

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

ERIC-VOEGELIN-ARCHIV
LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT
MÜNCHEN

— VII —

Dante Germino

Eric Voegelin on the
Gnostic Roots of Violence



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Dante Germino,

Eric Voegelin on the Gnostic Roots of Violence

hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz und Dietmar Herz

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This study is dedicated to the memory of Eric Voegelin,
il maestro di color che non sanno.

„Man’s partnership in being is the essence of his existence, and this essence depends on the whole, of which existence is a part. Knowledge of the whole, however, is precluded by the identity of the knower with the partner, and ignorance of the whole precludes essential knowledge of the part“.

Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, I, 2.

Introductory Note

In this study I have sought to accomplish two objectives: (1) to present an account of Voegelin’s understanding of original (i.e. ancient) gnosticism as it developed from *The New Science of Politics* to Volume V of *Order and History*, and (2) to bring out the implications for Voegelin’s teaching on both ancient and modern gnosticism for an understanding of the Cult of (Expressive) Violence in our time. These two themes are interwoven in my text, just as they are in the texts of Voegelin. Although there have been a few learned treatments of Voegelin and Gnosticism — the essay by Gregor Sebba on „History, Modernity, and Gnosticism“ in *The Philosophy of Order*¹ is especially noteworthy —, no one to my knowledge has traced what Voegelin had to say about Gnosticism over time, letting him speak in his own words, and I am glad that in this paper I have been able to accomplish this task.

The discussion of what Voegelin actually said on the second theme — the implications of the Gnostic preintellectual disposition against reality for the emergence of the Cult of Violence — would be brief indeed if we were to rely exclusively on Voegelin’s own words. This is perhaps because his notion of „science“ left little room for the detailed depiction of or even reference to the most monstrous acts of

collective cruelty-driven violence in our time, such as the massacre of the Armenians in the last days of the Ottoman Empire and the Holocaust itself. Let us call this the problem of Voegelin's reticence to write about violence in the concrete. Despite this reticence, Voegelin nonetheless did at times write explicitly about violence, and from the record I believe that we can faithfully extrapolate the implications of his teaching for the subject of expressive violence, and that is the second objective of this paper.

This study grows out of research on political violence I have had the privilege of conducting with Meindert Fennema of the University of Amsterdam, research that is still very much in progress. My study of Voegelin has occupied me for decades, while my reflections on violence are the fruit of only the last two years. My thinking on violence has been more influenced by Fennema, who has his own distinctive (ungnostic) place in political theory, than by Voegelin. Yet it was Fennema who first suggested to me the link between gnosticism and violence, and from there a return to Voegelin, for whom gnosticism had been such a powerful theme, was a logical next step.

In our article on „Violence in Political Theory“², Fennema made the important observation that „political scientists live in an intellectual world where violence lacks the status of a self-standing category“. Indeed, violence has too long been regarded in an exclusively instrumental context, connected with the breakdown of political processes. To paraphrase von Clausewitz, violence is held to be the pursuit of politics by other means. This instrumental view neglects the fact that there is also an expressive dimension to violence — violence viewed as an end in itself. Joy in destruction, pleasure in

cruelty, the conviction that one is most free when one is expressing the need for violence, the kind of violence we see praised in Fascist ideology, may have a genetic bodily foundation, but its roots may well also lie in a certain spiritually distorted way of viewing the world as badly made and in need of destruction. Such a way of looking at the world was first coherently expressed by gnosticism — or gnosis as some prefer to call it.

I must confess that for a long time I was inclined to agree with Jürgen Gebhardt, who told me in our scholarly conversations that Voegelin's view of gnosticism was too compact and insufficiently differentiated, which was the reason that his thesis in the *New Science* to the effect that gnosticism is the essence of modernity was unconvincing. Only gradually did I come to appreciate the fact that gnosticism is not so much a doctrine or even a creed-movement as it is a series of hallucinations, or nightmares, if you prefer. In this series, dramatic transformations take place with regard to what is to be done about man's alienation from and imprisonment in the cosmos. The shift of emphasis from escape from to control over the cosmos — the dominant themes of ancient and modern gnosticism, respectively — could take place in the twinkling of an eye. Indeed, it is now clear to me that Voegelin not only understood that ancient „otherworldly“ gnosticism *could* transmute into modern „innerworldly“ gnosticism, but that he grasped additionally that it *had* to do so. Gnosticism's impatience with reality in the cosmos guaranteed that after the earlier generations had (inevitably) failed to escape from the cosmos, later generations of gnostics would turn toward attempts at transforming it. When the cosmos refused to be magically transformed, then the fault could be said to lie in the failure to use the correct

(revolutionary) key, and so modernity as a series of attempted transformative revolutions from renaissance, to reformation, to enlightenment, to scientism, to counterrevolutionary reactionism, to nationalism, anarchism, communism, fascism, and so on and on took place and is arguably still taking place. It is because he correctly discerned the high-speed futuristic thrust inherent in gnosticism from its beginning that Voegelin was also able correctly to conclude that gnosticism is the essence of modernity.

To return to the problem of violence and political theory, I shall argue that political theorists are in dire need of an approach to violence in all its dimensions. That this approach must also be philosophically alert is clear from one of the few attempts in the recent literature to rectify the instrumentalist fixation. Thus, in his lengthy Introduction to von Clausewitz's 1832 classic *Vom Kriege*³, Anatol Rapaport struggles valiantly to counterpoise to the instrumental approach what he calls „the eschatological philosophy of war“. Aside from his use and abuse of the term philosophy to stand for any (more or less) coherent and (more or less) general standpoint, Rapaport's discussion of the „eschatological“ approach breaks down into incoherence as he chops it up into numerous „variants“, some of which are anything but eschatological. Furthermore, lacking any apparent familiarity with the history of gnosis, he is led to find in „Christianity“ — i.e., in the very „unessential“ and after Augustine heretical „Christianity“ of the book of Revelation — the source of the eschatological „philosophy“ of war and violence.

Some theorists may still think that the term „eschatological“ is preferable to „expressive“ as the antithesis to instrumental violence. For reasons too complicated to go into here — in

part having to do with what from Voegelin we learn has been the misuse of the „eschaton“ in political theory — I decline to go down that road. I would have less objection to the adjective „apocalyptic“, except that I think that „expressive“ has the advantage of including hooliganism and other decidedly unapocalyptic manifestations of deadly violence in not so civil „Civil Society“. Finally, one could follow Hans Jonas and use the term „nihilistic“ to connote both gnostic and existentialist orientations toward the cosmos, and by extension contrast „rational“ or instrumental with „irrational“ or nihilistic violence. Neither the ancient gnostics nor the modern glorifiers of violence are ultimately nihilistic, however, because they experience their ecosystemic rejection as liberating and find life — the new life of uncompromising rejection or cosmic reality — full of meaning. So, following Fennema I say: Yes, the term expressive violence may be unfamiliar, but get used to it, for it is the best we have available. Furthermore, while it may be unfamiliar, it is anything but „vague“ — to anticipate a criticism from those still under the sway of the instrumental view.

Voegelin teaches the importance of avoiding anachronism in political interpretation. That is why searching for the historical roots of a contemporary complex of ideas, experience, and behaviors is so crucial to political theory. We are not permitted to ignore those roots: on the contrary, we must dig around for them and expose them to light. It is important to know, for example, that optimism and pessimism are neologisms, historically speaking; the same with racism. Thus, it is improper to describe the Greek tragedians as pessimists as Nietzsche does, because there were no pessimists before Schopenhauer. Likewise, it is improper to call Plato a racist, as Popper does, because, among many other reasons, racism as

an ideology did not exist until the 19th century, as Voegelin demonstrated in two books. With regard to the Cult of Violence, on the other hand, its roots lie deep in the soil of the past. It is a form of reverse anachronism to regard this Cult as of only recent origin; on the contrary the way for it was prepared by the complex ancient-plus-modern gnosticism. The pre-intellectual disposition to look at reality as something deserving to be destroyed *in toto* originates in ancient gnosticism. The enduring significance of Eric Voegelin's discovery of the current political relevance of the gnostic complex of ideas and experiences present in history must be preserved for science.

So fearfully complex is the subject of political violence that it is no wonder political theorists have tended to reduce it to manageable (instrumental) proportions and then shove it off into another discipline, such as military science or the behavioral sciences interested in the control of riots. To expose the twisted face of expressive violence is an undertaking that runs its own risks: political theory cannot be reduced to a moralistic set of preachments. Expressive violence — violence for its own sake and for the hard cruel joy that comes from destroying lives and what they have built — is evil, but it is also human. As Gramsci wrote of the Mafia, violence expresses the needs of a personality type, albeit one of a low level. The mystery of evil hangs over all reflections on human existence. Political theory cannot preach pacifism as an alternative to what Fennema and I in our article on Antonio Gramsci⁴ have called „the culture of violence“, and this means that some hard residue of cruelty remains embedded in institutions of political and social existence.

There is no way to exorcise expressive violence in its entirety from the use of instrumental violence. The airman who releases the bombs on his distant targets in war self-confessedly gets a rush of satisfaction from contemplating the destruction he has conveyed with pinpoint accuracy. Nor can we *carte blanche* condemn from the earthly perspective of collectivities organized for power the unleashing of deadly violence. Individuals may sacrifice themselves and chose martyrdom, but representatives of political collectivities cannot responsibly do so, as Max Weber showed in his distinction between the ethics of intention and the ethics of responsibility and as Reinhold Niebuhr demonstrated in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.⁵

So, violence, including some measure of expressive violence, is part of the human condition. That scarcely makes violence good, and it is a qualitative leap from such an admission of the role of violence in human affairs and in the recesses of our personalities to what I call in this paper the Cult of Violence. The notion that the enemy must not merely be defeated but must be annihilated is very much akin to the gnostic idea that the cosmos is wretchedly made and must either be remade, abandoned, or destroyed.

Eric Voegelin has been well described by both Jürgen Gebhardt and Ellis Sandoz as a „spiritual realist“. That is to say, the life of the spirit must be lived in what Plato called the *metaxy* — between good and evil, life and death, the Beginning and the Beyond. This „process of reality“ by no means conforms to our every wish, and may entail brutal suffering and the sacrifice of innocents. The temptation to replace reality is strong, but we have no alternative but to resist the temptation and to seek understanding, not in the vain

attempt to acquire gnostic omniscience but by wrestling with our ignorance.

One of the most significant negative results of the powerful presence of the gnostic virus in the spiritual bloodstream of the West was identified in a lecture by Voegelin in German in 1959, and that is the near destruction of philosophy (understood in the Platonic sense) by gnosis in the contemporary world. Philosophy has as one of its roles the protection of the sense of balance in the *metaxy*, or Between, of human life. Here are Voegelin's own words about the situation in 1959, which, *mutatis mutandis*, remains pretty much the situation today, at least in the Universities:

„Doch auch die Philosophie befindet sich in sehr bösem Zustande; sie ist heute nicht mehr rational, sondern ein sehr großer Prozentsatz dessen, was heute unter Philosophie geht, ist Gnosis, ist ideologische Massenbewegung der einen oder anderen Sorte, ist Positivismus, ist gnostischer Hegelianismus oder dergleichen mehr. Es ist nicht Philosophie im rationalen Sinne, in dem die Autonomie der Vernunft zur Sprache käme.“⁶

So, while the gnostic hatred of the cosmos links gnosticism to the cult of expressive violence in the positive sense of its being a catalyst for the glorification of violence, the gnostic destruction of philosophy links it in a negative fashion: i.e., gnosticism is a presence serving to weaken or destroy the forces of intellectual and spiritual resistance to such a glorification.

There are those like Hannah Arendt who wish neatly to separate „power“ or „force“ from violence, but I am not one of them. Lord Acton correctly saw that power tends to corrupt, and „legitimate“ force can be used — and often is — cruelly and violently. What we can and must fight against is surplus

violence, to borrow a concept from Herbert Marcuse, who wrote of „surplus repression“. Violence declared to be an end in itself, violence declared to be sacred, destruction held to be the highest form of liberty, violence magnified and collectivized, turned into an ideology, violence that has come full circle and is cold and calculating rather than the result of the heat of passion, violence with deep intellectual roots anchored in the hatred of the cosmos, hatred of the body, hatred of sensuality, hatred of sexuality — this violence is what is really *de trop*.

One of the numerous advantages of using Voegelin's analysis of gnosticism to understand political reality is that it can help to correct the bias of what in the last decade has come to be called the „Politically Correct“ attitude, which concentrates almost exclusively on right-wing extremist movements as the harbinger of expressive violence. This bias, predominant in Western social science, was anticipated in the so-called „authoritarian personality“ studies of Adorno, including the famous F (for Fascism) and E (for Ethnocentrism) scale tests. Authority is an inescapable fact of political existence, and to imply that anyone who respects authority is prone to violence against the weak and dispossessed is the mark not of science but of egalitarian leftwing prejudice. Nonetheless, Voegelin probably — even undoubtedly — went too far at times in correcting the equivalent of Political Correctness, to the point that he left himself vulnerable to rather silly objections such as that of his former teacher Hans Kelsen that his „new science“ of politics was not science at all but an expression of a preference for the right (Republican) wing of American politics. (Voegelin's answer to Kelsen, had he chosen to give one, would presumably have been the same as his response to George Nash, who had requested a photograph of him to

include in Nash's book on American conservative thought: „Just because I am not stupid enough to be a liberal does not mean that I am stupid enough to be a conservative“. No photograph was sent. On another occasion Voegelin exploded with indignation against the misuse of his work by arch-Conservative Senator and former political theory professor John East, telling East that he had not „spent his life [...] in an effort to amuse and comfort American Conservatives“, and declaring that „*the actual content and purpose of my work [...] has nothing to do with Conservative predelictions*“.⁷

One of Voegelin's proclivities is sometimes to talk about a term or author negatively in one context and affirmatively in another. Take liberalism, for example. In the *New Science* liberalism is condemned as gnostic, but in 1960 he published an article on „Der Liberalismus und seine Geschichte“⁸ in which he praised liberalism's institutional achievements — liberalism here understood as a broad movement underlying representative democracy. Voegelin's tendency to shoot from the hip at times about liberalism and Yalta, where even Churchill is branded a gnostic politician for example, should not be allowed to obscure his lasting contribution to exposing magic pneumatism in both its Left (egalitarian) and Right (hierarchical) formulations. Gnosticism is quite simply the disposition to pick up one's marbles and go home if reality doesn't conform to one's wishes, substituting a Second Reality or dreamworld construction for the reality of existence in the *metaxy*. Expressive violence is not the automatic result of such a metaphysical operation, but it sows the seeds for the view that reality needs some radical surgery — not the surgery of Eliot's Wounded Surgeon in „East Coker“ but of the torturer's wheel and the concentration camp, whether in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's USSR or Pol Pot's Cambodia.

With regard to the latter, here is a description of the forced evacuation of Pnomh Penh in April, 1975:

„Those who were in hospitals, who couldn't walk, were just chucked out of the window, no matter which story they were on. Survival of the fittest. Then the mass murder began. Eyewitnesses said that everyone who had any kind of education was killed. Any artist, any civil servant, was butchered. Anyone wearing glasses was killed...Little kids were doing the killing, ten-year-olds, fifteen-year-olds. There was very little ammunition left, so they were beating people over the head with axe handles or hoses or whatever they could get hold of. Some of the skulls were too tough for ticks and clubs, and because the kids were weak from eating only bark, bugs, leaves, and lizards, they often didn't have the strength to kill. So to make it more fun they were taking bets on how many whacks it would take to cave in a head. Some eyewitnesses said the kids were laughing with a demented glee. And if you pleaded for mercy they laughed harder. If you were a woman pleading for mercy, they laughed even harder. [...] It was a kind of hell on earth.“⁹

All of the above has a lot to do with the gnostic lust for world destruction and little to do with Marxism — the Marxism of Marx, about which Pol Pot and his followers can scarcely be said to be well informed. I think that Voegelin was mistaken, therefore, when he pronounced Marx to have been a gnostic. While one can certainly say that there are *gnostic elements* present in Marx, just because there are gnostic elements in a thinker it does not follow that the author was *per se* gnostic, as Voegelin himself acknowledged (in the Introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*) with regard to the author of the Gospel of John. Marxist materialism and gnosticism go ill together, and the fact that a self-confessed Marxist like Antonio Gramsci could write so soberly and realistically about violence makes me dissent from Voegelin's overall judgment about Marxism as either gnostic or as a mass movement. Marxism is a

political perspective limited to intellectuals of varying degrees of philosophical sophistication. Far from hating the body, Marx, and especially the young Marx, extolled its sensuous possibilities. Also, as Fennema and I demonstrate in the article on „Violence in Political Theory“, Marx did not glorify violence but viewed it instrumentally in terms of whether it promoted or hastened the Revolution. The class struggle might well take nonviolent forms in England and the Netherlands, for example. Violence in *Das Kapital* might be the „midwife of history“, but a midwife is instrumental to a birth and not praiseworthy as an engine of death.

In the pages that follow, I seek to recover from Voegelin’s disparate works the complexities of his understanding of gnosticism as well as to demonstrate the implications of that understanding for revealing the intellectual and spiritual catalyst of expressive violence. Specialists in gnosticism may attempt to dispute Voegelin’s interpretation, but they cannot legitimately continue largely to ignore it or dismiss it out of hand. As I hope to have succeeded in showing in the ensuing pages, Voegelin was very well abreast of scholarship on ancient gnosticism. One is tempted to say that if one prefers to use another term than gnosticism, Voegelin’s own formulation of gnosticism as a form of „magic pneumatism“ would do very well as a substitute. However, as Voegelin always correctly insisted, theory is bound by history, and history has given us a phenomenon originally called gnosticism. In my judgment, he succeeds in showing that the experiential core of ancient gnosticism is preserved in modern movements of magic pneumatism and that as political theorists we are justified in speaking of two variants of gnosticism, ancient and modern.

One problem that presents itself both in Voegelin and in the title of this study may be formulated by the following question: „How does one prove that a complex of experiences and ideas such as gnosticism is an indispensable source of totalitarianism and the Cult of Violence?“ Here Aristotle is relevant: one cannot demand greater precision than the subject-matter affords. Ideas have to be mobilized and translated into action, and it must be admitted that Voegelin did not devote much detailed attention to this problem so far as gnosticism is concerned. Certain key figures such as Joachim of Fiore and the radical Puritans are named as key transmission belts. This is a field of research for someone who takes his teaching seriously to fill in the gaps. Voegelin never claimed to have done everything.

On the other hand, one must avoid the danger of being led into the trap of modern inductivism. Writing history, Ranke-like, „*wie sie eigentlich gewesen ist*“ is not exactly appropriate to anyone who has learned anything at all from Voegelin. Voegelin of course saw history as a trail of symbols — one could say symbolic forms if this term is divested of its Cassirer-like Kantian connotations — and gnosticism was one of the great symbolic forms blocking the road leading from compactness to differentiation. Gregor Sebba caught the spirit of the Voegelinian enterprise when he referred to ancient Gnosticism as dissolving „into a weblike network of processes spanning [the] millennia“. Gnosticism, Sebba suggests, is „flexible, adaptable, and capable of producing variant after variant to bewilder the eye“. ¹⁰

Sebba suggests on the same page that to understand gnosticism and its mutations from ancient to modern one must first ask the Voegelinian question „Why are there gnostics at all?“ This

is a Voegelinian question because it invites the interpreter to penetrate below the surface of ideas and propositions to the experiences engendering those ideas. These experiences have to do with estrangement and alienation from the cosmos, and explain what Hans Jonas perceived to be the „felt affinity“ between modern existentialism and gnosticism. Indeed, in his remarkable Epilogue entitled „Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism“ published in 1963, Jonas shows how gnosticism had „degraded“ the world to „a power system that can only be overcome through power“. ¹¹ Gnosticism awaits the destructive violence of the Saviour who will „break into the closed system“ of the cosmos to which its adherents are trapped, revealing the „magical weapon“ of knowledge (gnosis) that „opens to the soul a path through the impeding orders“. ¹²

Unless one holds that ideas are unimportant in helping existential experiences to take wing, it is impossible to deny that ideas are sources of political action, both in its healthy and deformed manifestations. I do not claim in the confines of even a rather lengthy article to show in detail how gnosticism is the catalyst for totalitarian expressive violence and „ethnic cleansing“, but I have no doubt that it can be done, albeit not in conformity with neopositivistic tests for confirmation. So much the worse for the tests; there would be no philosophy at all if behavioralism called the tune on confirmation.

One of a number of secondary issues on which I disagree with Voegelin has to do with his condemnation of liberalism — sometimes denominated as „progressivism“ — as a gnostic mass movement. Liberalism, I would say, is too dull to be gnostic, and far from hating the body, liberalism is sedulous about its preservation and adornment with consumer goods. Furthermore, liberalism is the main source of the exclusively

instrumental view of violence and its greatest thinker, Hobbes, organized his whole system around preventing the „war of all against all“ — i.e., the culture of violence. (Of course, as with Marxism, one can detect gnostic elements in liberalism and specifically in Hobbes.) If gnosticism be the catalyst of expressive violence, liberalism cannot be gnostic because it hasn't a clue about the expressive dimension of political reality. However, liberalism bears considerable responsibility for helping to provoke gnostic movements because of its fixation on the instrumental and its neglect of the expressive dimension of human life.

What Voegelin gave away with one hand he sometimes took back with the other. For example, he was emphatic in his lectures I heard him deliver in Munich on the necessity for a (liberal) welfare state in contemporary industrial society. There are mistakes of judgment in Voegelin, but there is no Achilles heel. It will not do to for a Kelsen to dismiss his teaching on the basis of what Voegelin appropriately called „positionism“ — i.e., the assumption that if a serious thinker is suspected of occupying some „unacceptable“ place on the left-right continuum of practical political ideas then his teaching should be rejected *in toto*. But I have already said enough about Political Correctness, that monument to contemporary intellectual sloth. Voegelin does not have to be made relevant to the tragedy of political existence in our century. He himself accomplished that. But he was powerfully relevant to the problem of the glorification of expressive violence in a way that requires some digging to demonstrate. Enough said. Let us get on with our work in this study, which I dedicate to his memory.

Part I

Voegelin links Gnosticism to Political Theory

When *The New Science of Politics* burst upon the scene, nothing perplexed its detractors more than Voegelin's thesis that gnosticism was the essence of modernity. Voegelin's allegedly „obscure“ language — of which the phrase „immanentization of the eschaton“ is perhaps the classic example — was condemned by some reviewers, including one of the leaders of Establishment-style political theory, Robert Dahl, who opined that *The New Science* „is written in an awkward polysyllabic language only distantly related to English“. ¹³ Even some reviewers disposed to be sympathetic, such as T.I. Cook, complained of Voegelin's „strained and peculiar terminology“ and his „strange language, obscure erudition, and paradox“. ¹⁴ Robert Ammerman of Wisconsin wrote that „it is hard to forgive“ Voegelin for his „lack of concern for terminological precision and clarity“. ¹⁵

American provincialism aside — for how might the above gentlemen have sounded in German or another second language — my guess is that most of what was „obscure“ to his reviewers was the result of the darkness of their ignorance about the intellectual traditions discussed by Voegelin, among which gnosticism stands as the principal culprit. In 1952, no one to my knowledge in political theory in the U.S. — and perhaps not only in the U.S. — had ever uttered the word „gnosticism“, for the simple reason that they had never heard of it. The thought that knowledge about gnosticism was essential to a science of politics was enough to send many of the *cognoscenti* sputtering about the „obscure“ language of its author.

It must be noted that Voegelin never published the kind of thorough, scholarly account of the origins of gnosticism that he provided of philosophy and revelation, for example. (The closest he came to providing such an account was in 1974 in *The Ecumenic Age*, about which more later). That he was fully knowledgeable of the literature on early gnosticism is abundantly clear, however, both from the extensive scholarly literature he cited, for example, in the Introduction to *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, and in his personal contacts with prominent scholars of gnosticism. (I recall his telling me of extensive conversations in Paris with the Dean of scholars of gnosticism, C.H. Puech, who, to Voegelin's question „Are today's ideological movements gnostic in character?“, answered emphatically „But of course!“ — This conversation took place before Voegelin wrote the Walgreen Lectures entitled „Truth and Representation“, published in 1952 under the title with which we are all familiar.)

As many people who knew him better than I will affirm, Eric Voegelin never liked to write about anything until he had thoroughly researched it. The field was moving at such a rapid rate with new archaeological and textual discoveries in a variety of languages, including Coptic, in which I feel confident that not even Voegelin had a working knowledge, being made, that he presumably did not feel ready to write a major monograph himself. Besides, he must have reasoned, many monographs by specialists such as Puech and Gilles Quispel existed, and the conscientious reader of the *New Science of Politics* who wanted to know about the origins of gnosticism could simply do his or her homework.

Inevitably, these assumptions produced some negative responses, both from specialists in gnosticism who admired

the movement and of course from the majority of political scientists who, if they had heard of gnosticism at all, thought of it as some esoteric „religion“ which had no relevance for „politics“, as if reality were a copy of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. While most of the specialists ignored Voegelin — anyone who generalized about gnosticism was suspect to many of them — Carsten Colpe took time out to accuse both Voegelin and the natural scientist Ernst Topitsch of „inflicting violence upon the notion of Gnosis“.¹⁶

What was gnosticism? And was it the same thing as „gnosis?“ Puech himself perhaps gave the most succinct formulation of gnosis, deliberately choosing the latter term in order to avoid describing it as an „ism“. To Puech, gnosis is „an experience or a theory which has reference to some definite interior mental happening [...] which is inalienable and leads to an illumination which is regeneration and divinization [...]“.¹⁷ It is not my purpose here to go into the controversy among scholars ranging from Hans Jonas to Elaine Pargels to Gilles Quispel over how to characterize early gnosticism. Obviously, the way one answers the question „Is the Voegelinian interpretation of gnosticism as the essence of modernity sound?“ will have something to do with how one characterizes gnosticism in the first place. However, I wager that no one will contest Puech’s minimal definition of gnosis provided above, and it is quite possible to extrapolate Voegelin’s understanding of original gnosticism from that definition, for it contains the elements of self-divinization, inalienability, and illumination.

Voegelin himself did manage to say quite a bit about early gnosticism in the Introduction to *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Hereinafter *SPG*).¹⁸ One is at first inclined to be disappointed by the relative brevity of his remarks, until one

remembers that he was a master of the art of condensation. Quoting from Voegelin's *Autobiographical Reflections* of 1973, we find in Sandoz' Introduction the following comments by Voegelin:

„Since my first application of Gnosticism to modern phenomena [...], I have had to revise my position. *The application of the category of Gnosticism to modern ideologies, of course, stands.* In a more complete analysis, however, there are other factors to be considered in addition. One of these factors is the metastatic apocalypse deriving directly from the Israelite prophets, via Paul, and forming a permanent strand in Christian sectarian movements right up to the Renaissance [...] I found, furthermore, that neither the apocalyptic nor the gnostic strand completely accounts for the process of immanentization. This factor has independent origins in the revival of neo-Platonism in Florence in the late fifteenth century.“¹⁹

Another comment occurred in a 1976 conversation with R. Eric O'Connor in which Voegelin replied to a question as follows:

„I paid perhaps undue attention to gnosticism in the first book I published in English. [...] I happened to run into the problem of gnosticism in my reading of Balthasar. But in the meanwhile we have found that the apocalyptic tradition is of equal importance, and the Neo-Platonic tradition, and hermeticism, and magic, and so on. [Still] you will find that the gnostic mysticism of Ficino is a constant ever since the end of the fifteenth century, going on to the ideologies of the nineteenth century. So there are five or six such items — not only gnosticism — with which we have to deal.“²⁰

I shall hazard the thesis that without Voegelin's confessed overemphasis on gnosticism in the *New Science of Politics* (hereinafter *NSP*)²¹ we should not today be in a position to recognize gnosticism as the catalyst for what I shall call the cult of violence in a host of modern writers and movements,

including of course Italian Fascism and Nazism. Perhaps Nietzsche was correct to assert that „truth inheres in the exaggerations“. As a result, I note with some regret Voegelin’s softening of his position in this one off the cuff comment, for to say that gnosticism was only one of five or six factors giving birth to modern extremism muddies the waters considerably. We have no way of knowing how to weigh gnosticism’s influence, vis à vis the other items mentioned. However, let us bear in mind that Voegelin’s qualifications have to do with the „Immanentization of the Eschaton“ thesis, and not with expressive violence, which is my theme.

Now, objections may legitimately be raised to my method of extrapolating from Voegelin’s original exclusive emphasis on gnosticism to apply it to a theme he rarely explicitly discussed, at least not in his major theoretical works. There is a noteworthy distance in Voegelin regarding expressive violence: to my knowledge he nowhere in his published writings specifically describes the acts of unspeakable cruelty against the Jews by the Nazis — nowhere perhaps but in the preface to his book on *Die Politische Religionen*²², suppressed by the Nazis and published in Sweden, where he appears to justify the killing of the German ambassador to Paris by a Jew, which the Nazis used as a pretext to set off the horrors of *Kristallnacht*. Presumably, Voegelin’s rather Weberian notion of science kept him from recording his reactions. Those who heard his lectures in Munich, especially in the course on „Hitler und die Deutschen“, will know better than I the extent to which he did depict the cruelty of expressive violence, which manifests joy in beating, kicking, torturing, and killing innocent men, women, and children. My answer to reservations about my method here of extrapolating from Voegelin to show his implicit teaching about gnosticism’s

relationship to such expressive violence — fanatical violence for its own sake rather than for a limited military objective — is that Voegelin's work is there to be used by everyone, and especially by those of us who, in our limited ways, seek to carry on his legacy. Furthermore, there is at least one passage, cited below, in which Voegelin does make such an explicit link. There are also references to cruelty-related expressive violence in the chapter on the „The Gnostic Revolution: The Puritan Case“ in *NSP*. Finally, one could cite the two chapters on Bakunin's „lust for destruction“ in Voegelin's *From Enlightenment to Revolution*.²³

Definitions of Gnosticism

Before proceeding, I want to consider some definitions of gnosticism available in the now immense literature on the subject, with a view to seeing if they can both help flesh out Voegelin's own rather hesitant attempts in this direction (in part because he had an aversion to definitions in scientific analysis in any case) and also verify the essential soundness of his interpretation. This is for the obvious reason that if we are talking about the influence of gnosticism we need to be as precise as possible about what gnosticism was in the first place. There are, of course, those of the postmodernist persuasion who think that gnosticism is nothing but the construct of modern scholars. Since we are not here to discuss nonsense, I shall pass over this „constructivist“ view of „truth“, which may itself have an aroma of gnosticism about it.

Everett Ferguson, for example, provided a crisp and clear definition of gnosticism as having the following six traits:

- (a) Preoccupation with the problem of evil, the source of which is in the material world.
- (b) A sense of alienation from the world.
- (c) Desire for special and intimate knowledge of the secrets of the universe.
- (d) Dualism: there are two contending forces in the cosmos, one evil, represented by the Demiurge, and the other good, whose source is the hidden God.
- (e) Cosmology: Pleroma (the divine world of spirits) uses Archons as intermediaries who rule the world by fate.
- (f) Anthropology: elitist, the divine spark being in only a select few. „Human beings fall into different classes according to their nature, which is fixed and cannot be changed“. There are three classes: the pneumatics, the psychics, and the hylic class. The psychics have the potential to be redeemed by the pneumatic leadership, but the hylics are hopelessly lost and belong to the material world.

From a Voegelinian perspective, the problem with Ferguson's otherwise excellent definition of gnosticism is that it is too neat and precise. To use a phrase from T.S. Eliot, it implies that the „mess of imprecision and feeling“ known as gnosticism could be characterized in a laundry list of propositions. So we begin to see why Voegelin never produced a comparable list of traits defining ancient gnosticism.

In an essay entitled „Ersatzreligion“²⁴ — which has the subtitle „The Gnostic Mass Movements of our Time“ —, Voegelin tried his hand at his own substitute for a definition, or I should say his own summary of „the six characteristics that taken together reveal the nature of the gnostic attitude“. It is worth looking at these items:

- (1) „The gnostic is dissatisfied with his situation“.
- (2) The reason for this dissatisfaction is the gnostic's conclusion „that the world is intrinsically poorly organized“.
- (3) The gnostic believes that „salvation from the world is possible“.

- (4) „From this follows the belief that the order of being will have to be changed in an historical process“.
- (5) „A change in the order of being lies in the realm of human action“.
- (6) The gnostic is ready to provide „a formula for self and world salvation“ and „to come forward as a prophet who will proclaim his knowledge about the salvation of mankind“.²⁵

Close inspection of this section of Voegelin's essay will show that the six features above were not put forward as a definition of gnosticism, but rather as a description of „the attitude“ found in modern „gnostic“ mass movements, including „progressivism, positivism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, communism, fascism, and national socialism“ (*NSP*, 57). However, this procedure is confusing, because in the essay Voegelin does not discuss what gnosticism was initially and why, despite profound differences in the content of the symbolism, there is an experiential continuity between ancient gnosticism and certain kinds of modern mass movements and schools of thought that is so profound as to make those differences secondary, to the point that we can speak of two types of gnosticism, one ancient and the other modern and contemporary. It was not until six years later and the publication of *The Ecumenic Age* that this defect was remedied.

Furthermore, the designation of psychoanalysis, positivism, and Marxism as „mass movements“ is doubtful. Whether „progressivism“ is a mass movement cannot easily be determined because of the vagueness of the term. If he is using it as equivalent to liberalism, of either the upper- or lower-case variety, I have already expressed my disagreement in the Introductory Note. No doubt liberalism was in part a mass movement, but not all mass movements are gnostic. To my knowledge, Voegelin does not refer again to this essay, and it

is perhaps just as well, because it does not rank among his better literary and scholarly productions. Even Homer nods on occasion.

In the „Introduction“ to *SPG*, Voegelin cites with favor the renowned Dutch scholar, Gilles Quispel on early gnosticism. Quispel, whose little book *Gnosis als Weltreligion*²⁶ is praised by Voegelin²⁷, does seem to have originally been sensitive to the destructive potential of gnosticism. However, Quispel subsequently became a defender of gnosticism, and in the Introduction to the mammoth collection of essays published in Dutch in 1992 and edited by him, wrote the following:

„Recently Umberto Eco has issued a noteworthy condemnation of Gnosis: it is a conspiracy formed with the purpose of destroying the world. Against such a value judgment we oppose our strenuous objection: Manicheanism was the most persecuted of all religions, and the gnostic Cathars lived according to the Sermon on the Mount; a Cathar never killed a single Catholic. And Hermetic [Alchemic] Gnosis preached tolerance“.²⁸

It is not clear that Quispel has refuted Eco’s description of Gnosticism by producing this curious list. One could cite the peace-loving propaganda of Stalinism, for example, but what would it prove? The simple question is: did the gnostics hate the world and want it destroyed as a force over them? The answer as Quispel himself must well have known is in the affirmative.

Hans Jonas has correctly emphasized the violence implicit in the gnostic-existentialist symbolism of *Geworfenheit*, to use its Heideggerian formulation. Here is what he says:

„The term [...] is originally gnostic. In Mandaean literature it is a standing phrase: life has been thrown into the world, light into darkness, the soul into the body. *It expresses the original*

*violence done to me in making me be where I am and what I am, the passivity of my choiceless emergence into an existing world which I did not make and whose law is not mine.*²⁹

As we shall see in the section on Voegelin vs. Sartre, the modern gnostic shares with his ancient precursor a perception of the world as „universe of violence“. The argument of apologists for gnosticism that having all this anti-Cosmic hatred floating around in the intellectual atmosphere has nothing to do with the emergence of the Cult of (Political) Violence simply lacks credibility.

A recent book by Nathaniel Deutsch gives the most helpful summary currently available of the recent and current scholarly debate over the meaning of gnosticism and of its related term gnosis. At the International Colloquium held at Messina on the Origins of Gnosticism, whose conclusions were published in 1967, the final document distinguished Gnosticism, defined as „a certain group of systems of the Second Century A.D. which everyone agrees are [sic] to be designated with this term“ from Gnosis, or „knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite“.³⁰ Perhaps the scholars were under the spell of nearby Mt. Aetna when with all their labours they brought forth this mouse of a conclusion. What was the difference between Gnosis and Gnosticism to the Messina Colloquium? One scholar, {Robert McL. Wilson}, put it this way: „This Gnosis, then, is not yet Gnosticism in the strict sense; rather, it is a prior stage of development“ and „not *only* a prior stage but also wider and more comprehensive than Gnosticism proper“.³¹ How something can „develop“ out of something that is „both prior and wider and more comprehensive“ is not immediately clear, for the term „development“ itself implies growing complexity rather than a narrowing and simplification.

Ioan Couliano is one of the more prominent of the gnostic scholars — meaning scholars of gnosticism — who offered a much more helpful definition of gnosticism than did the Messina Colloquium. By „gnostics“, he wrote, he meant a group „with two shared biases — against the principle of ecosystemic intelligence and against the anthropic principle of the fitness of the world to human being“. By ecosystemic intelligence Couliano means that „this universe is created by a good and highly intelligent cause and is basically good“, while by the „anthropic principle“ he means „the affirmation of the commensurability and mutual link between human beings and the universe“.³² Whereas Platonism, Judaism, and Christianity are essentially pro-cosmic, Gnosticism is anti-cosmic. This definition is in harmony with that of the convener of the Messina Conference, Ugo Bianchi, for whom Gnosticism is basically dualistic. Gnostic dualism implies an „an anti-cosmic enmity against the material world and its creator demiurge“.³³

Anti-materialism, then, is one of the bedrock gnostic principles, and is an obvious but neglected link between gnosticism and Fascist ideology. A more complicated link is that between the gnostic hatred of the human body and the Fascist cult of violence. „Although some Gnostics questioned the absolute degeneracy of the material corpus, many asserted it violently“, Nathaniel Deutsch has observed.³⁴ At the same time, there is a gnostic „perception of the human body as the fateful intersection of divine image with defiled matter“.³⁵ The Gnostic had an obsession with acquiring a new, pneumatic body purified of the „decadence“ of the actual human body, and this obsession became the basis of the Fascist-Nazi exaltation of the heroic body of the warrior, hardened like steel, primed for combat. There is also a phallocratic strand in some variants of gnosticism which conceives of the cosmos as

something to be raped.³⁶ The centrality of cosmic rejection to any understanding of original Gnosticism was underlined by Hans Jonas in 1966 in his critique of the work of Gershom Scholem: „A Gnosticism without a fallen god, without the benighted creator and sinister creation, without alien soul, cosmic captivity, and acosmic salvation, without the self-redeeming of the Deity — in short a Gnosis without divine tragedy will not meet specifications...“.³⁷

Return to Voegelin

The purpose of the foregoing excursus into definitions is to show that Voegelin’s characterizations of ancient gnosticism were fully in line with the most recent research. Critics such as Colpe who claimed that Voegelin (and now he would have to add Umberto Eco) „did violence“ to gnosticism do not have a case.

It is ironic that Voegelin should be accused of violence against gnosticism, when the purpose of my paper is to suggest in preliminary outline what I perceive can be derived from Voegelin’s teaching: viz., that gnosticism itself is the major spiritual and intellectual source of what has come to be called „expressive“ violence in the modern world. Let me leave this irony aside, however, and proceed to examine that teaching itself.

„Nothing to Retract or Correct“: Gnosticism in the New Science

It is *The New Science of Politics*, first published in 1952, that put gnosticism on the map of political theory, and it is above

all to its treatment of gnosticism and violence that that we must attend.³⁸ A noteworthy feature of the *NSP* is that gnosticism is introduced only late, when it becomes time for Voegelin to discuss modernity. Only in lecture four, and only in the fourth part thereof, do we encounter several consecutive pages on gnosticism.³⁹ Gnosticism, Voegelin explains, is a symbolic form at least as old as the Christian Era itself. Arising out of the uncertain character of the human condition, the Gnostic creed-movement provides its followers with a certainty flowing from the conviction that they can become one with the godhead and thereby achieve liberation from the world — the cosmos — of ordinary human beings. While early Gnosticism tended to be politically quietistic, later Gnosticism became activist and revolutionary.

The destructiveness of „modern“ gnosticism — and Voegelin defines modernity as Gnostic in essence — was the result of the combination of the revival of the core of ancient Gnosticism beginning at least as early as the twelfth century with Joachim of Fiore with the sudden expansion of power in the West resulting from the growth of urban centers and increased trade. Joachim's tripartite division of history into the Ages of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost was the forerunner of Flavio Biondo's periodization of history into ancient, medieval, and modern eras, and of the Third Realm constructions of Condorcet, Comte, Mazzini, Marx, Mussolini, and Hitler. In contrast to what Voegelin identified as „essential“ Christianity, which was grounded on the intangible and inherently uncertain experience of the world-transcendent ground of being called „faith“ by the author of Hebrews 11, Gnosticism promised a massive and complete possession of and by those very experiences. Thus, the lust for total and certain knowledge (gnosis) of the self, its origin and its destiny

has been the foundation of all manifestations of the Gnostic imagination from its beginning until the present.

Modern Gnosticism has been dedicated to the hubristic attempt to overcome the anxieties and uncertainties of human life by building a terrestrial paradise. Despite its limitations and periodic lapses into fundamentalist repression of autonomous philosophical inquiry, medieval Catholic Christianity through its dogma preserved enough of the „Mediterranean Tradition“, derived from Greek philosophy and Israelite and Christian revelation and centered on the *cognitio fidei* (knowledge by faith), to keep Gnosticism at the level of an underground movement for centuries — specifically until the Reformation, described controversially by Voegelin as the beginning of gnosticism’s triumph over the Mediterranean Tradition in the Western life of the spirit.⁴⁰

Early Gnosticism in the New Science of Politics

Gnosticism „accompanied Christianity from the beginning“, for there were gnostic influences in Paul and John.⁴¹ In fact, writes Voegelin somewhat enigmatically, „only a discerning eye“ could tell the difference between Gnosticism and essential Christianity based on the uncertainty of faith as characterized by Hebrews 11:1-3: Faith is „the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen“. In a key passage on the results of the gnostic „fall“ from the heroic uncertainty of essential Christianity, Voegelin wrote:

„The economy of this lecture does not permit a description of the gnosis of antiquity or of the history of its transmission into the Western Middle Ages; enough to say that at the time gnosis was a living religious culture on which men could fall back. The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence

is fundamentally an attempt at bringing our knowledge of transcendence into a firmer grip than the *cognitio fidei* [...] will afford, and Gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip where God is drawn into the existence of man. This expansion will engage the various human faculties, and, hence, it is possible to distinguish a range of Gnostic varieties according to the faculty which predominates in the operation of getting this grip on God. Gnosis may be primarily intellectual and assume the form of speculative penetration of the mystery of creation and existence, as, for instance, in the contemplative gnosis of Hegel or Schelling. Or it may be primarily emotional and assume the form of an indwelling of divine substance in the human soul, as, for instance, in paracletic sectarian leaders. Or it may be primarily volitional and assume the form of activist redemption of man and society, as in the instances of revolutionary activists like Comte, Marx, or Hitler. These Gnostic experiences, in the amplitude of their variety, are the core of the redivinization of society, for the men who fall into these experiences divinize themselves by substituting more massive modes of participation in divinity for faith in the Christian sense.⁴²

The above passage is crucial to the understanding of Voegelin's teaching regarding gnosticism as the catalyst, the *sine qua non*, for expressive violence in our time. Expressive violence is violence that carries with it its own justification. In its most concrete manifestation it is the expression of the violent personality's need to punch, to shoot, to torture, to kill. Expressive violence regards its target as so much rubbish disposable at will.

Of course, I am not contending that Voegelin used the concept of expressive violence or that he concentrated on the phenomenon of violence. What I am contending is that if he had not the term he had the substance and that there is much to learn from Voegelin about the gnostic roots of the twentieth century's appalling and tragic history of unprecedented

violence. I will go further and claim that Voegelin was fundamentally sound in his linking of gnosticism to the violence of modernity and that the intransigence of his stance regarding this thesis should be applauded. We who try to follow in his footsteps as best we can should not be tempted to pour water into his wine on the grounds that of course there were other factors that help to explain the insanity of Nazism and Stalinism. The fact is that Voegelin understood this quite well and did not argue in the *New Science* that ancient gnosticism automatically produced or „caused“ modern totalitarianism. Even in the passage quoted above, brief as it is, it is clear that Voegelin was fully aware of the great variety of forms of gnosticism, from the contemplative to the paracletic to the volitional. And he was one of the most acute sociologists of mass movements of our century, fully aware of the impact of socio-economic factors and charismatic personality types on historical events such as Nazism and Fascism and Stalinism. What he did — and it was a momentous achievement — was to identify gnosticism — or gnosis if one prefers that term — as the *catalytic source of the uniquely destructive force of the modern cult of violence*.

Voegelin's Concept of Gnosticism and its Implications

One of the reasons that it is admittedly difficult conceptually to follow Voegelin's discussion of gnosticism in the *New Science* is that it is grounded upon the principle that „the substance of history is to be found on the level of experiences, not on the level of ideas“⁴³. So, to follow the trail of gnosticism as grounded in an experiential lust for total knowledge and control led all over the map, from More to Marx and from the Cathars to Comte. Gnostics could be

observed fighting each other for the victory of their particular brand of illumination. Surprising figures like Calvin appear in the Voegelinian history of gnosticism.

If one reads the *New Science* carefully, however, it is clear that Voegelin was fully informed of the history of gnosticism as an historical phenomenon, and that he read every monograph he could get his hands on on the subject. He knew, for example, that „beside the Christian there also existed a Jewish, a pagan, and an Islamic gnosis, and quite possibly the common origin of all these branches of gnosis will have to be sought in the basic experiential type that prevailed in the pre-Christian area of Syriac civilization“. ⁴⁴ Furthermore — and this is important evidence against the charge that Voegelin „did violence“ to gnosticism — Voegelin recognized that „gnosis does not by inner necessity lead to the fallacious construction of history which characterized modernity since Joachim of Fiore“. Hence, he declared:

„In the drive for certainty there must be contained a further component which bends gnosis specifically towards historical speculation. This further component is the civilizational expansiveness of Western society in the high Middle Ages. It is a coming-of age in search of its meaning, a conscious growth that will not put up with the [Augustinian] interpretation of history [after the Incarnation] as senescence.“ ⁴⁵

Voegelin explicitly eschews the task of writing of gnosticism as a phenomenon at the level of doctrines and ideas and concentrates instead on gnosticism as an intense yearning for self-salvation either from or within time and the world. There follows a page which takes us through all the third-realm symbolizations from Joachim to Dante to Petrarch to Condorcet to....Mussolini and Hitler. Of course, at the level of

ideas most of these people had little or nothing in common, but at the level of experience they sought in various ways to „immanentize the eschaton“, which is the experiential equivalent of trying to square the circle.⁴⁶

Is Voegelin vulnerable to Hannah Arendt's observation that „[t]here is an abyss between the men of brilliant and facile conceptions and men of brutal deeds and active bestiality which no intellectual explanation is able to bridge“.⁴⁷ The answer must be in the affirmative, except that Voegelin might well have insisted that the question is wrongly posed and that no such „abyss“ exists. Still, it is puzzling that he did not devote more attention to the problem of how to account for the fact that only some gnostics were of the brutally activist variety, suggesting perhaps that he placed excessive emphasis on the spiritual formation of individuals and not enough on their (genetic) bodily foundation. He of course did not deny the importance of the latter; indeed, it would have been gnostic of him to do so, for early gnosticism taught that the body was a prison from which deliverance is to be had by gnosis.

There is no point in detailing the argument in the *New Science* as to why and how „Totalitarianism“, defined as the existential rule of Gnostic activists, is „the end form of progressive civilization“.⁴⁸ The general argument, we will recall, is that, beginning with the Reformation, which destroyed the unity of the universal church, gnosticism went from strength to strength, culminating in a victory over „The Mediterranean Tradition“ in our own horrible twentieth century. With each victory, however, gnosticism confronted a problem: the structure of reality remained unchanged and no radical transformation of man and society occurred. Gnosticism therefore split up into right wing or accommodationist and left

wing or radical varieties. (Voegelin's tendency — unfortunate in my judgment — automatically to equate the left with the worst forms of gnostic destructiveness partially explains William F. Buckley Jr.'s *National Review*'s decision virtually to canonize Voegelin and to order the production of buttons reading „Don't let THEM immanentize the eschaton“ as well as *Time Magazine*'s making the *New Science* the subject of a cover story.) Be that as it may, Voegelin held that these two wings of gnosticism (left and right) fought each other, with the left wing winning out in the Puritan Revolution in England, The Revolution in France, and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The Second World War was a contest between two types of gnosticism — the liberal, American and Anglo-Saxon rightist variety and the German National Socialist leftist variety. (Left gnosticism in the Soviet Union ended up with the right gnostics in World War II because of the Nazis' violation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.) Yalta was a disaster brought on by „Gnostic politicians“ (presumably including Churchill), and the Cold War saw Stalinist Russia with its satellites take the place of National Socialism as leading representative of left-wing gnosticism. There is a glimmer of hope, especially with the change of generations, that gnosticism will be defeated both because the U.S. and the U.K. — the most mildy gnosticized powers because their revolutions took place relatively early while the „Mediterranean Tradition“ still left powerful residues — were also existentially the strongest powers, and because of the rebirth of classical-Christian political theory, of which Voegelin's book is a leading exemplar.

Before taking leave of the *NSP*, it is important to note that in the penultimate lecture on „Gnostic Revolution — The Puritan Case“, Voegelin makes explicit reference to the violence that

flows from the Gnostic attitude. Quoting from two Puritan documents,⁴⁹ one published in 1641 and the other in 1649, Voegelin supplies bloodcurdling testimony of the readiness of the extremists in the Puritan movement to „dash the brats of Babylon against the stones“, and to „suppress the enemies of Godliness forever“.⁵⁰ He then adds a paragraph on the relevance of Seventeenth Century English gnosticism to twentieth century developments which ends by noting that in „the political process the saintly comrades will take a hand, and the hand will be well armed. If the personnel of the old order should not disappear with a smile, the enemies of godliness will be suppressed, or, in contemporary language, will be purged“.⁵¹ The new revolutionary order of the „saints“ knew no limits in its scope — it was to apply to „all persons and things universally“.⁵²

Anticipating the objection that it is unfair to portray Puritanism in the guise of its extremist wing, Voegelin adds:

„The selection of materials which are meant to illustrate the nature and direction of the Gnostic revolution may seem unfair. A critic might object that Puritanism as a whole cannot be identified with its left wing. Such criticism would be justified if it had been the intention to give an historical account of Puritanism. *The present analysis, however, is concerned with the structure of Gnostic experiences and ideas; and this structure is also found where the consequences are toned down to the respectability of Calvin's Institutes or of Presbyterian covenantism.*“⁵³

Mutatis mutandis, the same answer can be given to those who will say that it is unfair to link gnosticism as a whole with the Cult of Violence on the grounds that some gnostics have professed pacifism.

Thus far, the argument of the *New Science of Politics*.

Part II

The Later Voegelin on Gnosticism: Implications for Expressive Violence

Although Voegelin is best known for his exposition of gnosticism and its link to political theory in *The New Science of Politics*, he wrote a considerable amount on the subject in several of his later works. Insofar as I am aware, no one up to now has collected these observations and presented Voegelin's whole teaching on gnosticism. Because of this fact, I think it important to include lengthy quotations from Voegelin's works after 1952, when the *New Science* was published.

What we shall call „the later Voegelin“ had to say on gnosticism has not received the attention it deserves. We shall begin with a discussion of his only work with gnosticism in its title and conclude with an examination of gnosticism in *Order and History*. There will also be a comparison between Voegelin and that modern gnostic Jean-Paul Sartre, on violence.

Gnosticism in Voegelin's Science, Politics, and Gnosticism

Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis was the title of Voegelin's inaugural lecture delivered in November, 1958 at the University of Munich, and did not appear in English until 1968.⁵⁴ In the Introduction, Voegelin had this to say about gnosticism, its origins, and „some of its essential characteristics“:

„For the cosmological civilizations of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt, as well as for the peoples of the Mediterranean, the seventh century before Christ inaugurates the age of

ecumenical empires. The Persian Empire is followed by the conquests of Alexander, the Diadochian empires, the expansion of the Roman Empire, and the creation of the Parthian and Sassanian empires. The collapse of the ancient empires of the East, the loss of independence for Israel and the Hellenic and Phoenician city-states, the population shifts, the deportations and enslavements, and the interpenetration of cultures reduce men who exercise no control over the proceedings of history to an extreme state of forlornness in the turmoil of the world, of intellectual disorientation, of material and spiritual insecurity.... [Among the efforts to cope with this crisis] are to be found: the Stoic interpretation [...], the Polybian vision of a pragmatic ecumene [...] to be created by Rome, the mystery religions, the Heliopolitan slave cults, Hebrew apocalyptic, Christianity, and Manichaeism. And in this sequence, as one of the most grandiose of the new formulations of the meaning of existence, belongs gnosticism.“

„Of the profusion of gnostic experiences and symbolic expressions, one feature may be singled out as the central element in this varied and extensive creation of meaning: the experience of the world 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 origin...The world is no longer the well-ordered cosmos. Gnostic man no longer wishes to perceive in admiration the intrinsic order of the cosmos. For him the world has become a prison from which he wants to escape....“

„If man is to be delivered from the world [...] this is accomplished through faith in the ‚alien,‘ ‚hidden‘ God who comes to man’s aid, sends him his messengers, and shows him the way out of the prison of the evil God of this world (be he Zeus or Yahweh or one of the other ancient father gods.)“⁵⁵

Once more, let us note that Voegelin was well aware that ancient gnosticism was not a monolithic phenomenon. At the same time, he also recognized that all gnostics shared a common aim: „However the phases of salvation are

represented in the different sects and systems — and they vary from magic practices to mystic ecstasies, from libertinism ...to ...asceticism — *the aim is always destruction of the old world...*“: „Self-salvation through knowledge has its own magic“, he continued, „*and this magic is not harmless*“.⁵⁶

Implications of Voegelin's Analysis for an Understanding of Violence

„Reality must be destroyed — that is the great concern of gnosis“.⁵⁷ The implications of Voegelin's analysis for an understanding of violence in our time are clear, once we grasp the fact that expressive as distinguished from instrumental violence has become a Cult in the twentieth century. Here I draw on work previously done by the Dutch political theorist Meindert Fennema and myself on „Violence in Political Theory“.⁵⁸

Voegelin recognized that definitions should appear in political theory, if they should appear at all, smacking as they do of Sophistic information rather than of *episteme politike*, at the end rather than at the beginning of the analysis. I shall suggest following Sergio Cotta that violence cannot be defined; it can only be mapped. In Cotta's words, violence is a „variegated map“, and violent acts „are in fact distributed between two contrasting poles: one in which measure is present...and the other in which it is completely absent“.⁵⁹ To use the language of today's social science, one may say that instrumental violence is one of the poles and expressive violence the other. Whereas what Cotta calls measure is present in instrumental violence, it is absent in expressive violence. (Of course in practice one rarely encounters a „pure“ case of either type of

violence, and there is some intermixture of the two dimensions.) Instrumental violence is employed to attain some kind of limited objective: repelling the attack of an invader, seizure of power by revolution, redress of economic grievances, etc.; expressive violence, by contrast, is exercised as an end in itself. Expressive violence quite literally „expresses“ a „felt need“ of its perpetrator. It is difficult for rational people to realize that underlying the explosion of violence has been the fact that many of its perpetrators see nothing wrong with violence, but regard it as the highest manifestation of the vitality of their personal existence. (Another factor has been the increasing instrumentalization of modern life to the neglect or repression of legitimate expressive needs, a subject outside the purview of this lecture.)

With very few exceptions, of whom the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci was one, Western political thinkers have failed to understand what conceptually is involved in the cult of violence.⁶⁰ Burdened by Enlightenment rationalism, the academic discipline of political theory has appreciated only one side of violence, viz., the instrumental. We political theorists have failed to see that violence always contains an expressive component and that in some forms of violence that component dominates. Italian Fascist rhetoric, for example, drips with expressivism. Marinetti, whose „Futurist Manifesto“ of 1909 had exalted fire and speed and risk of death, hailed war as „the only cure for the world“, and Mussolini was constantly talking of the „beautiful death“ of the martyr to Fascism and extolling the heroism demanded by war. The Fascist, his famous *Italian Encyclopedia* article intoned, was allegedly not motivated by materialistic or „economic“ (i.e. instrumental) concerns but by „idealism“ and self-sacrifice.⁶¹

It is my contention that gnosticism in its ancient form contained three essential elements required for the exaltation of violence to the point that it becomes a Cult: (1) the desire for the total destruction of the world as we know it; (2) dualism, or the division of the world into the forces of Good and those of Evil; and (3) hatred of the body and of the material world as experienced in their chaotic and disorderly manifestations. (Heinrich Himmler's Table Talk as reproduced by Syberberg in the 1977 documentary film *Hitler*, brings out the gnostic strand of Nazi glorification of violence in dramatic fashion.) As Voegelin has put it, for the gnostic, „the world has become a prison from which he wants to escape“.⁶²

How was gnostic man to escape from the prison of the world? Through access to the „hidden“ — hidden to ordinary mortals, that is — God who struggles against the Demiurge, the evil God, Creator of this world („be he Zeus or Yahweh or one of the other ancient father gods“.) Gnostic man is able to redeem himself — and it is an act of self-redemption and not grace in the Christian sense — by getting in touch with his spiritual essence (or pneuma) which is uncontaminated by the evil world in which it is imprisoned. Through a wide variety of gnostic practices, ranging from „magic to mystical ecstasies, from libertinism to indifference to the world to asceticism“ the way is prepared for deliverance.

„The instrument of salvation is gnosis itself — [true] knowledge“. The soul „will be able to disentangle itself through knowledge of its true life“ and of its condition as an „alien“ being in the world. This new, special knowledge, hidden from ordinary mortals, is itself „the salvation of the inner man“. The difference between gnosis and knowledge (episteme) acquired through philosophical inquiry is

fundamental: as a — or better the — saving insight acquired by the elite, gnostic wisdom is immune to questioning and exhibits a certainty that philosophical reflection after the manner of Plato could never possess, because the latter is a knowledge of the extent of human ignorance in relation to the divine ground. As Voegelin wrote in the opening pages of *Israel and Revelation*⁶³, the equivalence of the knower and the partner „precludes knowledge of the whole“, and „ignorance of the whole“ precludes knowledge of the part.

Voegelin on Gnosticism in The Ecumenic Age

In 1974, Voegelin published his long-awaited volume four of *Order and History*. One might have expected a sustained analysis of gnosticism in this work, whose time period even the cautious scholars at the Messina conference agreed covers the period of the rise of gnosticism. Although such a sustained analysis is not forthcoming, nonetheless Voegelin's comments add considerably to what we know from his earlier works already examined. Even more important for our purposes, there is a specific reference to a link between gnosticism and the violence of totalitarian dictatorships in our time.

In the important Introduction there are some pages on whether the author of the Gospel of John may be considered gnostic. Voegelin's answer is no, but that he sees traces of gnosticism in some of the anti-cosmic formulations in John. Furthermore, Voegelin describes the epiphany of Christ as a destabilizing event working both for and against the recovery of the Order of Being. It is worth quoting what he finds to have been the central „fallacy“ at gnosticism's core:

„In the construction of Gnostic systems, the immediate experience of divine presence in...the Beyond is...expanded to comprehend a knowledge of the Beginning that is accessible only in...mediated experience. ...[The process of reality] becomes an intelligible psychodrama, beginning with the fall of pneumatic divinity, continuing with imprisonment of parts of the pneumatic substance in a cosmos created by an evil Demiurge, and ending with the liberation of the imprisoned substance through its return to the pneumatic divinity....The imaginative game of liberation derives its momentum from an intensely experienced alienation and an equally intense revolt against it; Gnostic thinkers, *both ancient and modern*, are the great psychologists of alienation, carriers of the Promethean revolt...[A] Gnostic thinker must be able to forget that the cosmos does not emerge from the consciousness, but that man's consciousness emerges from the cosmos. He must, furthermore, be able to invert the relation of the Beginning and the Beyond....And finally, when his imagination invents the drama of the divine fall ...he must be insensitive to the fact that he is indulging his *libido dominandi*. I am stressing the magnitude of insensitivity required in the construction of a Gnostic system, in order to stress the strength and luminosity of eschatological consciousness necessary to make the Gnostic deformation intelligible. Considering the history of Gnosticism, with the great bulk of its manifestations belonging to, or deriving from, the Christian orbit, I am inclined to recognize in the epiphany of Christ the great catalyst that made eschatological consciousness an historical force, both in forming and in deforming humanity“.⁶⁴

In the Introduction to *The Ecumenic Age* Voegelin shows himself to have been fully abreast of the latest scholarship on gnosticism, including the proceedings of the Messina conference. He addresses directly and forcefully the objection that it is illegitimate to identify an early gnostic like Valentinus with a modern philosopher like Hegel as „members of the same species“. He emphasizes that it is necessary to distinguish between „the essential core and the variable parts of a Gnostic system“:

„The essential core is the enterprise of returning the pneuma in man from its state of alienation in the cosmos to the divine pneuma of the Beyond through action based on knowledge. [...] This essential core [...] can be imaginatively expanded by a variety of symbolisms [such as] the divine Pleroma and the Syzygies, the Ogdoads, Decads, and Dodecads of Aeons, a higher and a lower Sophia, a Demiurge, a Cosmocrator, and a pleromatic Saviour. If these richly varied expansions and their colorful personnel are considered the characteristic symbolism, as they frequently are, misgivings about the Gnostic character of the modern systems will understandably arise“.⁶⁵

Voegelin finds that what he calls „the obscurities in the history of Gnosticism“ are attributable to „a conception of Gnosticism that too narrowly concentrates on the instances of psychodramatic expansion“. There follows a discussion of how Schelling and Hegel drew on the gospel of John for inspiration, of how it is wrong to consider gnosticism either as a Christian heresy or as having a Judaic origin, and of how the scholar must keep his attention focused on the fact that ancient gnosticism drew its psychodramatic symbolism primarily from the cultures of Persia, Babylon, Syria, and Egypt, all of whom had been overrun by imperial conquerors with the resultant experience of alienation in a vast, unfamiliar, and seemingly senseless ecumene.

Most important for our purposes are Voegelin’s conclusions about the relation between gnosticism and violence:

„Gnosticism, whether ancient or modern, is a dead end. That of course is its attraction. Magic pneumatism gives its addicts a sense of superiority over the reality which does not conform. *Whether the addiction assumes the forms of libertarianism and asceticism preferred in antiquity, or the modern forms of constructing systems which contain ultimate truth and must be imposed on recalcitrant reality by means of violence, concentration camps, and mass murder, the addict*

*is dispensed from the responsibilities in the cosmos. Since Gnosticism surrounds the libido dominandi in man with a halo of spiritualism or idealism...no historical end to [its] attraction is predictable...*⁶⁶

Thus, for Voegelin the essential core of gnosticism, ancient or modern, is „magic pneumatism“.⁶⁷ Gnosticism is not only a dead end; it is „an exodus into ecumenic death“. Gnostics are also „sectarians who want to find shortcuts to immortality“.⁶⁸ Once more he gives us his distinction between „early“ and „modern“ gnosticism: „While these early movements attempt to escape from the *metaxy*...the modern apocalyptic-Gnostic movements attempt to abolish the *metaxy* by transforming the Beyond into this world“. They have both lost „the balance of consciousness“ and proceed to construct „an imaginary immortality“ on the basis of their acting out of their delusions that they move in a privileged „Second Reality“.⁶⁹

A Modern Gnostic's View of Violence: A Comparison of Voegelin and Sartre

From Voegelin we learn that, although gnosticism does not inevitably lead to the cult of violence (for gnostic responses to the experience of world-alienation range all the way from pacificism to its opposite), gnosticism does provide the essential ingredient, the *conditio sine qua non*, of such a cult: the rejection of the order of Being as a prison from which one must escape. Sartre's analysis of violence is an astonishingly accurate portrayal of the gnostic origins of the cult of violence. Of course Sartre intended the reverse: like the faithful gnostic that he is, he attempted to locate what he calls „the universe of violence“ itself in the order of Being.

In 1947 and 1948 Sartre wrote some pages about what he called „the universe of violence“ which have recently been published in an Italian translation. In his perceptive Introduction on „Violence and Revolt in the Thought of J.-P. Sartre“, Fabrizio Scanzio shows how Sartre adopts Heidegger’s gnostic image of man as a being „thrown into the world“, a world into which he does not fit and which he experiences as a „universe of violence“. Human existence for Sartre, then, „is nothing else than the movement in which man seeks to give a foundation to his *unjustified* being in the world“. But in this world he confronts a dead end: „no reason, no project can confer that foundation which nature has not provided“, and „radicalizing the Heideggerian image of man as a being ‘thrown in the world,’ Sartre concludes that in the world man is always *de trop*‘.⁷⁰ Thus, the universe of violence „is always the negation of symmetrical and equal human relations: *it affirms the superiority of being over man...*“.⁷¹

In Sartre’s own text we find him equating the idea of an order of being with violence. Since for Sartre existence precedes essence, being represents mere facticity, and is an enslavement of man. Any notion of essence is anathema to Sartre. The blind „faith of the masses in the order of being“ is the source „of all violence“. „My existence is in subjugation to my being“.⁷² To submit to God, the manifestation of pure liberty, is to submit to violence. „I submit to [His] liberty because I establish that this liberty emanates from Being“.⁷³ To those who accept the order of Being, „it is not the end that justifies the means but the means that justify the end, and the means that justify the end (sacrifice of the entire world for an end) confer on violence an absolute value“.⁷⁴

Here we have a perfect example of gnostic ecosystemic dissonance and anthropic misplacement — in a word, revolt against the cosmos. This inversion of the order of being and of God as its source to the point where violence becomes an ubiquitous presence in an evil world in Sartre fits in quite appropriately with Voegelin's analysis of Nietzsche and Heidegger in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Sartre's famous preface to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, in which he gave the appearance of legitimating terror — against what he had written in the notes on *Violence*, which contend that violence always remains an evil, perhaps necessary, but an evil — becomes more intelligible given his hatred of Being and its order.

Conclusion: Gnosticism in In Search of Order

In the last words that he wrote on gnosticism, in volume V of *Order and History*, published posthumously in 1987, Voegelin observed:

„[T]here is ample reason to be dissatisfied with the order of existence. The resisters are keenly aware of the discrepancy between the disorder they have to suffer and the order they have lost, or which they despair to maintain or judge to lie beyond any probability of ever being gained; they are disappointed with the slowness of the movement in reality toward the order they experience as the true order demanded by the Beyond; they are morally aroused by, and angry with, the misery and slowness which the transfiguring movement in reality entails; and the experiences of this class can heighten to the conviction that something is fundamentally wrong with reality itself, if it always bungles the movement toward the order that is supposed to be its meaning. At this

point, when the resistance to disorder transforms itself into a revolt against the very process of reality and its structure, the tension of formative existence in the divine-human movement and countermovement of the *metaxy* can break down; the presence of the Beyond, its Parousia, is no longer experienced as an effective ordering force, and, as a consequence, the questioner for truth can no longer tell a story that is part of the story told by the It-reality. At the extreme of the revolt in consciousness, ‘reality’ and the ‘Beyond’ become two separate entities, two ‘things,’ to be magically manipulated by suffering man for the purpose of either abolishing ‘reality’ altogether and escaping into the ‘Beyond,’ or of forcing the order of the ‘Beyond’ into ‘reality.’ The first of these magic alternatives is preferred by the gnostics of antiquity, the second one by the modern gnostic thinkers.“⁷⁵

Our analysis has concluded that Voegelin is correct in regarding the distinction between ancient and modern gnostics as of secondary importance, because in both versions there is the passion, or pre-intellectual disposition, for destruction of the only cosmos we know. Violence as its own justification, the cult of violence as something liberating (Sartre always is tying in violence and liberty with each other) is present in both ancient and modern gnosticism. Were there world enough and time, I should like to have dwelled on the Italian Fascist cult of violence in Julius Evola, Marinetti, and Mussolini himself. Only a gnostic like Hitler could have ordered his crumbling world to defend itself to the last, could have wasted countless lives at Stalingrad, and could have ordered his corpse burned after satisfying himself that „reality“ was not after all conforming to his gnostic dream of a racially pure „Volk“ in a Europe that was „judenrein“.

The great merit of Voegelin is to have shown that *the train beginning in seemingly harmless esoteric speculations on the demiurge, the pleroma, and the heavenly ascent could end at*

Ausschwitz. Only a Voegelin had the courage to teach that if we are to have an issue from our terrible century we must begin by exposing the gnostic dream construction for the nightmare it can produce. Only a Voegelin could show us the way toward *therapeia* and *metanoia*, by insisting that we take seriously the experiential source of the gnostic attempt at manipulating reality rather than to dismiss its founders' speculations as fantasies unworthy of consideration by theorists of politics.

I wish to conclude with a passage from one of Eric Voegelin's favorite poems, „East Coker“ in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* :

You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by the way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

Endnotes

¹ *The philosophy of order: Essays on history, consciousness and politics* (for Eric Voegelin on his 80th birthday, January 3, 1981); ed. by Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981, pp. 190-241

² Meindert Fennema / Dante Germino: „Violence in Political Theory“, in: *The Virginia Papers on the Presidency* (K.W. Thompson, ed.) Lanham, Md., University Press of America, 1997, pp. 155-167

³ Editor's Introduction to: Carl von Clausewitz: *On War*, London, Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 15-17

⁴ Dante Germino / Meindert Fennema: „Gramsci on the Culture of Violence“, in: *The Philosophical Forum* (New York, Baruch College, CUNY, Winter and Summer, 1998), forthcoming in the special issue devoted entirely to Gramsci.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr: *Moral Man and Immoral Society. A Study in Ethics and Politics*, New York / London, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949

⁶ Eric Voegelin: *Die geistige und politische Zukunft der westlichen Welt*, (Occasional Papers, I), hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz und Dietmar Herz, Eric-Voegelin-Archiv, München, 1996, S. 35

⁷ Quoted in Ted V. McAlister: *Revolt against Modernity*, Kansas City, 1996, p. 9 (Italics added).

⁸ Eric Voegelin: „Der Liberalismus und seine Geschichte“, in: *Christentum und Liberalismus*, Studien und Berichte der Katholischen Akademie in Bayern, Heft 13, ed. Karl Forster, Zink, München, 1960; engl. Translation: „Liberalism and Its History“, in: *The Review of Politics*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame (Indiana), Vol. 36, No. 4, 1974, pp. 504-510

⁹ *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987), 50-51. This is the text for the film of the same title.

¹⁰ *Philosophy of Order*, p. 240

¹¹ Hans Jonas: *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2nd ed., 1963, p. 320

¹² Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 329

¹³ Robert Dahl, Review Article on Voegelin, *New Science of Politics* in VII *World Politics* (April, 1955), pp. 479-489 (484).

¹⁴ Thomas I. Cook, *The Hopkins Review* (Spring-Summer, 1953), pp. 191-196 (193/194).

¹⁵ Robert Ammerman, *XIX Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* (June, 1959), pp. 539-540.

¹⁶ Carsten Colpe, in: Bentley Layton (ed.): *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism* (2 vols.) Leiden, Brill, 1980, I, pp. 38-39.

¹⁷ C.H. Puech, in: *The Jung Codex*, Zurich, 1959, p. 29.

¹⁸ Eric Voegelin: *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Chicago, Regnery, (Gateway Editions 168), 1968; Introduction pp. 3-12. (*Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* hereinafter *SPG*). This is a translation of Voegelin's inaugural lecture at the University of Munich (originally published as Eric Voegelin: *Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis*, Kösel, München, 1959) together with his essays on „Ersatzreligion“ and „The Murder of God“. All citations, except where noted, are to this 1968 edition. In a brief preface, written especially for the American edition, Voegelin rather significantly declared that „In the present state of science, a study of modern gnosticism is inevitably work in progress. Still, *I find nothing to retract or correct*, though a good deal would have to be added after the lapse of a decade, especially with the problem of alienation“ (*SPG*, vii). For instruction on alienation we are referred to Voegelin's own article „Immortality: Experience and Symbol“. It should be noted that Ellis Sandoz has recently brought out a reissue of *SPG*, together with a new introduction, to which reference will be made (Eric Voegelin: *Science, Politics and Gnosticism: Two Essays*, Washington, D.C., Regnery, 1997). [Eine deutsche Neuauflage von *Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis* erscheint zusammen mit einigen anderen Arbeiten und Briefen Voegelins zur Gnosis Ende 1998 in der vom Eric-Voegelin-Archiv München herausgegebenen Reihe Perialoge im Fink-Verlag unter dem Titel „Der Gottesmord“.]

¹⁹ Voegelin, quoted from *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 66, in Introduction by Ellis Sandoz to the 1997 re-issue of *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, xvi. Emphasis added. Deutsche Ausgabe: Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographische Reflexionen*, hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz, (Reihe Perialoge), Fink: München 1994, die zitierte Stelle: S. 87.

²⁰ Voegelin, quoted in *Ibid.*, xvii.

²¹ All citations within the text of Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics* (hereinafter *NSP*), first published in 1952, are to the following edition: Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*. An introduction, with foreword by Dante Germino, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987. (German translation: Eric Voegelin: *Die Neue Wissenschaft der Politik*. Eine

Einführung, hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz, Freiburg / München, Alber, 4. Auflage, 1991 (Alber-Reihe Praktische Philosophie, Bd. 39)

²² Eric Voegelin: *Die politischen Religionen*, hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz, (Reihe Perialoge), München, Fink 1993 (Originalausgabe: Wien 1938).

²³ Eric Voegelin: *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. by J.H.Hallowell, Durham, N.C., 1975

²⁴ „Ersatzreligion“, published in translation in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (1968). The essay was originally written in German: Eric Voegelin, *Religionsersatz. Die gnostischen Massenbewegungen unserer Zeit*, in: *Wort und Wahrheit*, Freiburg i.Br., Herder, XV. Jahrgang (1960), Heft 1, S. 5-18, (Neuabdruck in: Akademie für Politische Bildung, Tutzing, Vorträge und Aufsätze, Heft 3, Juli 1985)

²⁵ The two six-point characterizations of gnosticism by Ferguson and Voegelin respectively are very different, in that the former applies to ancient gnosticism while the latter is meant to portray modern „gnostic“ mass movements. See Everett Ferguson: *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans, 1987, 1993, pp. 290-291. Voegelin's six traits are meant to be descriptive of modern gnosticism, but they inevitably presuppose that the reader already knows what ancient gnosticism was. That is to say, Voegelin seems momentarily to forget that modern gnosticism cannot stand on its own, but is somehow derivative of and related to ancient gnosticism even as it transforms it in important respects. See *SPG* (1997 ed. 59-60. In a paper delivered to the annual meeting of The Eric Voegelin Society at the American Political Science Association convention in the late August, 1997, William D.Gairdner had this to say about Voegelin's six characteristics: „By the end it struck me that his six features are contradicted by the gnostic faith itself, and the idea of the 'immanentization of the eschaton' does not ...resolve this contradiction ...unless this process can somehow be selective. In other words, immanentization does not explain how *extreme anti-mundane pessimism becomes pro-mundane optimism*“ (William D. Gairdner, „Hyperdemocracy and the Gnostic Impulse“, p. 3). While he is correct to criticize the list of six features given by Voegelin in the „Ersatzreligion“ essay, it is both historically inaccurate and philosophically imprecise of Gairdner to speak of „the gnostic faith“, because if by „faith“ one means „creed“ there is no evidence to suggest that there was a gnostic equivalent to, say, the Nicene Creed and because, as Voegelin showed in the *NSP*, philosophically speaking the essence of „faith“ is *uncertainty* while the essence of gnosis is *certainty*. This, „gnostic faith“ is a contradiction in terms. Also, it is anachronistic to use optimism and pessimism as Gairdner does here. Finally, I would suggest that Gairdner ignores Voegelin's repeated warnings that in

comparing ancient and modern gnosticism one must look behind the symbolizations (that indeed differ if taken as literal propositions) to the equivalence of experiences engendering the symbols. This point is discussed by Voegelin in his January 10, 1953 letter to Schütz (in *Philosophy of Order*, op.cit., pp. 458-462), on both ancient and modern gnosticism as in revolt against God. Gairdner is in error in looking at early gnosticism as if its adherents shared a rigid doctrine. A static approach is inappropriate to grasp the character of a such a protean movement as gnosticism, which might be better described as a set of constantly evolving symbolisms based on a continuous series of hallucinatory experience about overcoming the process of reality in the metaxy. Having said all of this, it remains true that Voegelin himself invited these understandable misunderstandings on Gairdner's part by his seeming „definition“ (in the essay „Ersatzreligion“) of gnosticism that in fact was not a definition but a summary description of modern gnostic creed-movements. Add to the confusion Voegelin's insistence that definitions come only at the end of the analysis and not at the beginning and one has a formula for endless argument over matters of secondary importance. Glenn Hughes, in his paper to the same meeting entitled „Gnostic Anxiety: Participation and its Discontents“, quotes a passage from Voegelin's *The Gospel and Culture* which goes a long way toward explaining the connection between early and modern gnosticism in Voegelin: „As the longing for goodness dissociates from the world, it contracts to what Voegelin calls 'an extracosmic isolation of existential consciousness,' that is, to a pure relation of the self to its longed-for completion in a perfection beyond this world“. Voegelin also notes in *Gospel and Culture* that early Gnosticism demotes „the cosmos, its gods, and its history“ to the status of „a reality which has the index of existential untruth“. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 3. This demotion finds its equivalence, I would add, in what Voegelin, following Robert Musil, calls the „Second Reality“ constructions of those modern ideologies described by Voegelin as gnostic. I am grateful to Ellis Sandoz for sending me the two papers referred to above, as well as that by Paul Caringella, later to be discussed. [A German translation of *The Gospel and Culture* has been published as: Eric Voegelin: *Evangelium und Kultur. Die Antwort des Evangeliums*, München, Fink, 1997]

²⁶ G. Quispel: *Gnosis als Weltreligion*, 1951, revised ed. 1972

²⁷ Voegelin, *SPG* (1968), p. 6.

²⁸ G. Quispel (ed.): *De Hermetische Gnosis in de loop der eeuwen*, 3rd ed., Baarn, Tirion, 1996, pp. 7-8.

²⁹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 334-335, emphasis added.

³⁰ Quoted in Nathaniel Deutsch: *The Gnostic Imagination*, Leiden: Brill, 1995, p. 29. This is an indispensable study for understanding early gnosticism.

³¹ Quoted in Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

³² Quoted in Ibid., 60.

³³ Ibid. 31, n.57.

³⁴ Ibid., 137.

³⁵ Michael Williams, quoted in Ibid.

³⁶ On the „hypostatic phallus“, see Ibid., 111-135. These quite remarkable speculations are narrated unflappably by Deutsch.

³⁷ Hans Jonas, „Response to G. Quispel’s ‚Gnosticism and the New Testament‘“, in: *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, (J.P.Hyatt, ed.), Nashville, 1966, p. 293.

³⁸ By beginning with the *NSP*, I do not wish to imply that Voegelin had written nothing on gnosticism or gnostic movements prior to the book’s publication in 1952. Indeed, much of what he wrote in the *NSP* about the English Puritans as a gnostic mass movement was a condensation of material taken from his gigantic manuscript entitled *The History of Political Ideas*, which is only today being published by the University of Missouri Press. Some sections of the *History* have been published in German translation: Eric Voegelin, *Das Volk Gottes. Sektenbewegungen und der Geist der Moderne*, ed. by Peter J. Opitz, Fink: München 1994; Eric Voegelin, *Die spielerische Grausamkeit der Humanisten. Eric Voegelins Studien zu Niccolò Machiavelli und Thomas Morus*, Fink: München, 1995 (Reihe Peripatete).

³⁹ The pages on gnosticism in *NSP* are 121ff. (S. 176 ff. in the German translation, ed. 1991)

⁴⁰ For elaboration of this view, see Voegelin’s lengthy letters to Alfred Schütz of January 1 and 12, 1953 on the discussion of Christianity and on Gnosticism, respectively, in the *NSP* (in *Philosophy of Order*, pp. 449-462). (Der deutsche Originaltext der Briefe findet sich in: Eric Voegelin / Alfred Schütz / Leo Strauss / Aron Gurwitsch: Briefwechsel über „Die Neue Wissenschaft der Politik“, hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz, Freiburg / München, Alber, 1993 (Alber-Reihe Praktische Philosophie, Bd. 46)

⁴¹ *NSP*, pp. 124 and 126 (deutsche Ausgabe: S. 184)

⁴² Ibid., p. 124 (dt.: S. 180 f.)

- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 125 (dt.: S. 182 f.)
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 126 (dt.: S. 184)
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 126-27 (dt.: S. 184)
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p.127 (dt.: S. 185)
- ⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd enlarged edition, New York, 1958, p. 183.
- ⁴⁸ *NSP*, p. 132 (dt.: S. 189)
- ⁴⁹ The two Puritan documents are both contained in A.S.P. Woodhouse (ed.): *Puritanism and Liberty*, London, 1938.
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in *NSP*, pp. 145 and 150 (dt.: S. 208 ff.)
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 150 (dt.: S. 215)
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 151 (dt.: S. 215)
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 151, emphasis added (dt.: S. 216)
- ⁵⁴ cf. Endnote 18
- ⁵⁵ *SPG*, pp. 7-11 (dt. in *Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis*, S. 14 ff.)
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 11,12. Emphasis added (dt.: S. 19)
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 35.
- ⁵⁸ Fennema / Germino, „Violence in Political Theory“, op. cit.
- ⁵⁹ Sergio Cotta, *Perché la violenza?* (L’Aquila: U. Japedre, 1978), 18.
- ⁶⁰ Germino / Fennema, „Gramsci on the Culture of Violence“, op.cit.
- ⁶¹ See the selections by Mussolini, F.T. Marinetti, Gabrielle D’Annunzio, and Giovanni Gentile, in Adrian Lyttleton, ed., *Italian Fascism from Pareto to Gentile* (London, J. Cape, 1973). Gentile, the court philosopher of Fascism, was himself a fascinating combination of what Voegelin called the contemplative and the volitional varieties of gnosticism. Gentile once wrote that the Actual Idea realizes itself in „the rain of fists“ by the Black Shirts on their opponents: a perfect example of expressive violence.
- ⁶² *SPG*, p. 9 (dt.: S. 15 f.)
- ⁶³ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Vol. I: Israel and Revelation*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, p. 2. (Eine deutsche Übersetzung des gesamten Vorwortes findet sich in: Eric Voegelin,

Ordnung, Bewußtsein und Geschichte, hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz, Klett-Cotta, 1988., S. 28-44)

⁶⁴ Voegelin, *Order and History, Vol. IV: The Ecumenic Age*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 19-20. First italics added.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 27-28. Emphasis added. It is probable that Voegelin intended to write „libertinism“ here instead of „libertarianism“, although it is possible he had Ayn Rand in mind as a modern gnostic.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 238.

⁷⁰ Fabrizio Scanzio, Introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Universo della violenza*, Rome, EAEI, 1996, p. 8. I am indebted to Professor Giorgio Baratta of the University of Naples for bringing this valuable translation of a 1947-48 *Notebook* by Sartre which is hard to come by in French.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 18. Emphasis added.

⁷² Sartre, „La violenza“, in Ibid., p. 79.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 81.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷⁵ Voegelin, *Order and History, Vol. V: In Search of Order*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1987, pp. 36-37. Actually, his very last word on gnosticism may have been this later passage in Volume V: „In his self-understanding, Parmenides speaks of himself as the ‘knowing man.’ Guided by the Heliconian maidens, he finds his way to ‘the goddess’ who reveals to him the truth of Being in *oratio directa* (B 1). The excitement that carried the ‘knowing man’ from assertive to self-assertive symbolization provoked the balancing resistance of the ‘philosopher,’ of the Socrates-Plato, who knows that he does not know and, even more important, who knows why he does not know“. (*In Search of Order*, 87-88)

In an important paper, Paul Caringella, Voegelin’s assistant and co-researcher in his last years, has called our attention to the importance of the entire section on „Reflectively Distancing Remembrance“ in Volume V, and especially pp. 35-41, in assisting us in „getting beyond the too easy dependence on *NSP* and *SPG* that too often can lead to pitting a Voegelinian ‘doctrine’ against, say, a Bloomian one. They bring us into the heart of the later Voegelin’s analysis of structures of history and of consciousness in

which the ‘gnostic’ temptation is a force in Everyman’s soul“ (Caringella, „Harold Bloom’s Gnostic America“, paper delivered to the Eric Voegelin Society Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., September, 1997, p. 2). I am indebted to Caringella for the Dantesque description of Voegelin as *maestro di color che non sanno* used in my dedication. (Dante had called Aristotle *maestro di color che sanno*.)

While I welcome Caringella’s calling our attention to these pages in Voegelin, I cannot accept either the possible implication that the *NSP* and the *SPG* together present a „position“ or „doctrine“ later more or less abandoned by Voegelin, or the statement that the gnostic temptation is a „force“ in the soul of all of us. If it was present in Voegelin, it was a very weak force indeed. Voegelin does seem to have some affirmative things to say in Volume V about the constructive role of *speculative* gnosticism as a catalyst provoking *resistance* to deformed symbolization, but his main thesis that gnosticism is of one piece and that speculative gnosticism contributes to the rise of brutal, activist, „volitional“ gnosticism stands to the end. Where Caringella has an excellent point is in drawing our attention to the last sentence in the section in Volume V, which he highlights:

„[A] movement of resistance [...] can contribute substantially to the understanding of the paradox in the formative structure it resists, while the defenders of truth may fall into various traps prepared by their own self-assertive resistance and thus contribute substantially to an understanding of the forces of deformation“. (Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, p. 39)

It may well be that Voegelin had some of the more dogmatic followers of Leo Strauss in mind, if not Strauss himself, as well as other conservative defenders of „order“ and dogmatic orthodoxy in the comment on „defenders of [The] truth“ here. But, again: *pace* Caringella, properly interpreted, there is no Voegelinian „doctrine“ of gnosticism (divorced from experience) expressed in either *The New Science of Politics* or *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this paper. Voegelin to the end, then: „nothing [essential] to retract or reject“ in the above writings on gnosticism.

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