gnostic attitude by “convincing gullible people prone to such special illumination by the power of the Holy Spirit, intercessions that would convince them they are among the elected ones” [2, p. 135-136]. This unique experience whereby they discern the truth of things in the world would cultivate among them a high degree of separation between themselves and the rest of the world: from then on, the world would consist of ‘brethren’ and ‘the others’. In these circumstances, people

would prefer not only their company, but would inadvertently accept advice and guidance from those who indoctrinate them. Hooker, writes Voegelin, noted that *puritanical attitude was based not so much on the Holy Scripture as on some 'hidden' selfish political purposes, the Holy Bible being only used for citing certain verses taken out of their context and strictly useful to their cause*. Such an attitude ignores the traditions and rules for the interpretation of the Scripture that had been previously developed. In order to hide their anti-Christian position, the new neo-Gnostic movement, lacking mass success, have developed two technical instruments that remained until today the great instruments of the neo-Gnostic rebellion. The first tool refers the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, interpretation that needed to be standardized in order to systematically reformulate the doctrine in terms of the Scripture as it was some time ago given by Calvin in his *Institutes* [2, p. 139]. That was a guide for the correct 'reading' of the Scripture, which lead to the genuine formulation of truth, making useless for the new believers to resort to older theological literature. The second instrument refers to the adherent's obligation to exercise voluntary self-censorship, every faithful member of such a movement keeping away from any literature that could provide arguments against that movement.

In conclusion, the Protestant Reformation was putting a taboo on the classical philosophy and Christian theology, the new movement of the English Puritans being more than an anti-Christian tendency hidden beneath some distorted ultra-Christianity. It was a political religious Gnosticisant attitude which used, in order to reach its goals, the purely religious-Christian motives of the Holy Scripture. Calvin's work was considered by the Austrian author, in this context, as "the first Gnostic Quran, deliberately devised" [2, p. 140] for the use of the new believers. Other stages of the Gnostic revolution and other 'Qurans' may be found in Diderot and D'Alambert's *Encyclopedias*, in the works of Marx, Lenin and Stalin, and also in Scotus Erigena's.

Writing about those observations of Erich Voegelin's, one of the most titled experts on Gnosticism, the Romanian Ioan Petru Culianu wrote: "The 'Quranic' character of all those works involves active exclusion of everything they actually intend to replace. Thus, the Reform did not operate according to the law of argumentation and persuasion. Its truth was immutable and indisputable, promoting a totalitarian society. Totalitarianism means, in these circumstances, the fulfilment of the Gnostic search for a civilian theology. Nowadays, the neo-Gnosticism, as a manifestation of the Christian eschaton, was manifested in two distinct forms: Marxism ... and westernization, which involves the destruction of the soul's spiritual truth and contempt for the question of the existence." [3, p. 186]

4. Conclusions

We see here a real indictment that Voegelin addressed to that Gnosticizing modernity, guilty of all those aberrations of the modern history under whose mark the entire history of the twentieth century stood. Unlike Spengler, author of

the *Decline of the West* [4], whose vision was pessimistic, the vision advanced by Erich Voegelin is full of hope with the possibility for reversing the decline of modern civilization and the positive recovery of what was lost from the philosophy of ancient Greek, Judaism and primary Christianity.

Like any other thinker, Voegelin wrote in the light of his own experiences within the society in which he lived and spent his childhood. He had seen his homeland falling under Nazism, which led to his escape across the border. The traumatic experiences of the time had left with him a bitter taste and an utter disbelief in mass movements, but at the same time with hope for change to the better. For him, to understand the parousianic phenomenon of the Puritan movement resulted into an accumulation of positive data, which would prevent one from doing further mistakes in the future, whence his striving to understand the symbolic structures of mass movements and the symbolic complexes adjacent to such movements, that inflicted so much suffering on mankind.

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