

“How Not to ‘Immanentize the Eschaton’: Apocalypse, Gnosis, and History in Voegelin and Rosenstock-Huessy”

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In this paper I analyze divergent evaluations of immanence rendered by Eric Voegelin and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, in an effort to understand better what is the problem faced by secular progressivism on their points of view. Their evaluations of immanence display the range of how to interpret secularization, generally, the transference of divine authority to human power. Is secularization a passing phase or an unstoppable force, an opening to the world or a closing to the divine? Secularization is a thesis about politics or society that entertains obvious theological assumptions or implications. Is immanence a site for the dwelling of God or a launching point of rebellion against God?

Verweltlichung is the making human of a world, its secularization or de-divinization.¹ Is it good or bad?

Gnosticism splits the created world from God and the human soul. Entweltlichung takes the world out of its meaningful context. It is to Jonas “an annihilation of that which binds to the world.” Personal self alienated from nature, which is alienated from God, seeks a vehicle to escape world and reconnect with God, following destruction of fallen and inauguration of risen. Gnosticism conceives of opposing principles, light and darkness, reflecting the ground of being. The hidden light or divine spark of being,

captured in a material husk, gets liberated or released at the end of the war between flesh and spirit.

Apocalypse designates a temporal irruption that imagines a collective people suffering punishment by God in punishing world, receive a sign that a rupture in the world will reinstall God's place, following a point in time from to new. In Jewish apocalyptic literature, an otherwise hidden meaning is revealed. That revelation separates those who respond to its call from those who do not, and the point in time at which the former will overtake, overthrow the latter. It announces a new age to arise from the shattered ruins of an old.

Here I want to ask, is immanence the context for gnostic speculation or apocalyptic interruption of life?

To Voegelin, immanence is originally sinful and essentially deluded, but also dangerous. Voegelin considers immanence a rebellion against transcendence. Gnosis is the distorted form taken by the knowledge of order -- or disorder, forged in crisis, not a contemplative reflection -- whereas apocalypse is the distorting event that destroys the old order and seeks to put the new age in its place (MWR 204-206, 193-94).

Augustine was able to counter the first wave of late antique Gnosticism by distinguishing the decay of profane history from the triumph of salvation. The second phase of Gnosticism arose with the periodization of Joachim, which drew the eschaton onto an immanent course. Voegelin called the ensuing "immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton" a fallacy. He wrote, "the course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no eidos, because the course of history extends into the unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion." The delusion that history has a

meaning of its own comes from treating a faith in transcendence like the immanence of an experience (MWR 184-6).

To Rosenstock, by contrast, immanence marks the periodic sedimentation of faith into routine, occasionally disrupted or interrupted by the apocalyptic revolution overthrowing the “saeculum senescens”. Philosophy, an essential assessment of eternal nature, on Rosenstock’s account, is a variant of Gnosis, the claim to escape an unanticipated purpose of life and contemplate ‘the’ essence of things.

The cross gathers together and disperses the tensions between past and future, internal subjectivity and external objectivity. Jesus crucified at the center the cross binds multiple options into the constant metanoia, or turning around. That turning is, in a sense, not of this world. “The essence of eschatology is its infinity. It asks complete surrender to something outside the existing order of things.”²

Both Voegelin and Rosenstock condemn hubris and decry a lack of humility before God. Yet for each thinker, the source of hubris and the end of humility differ.

For Voegelin, in Gnosticism a symbolic system would try and supplant reality. It comprises two elements: the libidino dominere and “the obsession of replacing the world of reality with the transfigured dream world.”³ By contrast, Plato and Jesus provide narrated symbols (the cave, Golgotha) that open the finitude of human consciousness to the infinity of God.

Voegelin considers immanence a rebellion against transcendence. Humans have a natural aptitude for sensing transcendence. However, that sense does not operate in only one way. There is one structure of being in the truth of its representation, although its differentiation or existential representation varies considerably under the pressures of

historical circumstances. The Israelite prophets and Greek philosophers exemplify the symbolic variations on the theme of transcendence. (So, too, ancient cosmological or stereotypically pagan symbolisms, which discovery seems to have reshaped Order and History between volumes 3 and 4).

Gnosticism appropriates the symbol of the eschaton and applies it to worldly existence. In it, the humble submission to God is metastasized into an arrogant assertion of autonomy.

Secularism is a radicalized immanentism. One could add Nietzsche and Freud where Voegelin finds that “Feuerbach and Marx, for instance, interpreted the transcendent God as the projection of what is best in man into hypostatic beyond; for them the great turning point of history, therefore, would come when man draws his projection back into himself, when he becomes conscious that he himself is God, when as a consequence man is transfigured into superman.”⁴ Voegelin praises “Hegel's effort to get rid of the hypostatic Beyond of a purely doctrinal God, so that the poor in spirit can return to the "mystery" of the divine reality experienced as present in the "heart" of man, i.e. in his concrete existence as a human being.”⁵

For Rosenstock, even in philosophy would an intellectual program, an idea, dominate over devoted action. By contrast, truly historical revolution alone submits the finitude of human power to the infinity of God, throwing caution to the wind and gripping the spirit of God. To Rosenstock, God has no being outside the time of His personality. In direct opposition to Voegelin, Platonism for Rosenstock is, as Cristaudo notes, a subset of Gnosticism. Redemption, like creation, is of time, not in spite of time.

Redemption takes the sting out of death. In the resurrection, “death became the gateway to new life.” The “Living God” is not an idea or an image, “not an object but a person.” God is “not a concept but a name. To approach Him as an object is to defeat the quest from the start. Nothing but the world of space is given in this manner.” In time “God looks at us.” More, God “is the power which makes us speak.” Transcendence is not order in the structural sense, but in the sense of a request or command. It is not an essence of being, but an event, an occurrence: the turning or overturning of primitive values. “Philosophy tries to be timeless,” and lacks faith.⁶

Philosophy, though, gives voice to only one mode of speech. Speech has many moods that shape and emplace our lives. “Speech is the body of spirit.”⁷ The Alexandrian grammar that gives pride of place to the indicative mood of ostensive definition supports the philosophical reflection on order. Reality addresses us, though, more in the imperative voice and the vocative case. In reality we take on the names given to us, and respond to the demands placed upon us. Philosophy contemplates the world; action establishes it. Hence, faith offers no symbol but direction, rectitude. Dealing with life is inevitably partial, piecemeal and biased. Speech gives life its present presence/ orientation on the cross, between inner and outer, past and future.⁸

As a result of this charge against Gnosticism -- and its subsidiary apocalypse -- Voegelin emphasizes the structures of consciousness and the spatial order they perceive in the polis, thus history. The problem of history begins when consciousness loses sight of the beyond and finds meaning in this history of experience. The Gnostic “will not leave the transfiguration of the world to the grace of God beyond history but will do the work of God himself, right here and now, in history.”⁹ We may usefully contrast

Voegelin's remark on Parmenides' ascent to the infinite: "the experience was so intense that it tended toward the identification of nous and being, of noein and einai; in the rapture of the vision of the knower and the known would fuse into the one true reality (aletheia), only to be separated again when the logos became active in exploring the experience and finding suitable language symbols for its expression."¹⁰

Rosenstock -- who rejects Gnosticism, but not a qualified apocalypse -- underscores the movements of body and the temporal rhythm they hear in society, thus history. One of Rosenstock's contributions is the grammar of time he unpacks through the calendar of holidays.¹¹ The calendar is important because the annual, monthly, even weekly recurrence of holidays sets forth a dimension of time that beats to a different rhythm than the lifespan of the individual person. "While this life stretches from the cradle to the grave the life span of an inspiration reaches from the middle of one man's life to the middle of the life in the next generation."¹²

In short, as we know, Voegelin is a political philosopher, and Rosenstock is a social grammarian. What we may learn from the description above, moreover, is that for Voegelin immanence represents an abundance of historical experience but a paucity of a truthful order, whereas for Rosenstock immanence provides the context through which the divine end of history makes a difference.

Between questioning by contemplation and addressing by speech, which is more humble, and which more hubristic? In their responses to this question, Voegelin and Rosenstock arguably part ways.

Does Voegelin seek restoration of prior historical models or reconciliation with God above and beyond the beginning of history? Is there an ancient or premodern order

that we might regain in time? Or is there no end but the contemplative reconciliation of the mystic with his eternal beyond whose source is nothing but God, from which all history begins? Inasmuch as the experience of transcendence is open to us everywhere and always, the instinct for precipitous action in behalf of change, destroying the old and replacing it with the new, is, sadly, no longer or not yet closed off as an option.

"History is not a stream of human beings and their actions in time, but the process of man's participation in a flux of divine presence that has eschatological direction" (EA, 6). That participation, Voegelin calls "the in-between or metaxy." The beyond marks a seeking and questioning, which drives historical change; the beginning inaugurates and sustains order¹³

In Gnosticism, for Voegelin, the metaxy of philosophy and Christianity is displaced by a metastatic faith in the transformation of cosmic and human nature into another nature. "The soteriological truth of Christianity, then, breaks with the rhythm of existence; beyond temporal successes and reverses lies the supernatural destiny of man, the perfection through grace in the beyond." (MWR, 185). Apocalypse is merely the historical enactment of Gnosis, it seems for Voegelin.

Yet for Rosenstock, it is just the lack of faith in the old social world that precipitates the apocalyptic emergence of the new. Note that Rosenstock's concept of revolution proffers no overestimation of human ability so much as it expresses the gift humans have for changing the 'course' of history by acting within nature, if even to alter it technologically, on response to call from God. The future is open not to a linear life with its meaning in history, which death rules, but to experience of death from whose survival rebirth grants new life. "Not steady movement in one direction but continual

redirection, breaking through old ruts ... the one step into the unknown and improbable which we experience when we ask ourselves where our heart really is.”¹⁴

Here then is a crux of the difference between Rosenstock and Voegelin on immanence. The difference needs careful attention. Voegelin subordinates immanence as a deficiency or, worse, illusion of transcendence. Rosenstock takes a different approach; he aligns the eternal transcendence of order that Voegelin contemplates with the hidden God, the deus absconditus, which Gnosticism elevates. From Rosenstock’s point of view, Voegelin has the same problem as the crisis or dialectical theologians whom Voegelin would seem to criticize: they deprive God of His personality and turn Him into a remote principle or (wholly other) Being.

In a letter to Karl Barth, for instance, Rosenstock avers that God is not irretrievably transcendent, because transcendence, like order, outstrips every temporal horizon.

An alien God is historically ineffectual, by virtue of having no affect on those of us -- human beings who respond to the call -- who effect history. “Hasn’t salvation come into the world? Hasn’t God taken pity on us? Does Paul speak of the transcendent powers of new eon or of a Father who lives up there 50 million kilometers away or does he speak of the Son of God who became man. Christ became flesh, thus we live in his name which is the addressable and effable name of God. Thus has God revealed himself. Where’s the transcendence in this?”¹⁵

Rosenstock’s close friend Rosenzweig criticized Barth this way: “The point is that we theologians cannot help but make prescriptions for God’s conduct out of our knowledge. We know that God can be known only in his presence, and at once we make

out of this a law for him: that he does not permit himself to be known in his absence. In truth, however, we could easily leave to him as to when and how and what of himself he wants to be known.” Rosenzweig insists “the faraway God is none other than the near God, the unknown God none other than the revealed one, the Creator none other than the Redeemer.”¹⁶ Dialectical theologians such as Barth constrain and restrict God to the beyond, and foreclose the possibility of God’s freely entering into a relation with the cosmos. Voegelin does not fall into this trap; however his attempt to reincorporate divinity passes through consciousness of politics, not through political action.

The numerous minor apocalypses, what Rosenstock calls “total revolutions,” mark transitions from one symbolic-social structure to the next, with short-term losses paid in exchange for long term gain. For example, the American and French revolutions passed through terror and not easily justifiable suffering, and yet nonetheless made existentially illegitimate the image of a monarch who overrules at God’s pleasure. In revolution circulates the economy of salvation. “Mankind does not try to speak one language,” he writes in *Out of Revolution* (738). For “every speech is dissoluble,” however “through translation each variety of man remains in contact with all other varieties.”

For the two Christian viewpoints sketched above in opposition to secular progressivism or progressive secularism, secularization plays either a subservient or an obstructive role to the presence of God. But subservience and obstruction do not find God in the same place: the first senses, hears the rhythm of God drawing history to a close from within it, and the second senses, has an image of God beginning history from beyond it. Both oppose Gnosticism. Voegelin aligns Gnosticism, Apocalypse, and

immanence altogether in contrast with Plato and Christianity, which, sensing transcendence, grant order to history through either the contemplation of truth or the transfiguration of self, respectively. Rosenstock distinguishes Gnosticism from Apocalypse of the variety that does not sever immanence from transcendence, but renders transcendence immanent, in the cross of reality. Whereas Rosenstock detects the non-linear movement of history towards God, Voegelin envisions the kinds of order that make history.

NOTES

¹ See Voegelin, Modernity Without Restraint, 175.

² Christian Freedom, 71.

³ MWR, 226.

⁴ MWR 190, 303.

⁵ Voegelin, Eric. "Reply to Altizer." Journal of the American Academy of Religion 43, no. 4 (1975): 765-772.

⁶ CF 93-95.

⁷ See Stahmer, Harold, "Speech Is the Body of the Spirit: The Oral Hermeneutic in the Writings of Eugen Rosenstock--Huessy (1888--1973)," Oral Tradition 2, no. 1: 301-22.

⁸ See Speech and Reality, 8.

⁹ MWR, 207.

¹⁰ Voegelin, Anamnesis, 94-95.

¹¹ CF 209.

¹² CF 220.

¹³ (EA, 16-17). “Plato and Paul agree that meaning in history is inseparable from the directional movement in reality. ‘History’ is the area of reality where the directional movement of the cosmos achieves luminosity of consciousness. They furthermore agree that history is not an empty time dimension in which things happen at random but rather a process whose meaning is constituted in theophanic events. And finally they agree that the reality of history is metaleptic; it is the in between where man responds to the divine presence and the divine presence evokes the response in man” (EA, 242).

¹⁴ CF, 83, see 108n.

¹⁵ Letter of Rosentock-Huessy to Barth, 18.11.1919. A copy of this exists in the Rosentock-Huessy archives in Bielefeld; cited by Cristaudo 2010 (unpublished).

¹⁶ Judah Halevi, translated by Barbara Galli, 204-5.