
Voegelin on Gnosticism, Modernity, and the Balance of Consciousness

The twentieth century was an era of unprecedented horror. From the Russian Revolution through the two world wars to the Chinese “Cultural Revolution” and the Cambodian “killing fields,” millions upon millions have been oppressed, enslaved, or slaughtered by revolution, war, and the policy of their own governments. Although one may hope that the worse excesses of that age have run their course, the Soviet Union has disintegrated and Eastern Europe is rising, our time remains characterized by a pervasive apprehension that something is “out of joint.” Freedom, justice, peace, prosperity, civilization itself seem far from secure, even in the Western liberal democracies. The widespread unease and the unparalleled disorder of our era cry out for explanation.

The philosophy of Eric Voegelin offers insight into the causes of the twentieth-century nightmare, causes, he suggests, bound up with the very nature of “modernity” itself. According to Voegelin, the great modern ideological movements—communism, fascism, national socialism—are neither random and inexplicable outbursts nor solely the products of particular material and historical conditions. They should be understood instead as the extreme manifestations of a form of spiritual disorder or psychic disorientation that springs from certain tensions inherent in human existence. For Voegelin, the crisis of modernity is in essence a spiritual crisis rooted in a deformation of the truth of reality.

The Balance of Consciousness

According to Voegelin, human existence is always and everywhere “existence-in-tension,” existence in the “in-between” reality that Plato termed the *metaxy* and that is constituted by a simultaneous tension toward both mundane existence and its transcendent divine ground. Human consciousness in all times and all places finds itself embedded within a mysterious, participatory reality “halfway between God and man,”¹ a reality constituted by a tension toward the existential poles of immanence and transcendence, the poles of mortality and immortality, ignorance and knowledge, time and timelessness, imperfection and perfection, matter and spirit, existence and non-existence, life and death, truth and its deformation. Reality is a comprehensive whole that consists of both mundane and transcendent dimensions, of mutual participation of the human and the divine.

A “healthy,” “balanced,” or “well-ordered” consciousness is for Voegelin one that accepts the “tensional structure of existence”² and mediates successfully between its contrary poles. “Diseased” or “unbalanced” or “disordered” consciousness, on the other hand, may be defined as a mode of experience wherein one or the other of the existential poles whose tension constitutes the “in-between” reality of human existence has been collapsed; it is existence within a truncated or deformed reality characterized by the eclipse of one or the other of its inseparable dimensions. Disordered consciousness may, then, take one of two main forms, depending upon which existential dimension, the immanent or the transcendent, recedes from experience. In the case wherein intense consciousness of transcendent reality serves to eclipse mundane reality, a condition that Voegelin terms “metastatic faith,” the belief in the imminent arrival of divine presence on earth in such a manner that worldly existence is transfigured prevails. The second possible response to the tension inherent in human existence and the one more problematic in the modern era is the eclipse of the transcendent realm by the illegitimate expansion of immanent to total reality; such, Voegelin maintains,

is the existential response that underlies both the various ideological constructions and other peculiarly “modern” political and social movements.

According to Voegelin, the phenomenon of imbalanced consciousness is intimately bound up with mankind’s spiritual advance from what he terms the “compact” spiritual experience of the ancient cosmological empires to the “differentiated” experiences manifested in classical philosophy and Christianity. The inhabitants of the cosmological empires (e.g., Egypt, Persia, Syria) experienced the Divine Source as an intra-cosmic entity; they dwelled within a divinized “world full of gods.” Their world was experienced as a microcosm that reflected the divine order of the cosmos, an order mediated through the political ruler to the people and the realm. For cosmological man then, the divine and the immanent were inseparable; he had not yet discovered either the soul or the transcendent ground of being, experiences that could dissociate the cosmos and the ground of being into radically immanent and radically transcendent realms. Although there undoubtedly existed tension between the “truth of the soul”³ and the “truth of society”⁴ even in the compact societies, such tension could not become socially disruptive so long as the cosmological order was experienced as all-embracing and so long as the existential reality of the psyche and the transcendent Divine Source remained undifferentiated.

Thus the problem of unbalanced consciousness, “the problem of maintaining a balance between openness to transcendent experience and sober attentiveness to the necessities of mundane existence,”⁵ is bound up with the “theophanic events” wherein the transcendent God revealed himself to man; it first appears on the historical scene with the revelation of the “I Am” to the Hebrews. Indeed, the prophet Isaiah is for Voegelin the prototypical bearer of “metastatic faith,” the “faith that the very structure of pragmatic existence in society and history is soon to undergo a decisive transformation.”⁶ Isaiah, of course, counseled the king to lay down his arms and trust that God would defeat his enemies. Isaiah’s experience of the transcendent God was so intense as to

eclipse the reality of political existence in time; he became convinced that divine intervention would transform the very structure of mundane reality in such a way as to insure the victory of the Chosen People over their worldly enemies. The point is that Isaiah's experience of participation in divine transcendent reality was so strong that he "tried the impossible: to make the 'leap in being' a leap out of existence into a divinely transfigured world beyond the laws of mundane existence."⁷ According to Voegelin, this "prophetic conception of a change in the constitution of being,"⁸ bound up as it with the existential discovery of the "truth of transfigured reality,"⁹ lies at the root of the ideological consciousness which he identifies as one of the main sources of disorder in the modern era.

The classical philosophers also struggled with the problem of existential balance deriving from the discovery of spiritual order. The discoveries they made, of the transcendent nature of the Divine Source (the Platonic *epekeina* or beyond) and of the psyche, the "human spiritual soul" that is the "sensorium of transcendence," were epochal events in mankind's advancement from spiritual dimness to spiritual clarity. For Plato discovered that the openness of the psyche toward divine reality may permit certain transcendent experiences that shape the order of soul and society; he discovered the transcendent ground of being which is the source of personal, social, and historical order. Plato, however, unlike Isaiah, managed to maintain the balance of consciousness in the face of the theophanic event; he did not permit his transcendent experiences to disturb his awareness of the autonomous structure of mundane reality, of the enduring reality of existence in the cosmos of begetting and perishing. Although he glimpsed a realm of enduring perfection, he remained lucidly aware of the "improbability"¹⁰ of its establishment in time as well as of the inevitable decline of such a perfect order if it were somehow to come into being. Platonic philosophy represents for Voegelin a model of "noetic control," of healthy, balanced existence within the enduring tensions of the *metaxy*.

Although the Platonic discovery was an advance from com-

pactness to differentiation, it was, according to Voegelin, but a step on the spiritual path that found its end in the epiphany of Christ. Christianity, for Voegelin, represents the “maximal differentiation” of the relation between God and man; the “leap in being” that accompanied the epiphany of Christ fully differentiated the radically transcendent nature of the Divine Source and the truth of transfigured reality. The effect was not only to heighten the tension of existence in the *metaxy* but potentially to “destabilize” the balance of consciousness. It is perhaps difficult for modern man to re-experience the “shock” felt by those who first experienced the revelation of the transcendent God and the concomitant “withdrawal of Divinity from the world.” The newly de-divinized cosmos must have “seemed to be left an empty shell, void of meaning, [indeed,] void of reality.”¹¹ Moreover, and most importantly, Christianity permanently “reordered human existence in society . . . through the experience of man’s destination, by the grace of the world-transcendent god, towards eternal life in beatific vision.”¹² Such an experience threatened to diminish the value of mundane existence (what is the meaning and significance of that existence in light of man’s ultimate transfiguration in God out of time?). For various reasons then, the Christian revelation would challenge the existential balance of consciousness. Thus it is not surprising that the modern ideological movements, which Voegelin regards as manifestations of existential imbalance and disorientation, should prove to be intimately bound up with the Christian experience.

Gnosticism and Modernity

From the seventh century B.C. onward the ancient Near East was wracked by a series of military conquests that profoundly disoriented the inhabitants of the various cosmological empires. A widespread sense of meaningless and psychic disorientation was engendered by the slaughter, the enslavements, the forced intermingling of peoples and cultures, phenomena which inevitably undermined faith in the traditional cosmological order. Various responses arose in the attempt to comprehend the meaning of

existence within such a troubled world, among the more important of which were stoicism, Christianity, and gnosticism.

To gnostic man, the world appeared neither as the “well-ordered,” the cosmos of the Greeks, nor as the Judeo-Christian world that God created and “found good.” On the gnostic view, by contrast, the world appeared as a “prison from which [man must] escape, . . . as an alien place into which man has strayed and from which he must find his way back home to the other world of his origins.”¹³ The fundamental experience of the ancient gnostics was of an alien, disorganized, chaotic, and meaningless world. They experienced God as an absolutely transcendent entity utterly divorced from mundane existence, the existing world as false, as devoid of reality, as “existent nothingness.” Not surprisingly, the central theme of the diverse gnostic thinkers was the “destruction of [such an abhorrent] old world and the passage to [a] new.”¹⁴ A new world that offers salvation from an old world felt to be wrong in its very constitution could, they taught, be gained through personal effort and a privileged gnosis of the means of escape.

According to Voegelin, the ancient gnostic speculations engendered in response to the disorder of the “ecumenic age” are of significance because the experiences and beliefs they symbolize have re-emerged in modern times with such force as to have decisively shaped the character of that era. The history of “modernity” is for him the history of a struggle between different representations of the truth of existence, represented on the one hand by the truth of the soul and of man’s relationship to God manifested in classical philosophy and Christianity, and on the other by the “new truth” propounded by modern “gnostic”¹⁵ thinkers, the truth of the radical immanence of existence and the promise of a revolutionary transfiguration of man and society in time. Philosophy, we have seen, discovered the truth of transcendent divinity, a truth decisively differentiated by the epiphany of Christ. These events an “uncompromising [and] radical de-divinization of the world”¹⁶ and a concomitant dissociation of previously unified spiritual and temporal power. Henceforth

man's transcendent spiritual destiny was to be existentially represented by the Church, the de-divinized temporal sphere of political power by the Empire, a "double representation of man in society"¹⁷ that endured through the Middle Ages.

Voegelin maintains that this truth of man in society was challenged during the late Middle Ages by the rise of various "gnostic" spiritual movements which would prove to be the seedbeds of modern ideological consciousness and which ultimately effected the "re-divinization" of political society in the name of a new truth of existence. Such movements were an outgrowth of a "fissure"¹⁸ within the early Christian community that stemmed from varying interpretations of the Revelation of St. John. The Revelation had aroused chialistic expectations in certain early Christians, and they impatiently awaited Christ's imminent second coming. Augustine sought to dash such expectations by re-interpreting John: Christ's thousand-year reign on earth, he declared, had already begun with the Incarnation; thus "there would be no divinization of society beyond the pneumatic presence of Christ and his Church."¹⁹ According to the Augustinian philosophy of history, the period following the epiphany of Christ was the last of six historical phases, the *saeculum senescens*, a time of waiting for the end of history to be brought about through eschatological events. Augustine, moreover, had drawn a further distinction between profane and sacred history, which was, in turn, embedded in a transcendental history of the *civitas dei*. Only transcendental history, including the sacred history of the epiphany of Christ and the establishment of the Church, had direction toward eschatological fulfillment. Profane history had no such direction, or indeed, meaning of any sort; it was merely a waiting for the end in a radically "de-divinized" world.

The End of History

The twelfth century was a time of civilizational expansion and growth; population was increasing, trade and settlement expanding, urban culture and intellectual life flourishing. Augustine's notion of a "senile" age was incongruous in the midst of such

expansive vitality. At this critical juncture, a new construction of history emerged to challenge the Augustinian construction. The Calabrian monk Joachim of Flora created a speculative history that satisfied the desire to endow mundane human existence with a meaning which Christianity, and especially the Augustinian conception of history, had denied it; and he did so by relocating the end of transcendental history, the Christian eschaton, the ultimate transfiguration in God out of time within historical existence. Joachim's project, according to Voegelin, was the "first Western attempt at an immanentization of the meaning of history."²⁰ What begins with Joachim is a conception of "Western society as a civilizational course that comes into view as a whole because it is moving intelligibly toward an end."²¹ Thus begins the modern attempt to find a Final End of mundane history that would substitute for the end of history in the transcendent Christian sense.

Joachim modeled his new conception of history on the Trinity; he divided history into three ages, the Age of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Age of the Father spanned the beginning of creation to the time of Christ; the Age of the Son began with Christ and ended in Joachim's time; the Age of the Holy Spirit was about to dawn (Joachim predicted it would begin in 1260) and would last indefinitely. According to Voegelin, Joachim's construction is of significance because the three-age symbolism he created rules not only the modern ideological constructions of history, but the "self-interpretation of modern [Western] society" and thus the structure of its politics to this day.

In Joachitic history, which let immanent history end with the end of sacred history, transfiguration in God was "fallacious, but not un-Christian."²² In the several centuries following Joachim's construction, the new historical expectations he created remained more or less within the Christian orbit; it was thought that an increase of fulfillment in history would come about through a new eruption of transcendent spirit. Over time, however, the process of "fallacious immanentization" begun by Joachim became more and more radical and the relation to transcendence

ever more tenuous. By the eighteenth century, the increase of meaning in history would be conceived as a radically intramundane phenomenon; the transcendent pole that sustains the balance of existential consciousness collapsed. The result, according to Voegelin, is the spiritual and temporal disorder and disorientation of the “modern age.”²³

What unites the various manifestations of this spiritual disorder—positivism, progressivism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, liberalism, fascism, National Socialism—is the radical “will to immanentization,” the closure toward the transcendent dimension of human experience, that underlies their construction. Indeed, the most extreme modern ideologies go a step further; their proponents not only reject the transcendent ground but seek to “abolish the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and to replace it with a world-immanent order of being.” They aim to bring about the transfiguration of human nature through human action in history and to build a terrestrial paradise endowed with the meaning and salvational qualities of the Christian eschaton. In short, the ideological constructions embody, in Voegelin’s famous terminology, a radical and “fallacious immanentization of the Christian eschaton.”²⁴ The Christian conception of man’s ultimate transfiguration in God was brought “down to earth,” transformed into the notion of human transfiguration in time, to be accomplished through strictly human and immanent action; the transcendent Christian end of history was transformed into a mundane “End of History” to be realized in the immanent future. The ideologists carried the process begun by Joachim to its limit; the transcendent dimension of reality was fully absorbed into mundane existence.

Gnostic Experience and Symbolism

As we have said, Voegelin contends that the modern ideological constructions are the productions of “speculative gnostics” who share the basic existential motivations and aims of their ancient forebears. These include:

1. Dissatisfaction with present existence.
2. The belief that this dissatisfaction results from the intrinsically poor organization of the world. If something is not right, the reason is to be found in the evil of the world.
3. The belief that salvation from the wickedness of the world is possible.
4. The belief that the order of being will be changed in a historical solution, that a good world will evolve historically.
5. The belief that a change in the order of being can be realized through human action, that “self-salvation” is possible through man’s own effort.
6. The construction of a “formula” for self- and world-salvation based upon knowledge of how to alter being. The gnostic thinker typically presents himself as a prophet proclaiming knowledge about the salvation of mankind.

The ancient and modern gnostics differ in that the moderns assume an aggressive, activist stance toward the “evil” of existent reality, while the ancients were relatively quietistic. Nevertheless, according to Voegelin, their experiential motivations as well as their aims are of a piece. All gnostics experience the world “as a place of total chaos which would be transformed into a world of perfected, durable order by divine or human intervention.”²⁵ All gnostics aim to alter the constitution of being through human effort in order to escape a world experienced as alien and evil, and they aim to do so through applying their special gnosis to that task. All of them have falsely extrapolated their experience of the “beyond” to the “beginning,” claiming knowledge of the nature and meaning of human existence and of history as a whole that they do not and can not actually possess.

The modern ideological “gnostics” also differ from their

ancient counterparts in that the modern “revolt against reality” is directed against a world shaped by the Christian differentiation of spiritual truth; their constructions must be understood in light of the Christian background against which they rose in rebellion. Indeed, the modern ideologies may be said to “derive” from Christianity in that they represent radically immanentized transformations of Christian experience and symbolism, a derivation evinced in their structural congruence with Christian doctrine.

First, all the modern ideologists adopted and transformed the Christian idea of perfection. For the Christian, life on earth is shaped by the expectation and aim of realizing a “supernatural [fulfillment] through grace in death.”²⁶ The Christian idea of supernatural perfection thus consists of two components: a *teleological* movement toward a final *axiological* goal, the state of ultimate perfection or “highest value.” As we have said, all the ideological movements immanentize the Christian eschaton by aiming to produce a final state of perfection within historical existence, a perfect society that is to be created through implementation of the ideologists’ program or system. The ideological constructions differ, however, according to whether they emphasize either the teleological or axiological element of the Christian conception from which they derive. Accordingly, the various immanentist constructions may be classified into several types:

1. *Teleological immanentization*. When the teleological component of the idea of perfection is immanentized, the main emphasis of the system lies on the forward movement toward the goal of perfection in this world. According to Voegelin, the eighteenth century ideal of “progress” is of this type as is liberal progressivism in general. The emphasis is on movement; typically there is little clarity about the final state to be realized.

2. *Axiological immanentization*. Here the emphasis is placed on the state of perfection in the world. Generally the thinker paints a detailed picture of the proposed perfect society while giving short shrift to the means by which it is to be realized. All

formulations of “ideal societies” fall into this category; Thomas More’s *Utopia* is a classic example.

3. *Activist mysticism* . In this form of immanentization, the teleological and axiological types are combined. Here the thinker typically provides a more or less clear picture of the final state to be achieved as well as “knowledge” of the means by which it is to be brought into existence. Auguste Comte’s final state of industrial society under rule of the managers and positivists is one example; Karl Marx’s communist society to be ushered in by the proletarian revolution is another.

The second set of Christian symbols transformed by the modern ideological speculators derive from the Joachitic conception of history we have previously discussed. Joachim created and bequeathed to modern man a complex of four symbols.²⁷ The first is that of the “Third Realm,” the third “world-historical phase that is at the same time the last, the age of fulfillment.” Such symbolism reappears at a later date as the now familiar distinction between ancient, medieval, and modern historical periods; in the Comtean periodization of history into the theological, metaphysical, and positivist ages of man; in Marx’s division of history into primitive communism, bourgeois class society, and the final realm of the classless Communist paradise; in the “Third Reich” symbolism adopted by the Nazis; and so forth.

The second symbol derived from the Joachitic trinitarian eschatology was the symbol of the leader, the *dux*, who “appears at the beginning of each new era and establishes it through his appearance.” This symbol reemerges in various guises throughout the ensuing centuries: in the belief that St. Francis of Assisi would usher in the new Age of the Holy Spirit; in the paracletes imbued with the spirit of God who led the various sectarian movements of the Renaissance and Reformation; in Machiavelli’s Prince; in the charismatic leaders of the national-socialist and fascist movements.

The third symbol created by Joachim and adopted by the

ideological thinkers was that of the prophet, the precursor of each of the three ages. This symbol was transformed over time from the still-Christian conception of Joachim's era into the secular intellectual who knows the program for salvation from the evils of the world, who can predict the future course of world history, and who knows the meaning of that history (Hegel, Marx, Comte).

The final symbol bequeathed by Joachim to the modern world was that of the "community of spiritually autonomous persons." Joachim believed that the Age of the Holy Spirit would be one wherein highly spiritualized individuals would exist in community without the mediation and support of institutions and organizations. Joachim had the monks in mind. This notion reappears in later times as, for instance, the Marxian and anarchist notion of the withering away of the state and as the radical-democratic conception of a society of autonomous men.

"The substance of history," Voegelin insists, "is to be found on the level of experiences, not on the level of ideas."²⁸ In order to understand the logic of modern political developments and the rise of the ideological mass movements, then, we must examine them in light of the existential consciousness that engendered them, trace them to their source in the experiences and motivations of their founders and followers. More particularly, we must understand them as impelled by an intense "will to immanentization" which is in turn related to a desire to assuage the tensions of existence in the *metaxy* by eliminating one of its sources, man's experience of the transcendent.

We recall that for Voegelin human existence is existence-in-tension within the participatory reality constituted by simultaneous tension toward both mundane existence and its transcendent divine ground. By definition, a healthy or well-ordered consciousness is one that successfully mediates between the existential poles of immanence and transcendence; a disordered consciousness does not so succeed. Because all ideological consciousness entails a rejection of the transcendent dimension of reality, a closure toward the divine ground, it may be regarded as a form of imbalanced or disordered consciousness in the

Voegelinian sense. What accounts for this disturbed relation to reality? Although there is no one “cause,” the following elements enter into Voegelin’s analysis of the existential roots of “pneumopathological,” or spiritually disordered, consciousness.

In all cases of ideological consciousness, the will to power of the thinker “has triumphed over the humility of subordination to the constitution of being.” We recall that the principal aim of the ideological thinkers is to “destroy the order of being, which is experienced as defective and unjust and through man’s creative power to replace it with a perfect and just order.” In order to destroy such a “defective” order, it must be conceived as susceptible of human intervention; it can not be the created order of the Christian God which is, of course, impervious to human manipulation. Because the order of being must be conceived as under man’s control, then, its “givenness . . . must be obliterated.”²⁹ This requires the “retroactive” destruction of the God whose existence would prevent man from fashioning the order of being to his liking.

Consequently, the first and most important task of the ideological thinker is, as Nietzsche succinctly put it, to “murder God.” What underlies the “will to immanentization” and the passion to abolish transcendent reality is an unbounded desire for power over being, the pneumopathological wish and need to *be* God. According to the “logic” of the disordered soul, such a wish can be realized by destroying God, for, magically, he “who murders god will himself become god.” Thus, the “murder of God is of the very essence of the gnostic recreation of the order of being.”³⁰ What, one may ask, engenders such a seemingly insane aspiration? “Beyond the psychology of the will to power we are confronted with the inscrutable fact that grace is granted or denied.”³¹ On Voegelin’s view, our search for an ultimate explanation for the emergence of so many would-be modern gods founders on the ultimate mystery of man’s relation to God.

Existential Resistance

Voegelin wishes to emphasize that the ideological thinkers do not

deny the truth of reality (they may in fact be spiritually sensitive persons with an acute sense of transcendence), they *resist* it. The gnostic resisters who created the ideological systems, like the philosophers and prophets who created the philosophical and Christian symbolism, experience a reality that has eschatological direction, that is moving beyond its present structure. Moreover, they know reality moves not only into an historical future but toward a transcendent Beyond; notions such as “transcendence into the future” clearly point to the distinction they intend to obscure (an existence that “comes to an end in time without coming to [a] final End out-of-time”³²). Why do the resisters resist a truth which with they do not disagree? And what are the experiential sources that have made such resistance a recurring force in history?

The existential resisters are dissatisfied with the lack of order they experience in personal and social existence. Such dissatisfaction is itself understandable, for human existence is afflicted with many miseries—hunger, hard work, disease, early death, injustice—and painfully disoriented by rapid change (such as that engendered by the modern scientific and industrial revolutions). Ideological resisters, like many others, suffer from present disorder, but, more importantly, they suffer from the discrepancy between that disorder and the higher, truer order which they also apprehend yet which seems to lie beyond the possibility of realization. They are “disappointed with the slowness of the [transfiguring] movement in reality toward the order they experience as the true order demanded by the Beyond”; they are morally outraged by the misery entailed by this “slowness.” Such experiences can lead to the conviction that something is “fundamentally wrong with reality itself.” At such a point, the resister to disorder becomes a revolutionary who seeks to overturn the very structure of reality itself. The tension of existence in the *metaxy* dissolves; the “Beyond is no longer experienced as an effective ordering force.”³³ The ideologist constructs a system that will replace the defective force.

There is, however, an even deeper stratum of resistance, one originating from the structure of consciousness itself and espe-

cially from its imaginative capacity. Imagination for Voegelin is the capacity that permits man to symbolize, to articulate and express, his participatory experience within the “*metaxy* of divine-human movements and countermovements,” the capacity that makes him a “creative partner in the movement of reality toward its truth.”³⁴ This creative imaginative force can go awry, however, if the creative *partner* forgets he is a *partner* and begins to regard himself as “the sole creator of truth.” It is such an “imaginative expansion of participatory into sole power”³⁵ that underlies the ideologist’s illusory belief that he can create a new reality through creating a new image. Because of his imaginative capacity, man can confuse his image of reality with reality itself.³⁶

Ideology and the Drive for Certainty

We have seen that the ideological thinker aims to abolish existential reality and the constitution of being in order to deliver man from various perceived evils. But the control of being does not of course actually lie within his grasp; reality is not susceptible of human manipulation. Accordingly, “nonrecognition of reality is the first principle”³⁷ of the ideological constructions. In order to make his pathological constructions seem plausible, the thinker must imaginatively construct what Voegelin, following Robert Musil, calls a “Second Reality,” a transfigured “dream world” that replaces the First Reality he finds so unsatisfactory. The various Second Realities³⁸ resemble the First Reality in many respects (otherwise they would be too patently absurd), yet the ideological constructor necessarily eliminates certain inconvenient features of reality from his model. The ideologists vary in regard to which element of reality they omit; it may be the primary experience of the cosmos (the begetting and perishing of all existent forms), as in all constructions which anticipate the “End of History”; the need for institutional constraints and incentives as in Marx; the *summum bonum* as in Hobbes; the human penchant for possession, as in More’s *Utopia*, and so on. The point is that every ideological thinker constructs an imaginary reality that eliminates essential elements of reality as we know it.

As we said, the construction of ideological systems or programs does not of course permit actual control over being or reality. According to Voegelin, what the ideological constructors gain is the “fantasy satisfaction” of certain psychic needs, more particularly, of the need for “a stronger certainty about the meaning of human existence.”³⁹ Ideologues and their followers are comforted by the sense of increased certainty that accompanies their new-found knowledge, and the pretense of knowing the future course of events provides a firmer, if illusory, basis for action. For Voegelin, then, it is the inherent *uncertainty* of human existence, the tension of existing in a world whose only assurance of meaning and purpose is to be found through faith-engendered experiences, that impels the ideological thinkers into their Second Realities and to the construction of philosophies of history that envision an everlasting realm of bliss in time.

As we suggested earlier, Voegelin maintains that the heightened spiritual tension engendered by the Christian differentiation is bound up with the rise of the modern ideological movements. Christianity, in further differentiating the truth of the soul and clarifying man’s relation to a radically transcendent God, exacerbated the existential uncertainty the ideological constructions serve to assuage.

The Christian faith, as Voegelin understands it, requires great spiritual strength; it provides no assurance of the meaning or value of personal existence other than that gained by faith itself. It does not generate certain knowledge of the nature of being, of God, or of the meaning of mundane events; it reveals, on the contrary, the hard truth that the “order of reality is essentially mysterious.”⁴⁰ A faith whose very “essence is uncertainty,”⁴¹ Voegelin suggests, may generate an intolerable anxiety among those who long for greater assurance. The fact that the Christian differentiation of the truth of the soul is “more accurate” may provide scant consolation to those who crave a more certain guarantee of meaning and purpose.

Voegelin contends that Christianity’s widespread social success brought many people into the Christian orbit who did not

have the spiritual stamina to endure the strains of existence demanded by Christian faith at the same time further differentiation revealed the uncertainty that is its essence. The result was that “great masses of Christianized men who were not strong enough for the heroic adventure of faith became susceptible to ideas that could give them a greater degree of certainty about the meaning of their existence than Christian faith.” Because the reality of being as it is known by Christianity is difficult to bear, he maintains, many persons took flight into alternative spiritual constructs that permitted a seemingly “firmer grip on God”⁴² than that afforded by Christian faith alone.

This was not, Voegelin tells us, an entirely novel historical phenomenon, but one that appeared wherever the truth of the transcendent God had been differentiated; the “temptation to fall from spiritual height that brings uncertainty into final clarity down to a more solid certainty of world-immanent, sensible, fulfillment seems to be a general human problem.”⁴³ The Israelitic differentiation of the transcendent God had engendered a similar response; those who could not endure the demands placed upon the Chosen People fell back upon the still culturally viable polytheism of the surrounding society. In the late Middle Ages, the socially available spiritual alternative to a difficult Christianity was the “living culture” of the various underground gnostic movements, which provided “experiential alternatives sufficiently close to the experience of faith but far enough from it to remedy the uncertainty of strict faith.”⁴⁴

More particularly, the “experiential alternatives” offered by the gnostic spiritual movements (the cradle of the modern ideological movements) consisted of various attempts to “expand the soul to the point where god is drawn into the existence of man,”⁴⁵ of attempts to “divinize [the person who undergoes the experience] by substituting more massive modes of participation in divinity for faith in the Christian sense.”⁴⁶ Such experiences are of three kinds: intellectual, emotional, and volitional. The intellectual variant typically takes the form of a “speculative penetration” of the mystery of creation and existence; the Hegelian system is

a good example. The emotional variant assumes the form of an “indwelling of divine substance in the human soul,” as in the experiences of the paracletic sectarian leaders. The third type, the volitional, manifests itself as an “activist redemption of man and society,” best illustrated by Comte and Marx. According to Voegelin, it is this existential self-divinization that constitutes the “active core” of the immanentist eschatology that has impelled the modern re-divinization of society “from medieval immanentism through humanism, enlightenment, progressivism, liberalism, positivism, and Marxism.”⁴⁷

Marx provides a clear example of the existential dynamics involved in the process of self-divinization/secularization. Marx, following Feuerbach, insisted that God was a “projection” of man’s highest and best qualities into some illusory beyond. Thus man’s task is to draw his projection of God back into himself; in so doing, man becomes conscious that he himself is god; he is transfigured into “superman.” According to Voegelin, however, this Marxian transfiguration represents the extreme form of a “less radical medieval experience, which drew the spirit of God into man, while leaving God himself in his transcendence”; the modern “superman” of Comte, Marx, and Nietzsche is the end of the road to radical secularization marked by such figures as the paracletic sectarian leader, the “godded man” of the English Reformation mystics,⁴⁸ and so on. “Modern secularism should be understood as the radicalization of . . . earlier forms of [medieval and] paracletic immanentism, because the experiential divinization of man is more radical in the secularist case.”⁴⁹ All of this highlights the historical continuity between earlier and later gnostic movements and the experiential dynamics involved in the growth of the gnostic consciousness that has gradually transformed man’s self-understanding over the course of centuries.

We have seen that the ideologists’ aim is to abolish the tensions of historical existence by freezing history into an everlasting final realm on earth. To eliminate such tensions, they must abolish one of its sources, the truth of the open soul in tension toward the divine, as well as its symbolic manifestations, philoso-

phy and Christianity. Thus the marked hostility to both philosophy and Christianity that characterizes the peculiarly “modern” strains of Western civilization. On Voegelin’s view, however, Christianity is not blameless in this regard, for over time it came to embrace an excessive doctrinization and dogmatism which served to eclipse the experiential foundation of Christian truth. The ossification of that truth in formalistic and literalistic theological and metaphysical doctrine caused the Christian symbols to become opaque; the existential truth they were meant to express became increasingly obscure. It was this erosion of the existential meaning behind the Christian symbols which “permitted gnostic symbols of reality to take over the representational function among the nation states of the Western world.”⁵⁰

Indeed, the rise of gnostic consciousness led to a gradual transformation of the meaning of the main symbols by which Western civilization had ordered itself for a millennium. “Man” became merely a world-immanent being who governs the universe through intellect and will, through science and pragmatic action. The highest-order goods in the Western tradition, the life of contemplative reason expressed in philosophy and the life of the spirit symbolized by the Church, were attacked as “false and anachronistic.” Under the influence of the scientific and positivistic “science” that stems from gnostic consciousness, the “real” was contracted to only that which is immanent and “objective”; man’s spiritual needs were no longer regarded as grounded in the truth of being. The resulting experiential impoverishment partially accounts for the mass appeal of the modern “political religions.”

Men can allow the world to so expand that the world and the God behind it disappear. But they cannot thereby solve the problem of their existence, for it endures in every soul. Thus when the God behind the world is unseen, the contents of the world emerge as new gods.⁵¹

The most devastating result of the gnostic victory, however, was the “radical expurgation of a whole range of experiences

previously open to man,” the symbolic experiences of transcendence through which man gains his sense of order, meaning, and immortality. Indeed, the loss of such experiences was both cause and effect of the rise of revolutionary gnostic consciousness. As we have said, the ossification of existential truth into dogma served to eclipse the living truth such dogma was meant to protect; it created an existential void to be filled by the gnostic promise. The radical immanentization that ensued served further to suppress those intimations of order and meaning rooted in participation in the divine ground; indeed, it created a closed world deprived of any relation to transcendent being. The resulting sense of confinement fanned the flames of revolt against the limits of such an existence; it fueled the various revolutionary attempts to realize the “impossible goal of intramundane perfection.”⁵² The nightmare of our century was created by disoriented souls railing against the confines of a closed reality.

As we observed at the outset, the twentieth century has been an era of “unprecedented destructiveness” and remains pervaded by a diffuse sense of unease, dissatisfaction, and even alienation. At the same time, however, it has witnessed significant achievement: the growth in population accompanied by advances in material well-being, longevity, and literacy, much of which is made possible by the remarkable development of science and technology. Our time represents the curious phenomenon of a civilization that is “declining” and “advancing” at the same time.

Voegelin’s analysis of modernity suggests that the simultaneous material growth and spiritual decline of Western civilization is related to the process of radical immanentization or “secularization” we have discussed. “Gnostic speculation overcame the uncertainty of faith by receding from transcendence and endowing man and his intramundane range of action with the meaning of eschatological fulfillment; . . . as this immanentization progressed experientially, civilizational activity became a mystical work of self-salvation.”⁵³ This ‘recession from transcendence’ permitted the release of tremendous spiritual energy for the pursuit of worldly achievement; in building civilization, man was

earning salvation itself. Insofar as civilizational pursuits became a diversion from or substitute for genuine spirituality, however, the true life of the spirit was vitiated. Insofar as intramundane activity “absorbed into itself the eternal destiny of man,” the transcendent experiences which are the source of both personal and social order tended to disappear or become unintelligible. “The price of progress,” Voegelin observes, “is the death of the spirit.”⁵⁴

The absurd and even demonic consequences of the modern drive to immanentization are dramatically illustrated by the example of Auguste Comte, the founder of the “religion of humanity.” Comte was moved to proclaim himself the new Christ, the “world-immanent last judge of mankind, deciding on immortality or annihilation for every human being.”⁵⁵ The memory of those who had made significant intramundane contributions would, he declared, be preserved forever in the annals of mankind; indeed, the especially illustrious would earn a spot on the positivist “calendar of saints.” Those who failed to make an enduring contribution to immanentist human welfare were, on the other hand, to be consigned to social oblivion; their memories would simply be erased from the records of human existence.

Comte’s ideas were taken seriously by many eminent persons, John Stuart Mill among them. How could this be? Voegelin’s answer is that Comtean messianism is not all that far removed from the ethos of secular liberal progressivism and its ideal of ever-advancing immanentist progress. Progressivism, like its ideological brethren, is a manifestation of existential imbalance; it too relegates the transcendent to oblivion. Thus, from the Voegelinian perspective, liberal progressivism appears as far less benign than its proponents believe. Not only does it impoverish human existence by identifying “progress” with material advance, but, in relegating the spiritual life to the private sphere, it created a spiritual vacuum in the “public square” into which the messianic ideologues with their promise of ultimate fulfillment on earth eagerly rushed. The end of a radically immanentist “progressivism” is not, Voegelin warns, the emergence of positivist supermen or a realm of earthly paradise, but the gulag and the concentration

camp. As he starkly put it, the “progressivist symbolism of contributions, commemorations, and oblivion [characteristic not only of Comte but of liberal-progressivism in general] draws the contours of those ‘holes of oblivion’ into which the divine redeemers of the gnostic empires drop their victims with a bullet in the neck.”⁵⁶

Despite all of this, however, there is ground for hope, for human nature does not change. “The closure of the soul in modern gnosticism can repress the truth of the soul,

but it can not remove the soul and its transcendence from the structure of reality.” The flight from reality can not last forever. Moreover, the eschatological interpretation of history results in a false picture of reality (the order of concrete human societies is not in fact an eschaton); and errors with regard to the structure of reality have practical consequences. Surely the recent collapse of the former Soviet Union should give pause to even the most zealous ideologues.

Voegelin’s work constitutes a major contribution to the investigation of personal and social disorder from an ontological perspective; his insights into the respective orders of being and politics remind us that the nature of being cannot be ignored in an examination of political (or indeed any other) phenomena. Although these are thorny and difficult, if not “impenetrable,” matters, the participatory exploration of the nature of reality as practiced by Voegelin is surely the *sine qua non* for the advance of knowledge in this area; surely he is correct to suggest that the path toward personal and social order must begin with the existential recovery of its transcendent source. Voegelin lovingly probed the beyond in search of truth. The tragedy of our time should impel each of us to undertake a similar exploration. For we have learned that existence divorced from the comprehensive reality which sustains and nourishes it is a wasteland indeed.

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NOTES

1. Plato, cited in Eric Voegelin, "Reason: the Classic Experience," in *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Gerhart Niemeyer (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 103.

2. Voegelin, "Reason," 100.

3. That is, universal humanity's existence under God, the discovery that the human psyche immediately participates in the Divine Source of order.

4. The conventional self-interpretation of a society as it regards its existential role as representative of a higher truth.

5. Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 30.

6. *Ibid.*, 32.

7. *Ibid.*, 34.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Thomas J. J. Altizer, "A New History and a New but Ancient God," in *Eric Voegelin's Thought: A Critical Approach*, Ellis Sandoz, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1982), 184.

10. *Ibid.*, 51.

11. William C. Havard, "Voegelin's Diagnosis of the Western Crisis," *Denver Quarterly X* (1975), 129-30.

12. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), 107.

13. Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 19678), 9.

14. *Ibid.*, 10.

15. Voegelin uses the term "gnosticism" in an unconventional and very broad sense. It is his term for certain disorders of the spirit arising from "pneumopathological" or imbalanced consciousness. It is more or less synonymous with other terms Voegelin employs to symbolize the phenomenon of spiritual disorder: "activist dreaming, egophantic revolt, metastatic faith, activist mysticism, demonic mendacity, Prometheanism, parousiasm, political religion, social Satanism, magic pneumatism, and eristics" (Franz, 17).

16. Voegelin, *New Science* , 100.
17. Gregor Sebba, "History, Modernity, and Gnosticism," in Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba, eds., *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness and Politics* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1981), 231.
18. Sebba, 231.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Voegelin, *New Science* , 119.
21. *Ibid.*, 128.
22. Havard, "Diagnosis," 131.
23. Indeed, Voegelin maintains that the symbol of a "modern age" was created precisely to denote the "epoch marked by the decisive victory of the gnostics over the forces of Western tradition in the struggle for existential representation" (*New Science*, 134).
24. Voegelin, *New Science* , 121.
25. William C. Harvard, "Notes on Voegelin's Contributions to Political Theory," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Eric Voegelin's Thought: A Critical Appraisal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1982), 97-98.
26. Voegelin, *New Science* ., 105.
27. *Ibid.*, 111-13.
28. *Ibid.*, 125.
29. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* , 107, 53.
30. *Ibid.*, 55.
31. *Ibid.*, 31.
32. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* , Vol. 5, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 34.
33. *Ibid.*, 36-37.
34. *Ibid.*, 26, 37.
35. *Ibid.*, 38.
36. This "imaginative perversion of participatory imagination into an autonomously creative power has been a constant in history," recognized and expressed in such terms as hybris, pleonexia, *superbia vitae*, *libido dominandi* , will to power, in the romantic notion that "the world, it was not before I created it"

(*Ibid.*) Nevertheless, Voegelin observes, the identification of this perverted imaginative force has not and will not eliminate it from human experience. For such deformation is not a mistake that can be corrected, but a permanent potential in human existence that arises from the paradoxical structure of consciousness-reality and from the “paradoxical play of forces in reality as it moves toward its truth” (*Ibid.*). In other words, the thinker who is engaged in the quest for truth is also a human being who, like his resisting counterpart, is troubled by the forces of self-assertion, while the resisters to the truth of reality are, like the questers, troubled by the awareness of that truth.

Moreover, Voegelin suggests that the deformative potential inherent in the structure of reality and consciousness may be indispensable to the emergence of truth. For the movement toward truth always originates as a resistance to untruth; every thinker who is engaged in the quest for truth resists a received symbolism he considers inadequate to express truly the reality of his own experience.

37. Voegelin, *New Science*, 169.

38. For instance, Marx’s communist paradise; Comte’s positivist industrial society; the thousand-year rule of the Aryan masters, the eternally peaceful order of liberal constitutionalism, and so forth.

39. Voegelin, *New Science*, 107.

40. *Ibid.*, 68.

41. *Ibid.*, 122-23.

42. *Ibid.*, 124.

43. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 114.

44. Voegelin, *New Science*, 124.

45. *Ibid.*, 124.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 126.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Harvard, “Notes,” 98.

51. Eric Voegelin, *Political Religions*, trans. T. J. DiNapoli and

E. S. Easterly III (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986),
50-51.

52. Havard, "Diagnosis," 131.

53. *Ibid.*, 129.

54. *Ibid.*, 131.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*