

Calvin, Gnosis. and Anti-Philosophy
Voegelin's Interpretation of the Reformation
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I. Introduction

The Reformation movements of fifteenth-century Europe have been variously described as a cultural advance, a civilizational disruption with continuities, a religious revival, a heresy of "invincible error and [perhaps] perfect good faith," and a schism and "calamity." In Karl Holl's estimation, for example, it "enriched all areas of [European] culture," from theology and philosophy to art, from history to literature. It similarly "deepened" a theory of the state and produced a clearer delimitation of state powers. For Frederick Copleston, on the other hand, the contribution of the Reformation to philosophy generally and political philosophy specifically appears to have been slight and mostly derivative, except in one instance--the development of the notion of the state as a distinct and autonomous entity. Quentin Skinner sees this particular development as laying the foundations for modern political thought. For Roland Bainton, the Reformation was "an age of upheaval," but not of disintegration. The "culture of the West" remains a coherent phenomenon that is a kind of post-Reformation Christendom whose ecclesiastical structure has been shattered, but whose internal, cohesive meaning abides. "Above all else "a revival of religion," the Reformation was a movement for the recovery of first principles, the restoration of an "uncorrupted Christianity."

For Eric Voegelin, the Reformation marked "a clear epoch in Western History," to be "understood as the successful invasion of Western Institutions by gnostic movements." Such an assessment seems harsh and idiosyncratic in view of even the most strident critiques of the Reformation from its religious opponents. Voegelin's analysis of the Puritan revolution in England is an example of how he comes to his severe conclusion. Having shown the basic programmatic contours and underlying motivation of this revolution to be gnostic, and knowing that the formative theology of the Puritans stemmed from Calvin's writings, Voegelin traced the outlines of Puritan gnosticism back to the reformer from Picardy. A brief review of Calvinist doctrines of revolt, Voegelin argued, showed the easy transition from being a group that bears the "consciousness of being the representative[s] of a new truth" to a conducting a revolt against the crown. Examples of this "trend in political speculation, nourished from various sources, but converging toward the idea of an autonomous, intramundane polity that derives its governmental authority from 'the people'"... include John Knox and the French Huguenots. Whereas some evaluators may see this anti-monarchical development as a positive one toward modern conceptions of individual freedom, Voegelin's assessment was far less optimistic. The Reformation spelled for him the decisive downward turn in the history of Western Civilization whose final chapter has not yet been written.

This paper undertakes a two-part task. First, with specific focus on Calvin, it will consider Voegelin's argument that the obnoxious features of post-Reformation Protestantism are to be traced directly to the writings and practical reforming activities of Luther and Calvin themselves. It is their anti-philosophism and Calvin's gnosticism, according to Voegelin, that shape modernity to an unprecedented degree. As R. H. Tawney observed, and as Voegelin seemed

independently to concur, it is ultimately an "active and radical" Calvinism--and not the much more socially conservative, politically deferential, and religiously quietistic Lutheranism--that wends a path "strewn with revolutions" through the history of modern Europe. Friedrich Heer argues further that "the inner history of Europe" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries "was an attempt to overcome the attitudes fixed by the Calvinists," who were the "pioneers of the modern world" in almost every sense. Therefore, despite the early dependence of Calvin and his followers on Lutheran political doctrines, this paper will focus on Voegelin's evaluation of Calvin and his writings for their later import in European civilization.

Second, in view of Voegelin's polemical treatment, this paper will consider whether his evaluation of Calvin is fair. Voegelin's claim is unusual enough--even within a tradition of declaring Protestantism heretical--and his scholarship of a quality that a careful consideration of such a charge seems warranted in its own right. Oddly enough, Voegelin is not explicit about what, precisely, he finds, that is gnostic in Calvin's work. The reason for this gap is that *The New Science of Politics*, where Voegelin makes the charge, is a short text that is in some ways a summary of the results of the earlier eight-volume *History of Political Ideas*. In the *History*, Voegelin uses neither "koranic" nor "gnostic" to describe Calvin's work, but his exegesis of the *Institutes* shows the way to his summary conclusion in *New Science*. This paper explicates that conclusion by taking into consideration both of Voegelin's works while examining Calvin's texts.

II. Voegelin's Contextualization and Judgment of the Reformation

a. sacrum imperium

Voegelin's critique of the Reformation generally and of Jean Calvin's theology specifically must be understood in light of his interpretation of various political and ecclesiastical developments and responses to them in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This period begins with a spiritual dissolution revealed in the institutional corruption of late medieval Europe and in the spiritual alienation of writers like Dante, and it ends in the Reformation. These two centuries spell the beginning of the breakdown of Western civilization, characterized as the dissolution of the corpus Christianum that is institutionally expressed in the sacrum imperium into particularistic national and eventually religious spheres. The breakdown was finalized in the Reformation and religious wars of the sixteenth century. This medieval sacrum imperium or "holy empire" was a singular civilizational achievement of the West. In the mind of Calvin, at least, it was an achievement less to be superseded than to be refounded on new principles. Calvin's efforts at refounding led not to a new Christendom, however, but to counter-foundings, savage wars and eventual efforts to extirpate spiritual concerns from the public sphere altogether in many European polities.

The sacrum imperium, according to Voegelin, is the focal evocation of political ideas in the Middle Ages toward which all other political ideas are oriented. An evocation is a symbol that expresses the rationality or legitimacy or moral and emotional coherence of the "shelter function of the cosmion, the little word of order" that human beings create to preserve themselves in community and to give their lives "a semblance of meaning." The cosmion that human beings create provides both a physical shelter from internal and external enemies as well as an ordering function that is expressed in the political ideas that articulate and evoke the order of both the

cosmos and the particular human cosmion that exists within that cosmos. The cosmion replicates the order of the cosmos in its smaller world of human institutions, ceremonies, myths, and symbols of meaning.

"Sacrum imperium" was the summary representative symbol of such a cosmion. It was a uniquely Western political and religious symbol and a distinctive form of organization. In its physical manifestation, it originally consisted in a spiritual center in Rome and a temporal center in the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, north of the Alps, that was first founded by Charlemagne in 800. Unlike earlier (and later) empires, this medieval 'holy empire' "never achieved an internal [political] coherence and an effectiveness as a power organization" that could be compared to the empires of Mesopotamia, Greece, or Rome. Despite these deficits, it did exist as a manifest, coherent unit of organization and orientation in the minds of medieval Europeans as witnessed in their political and spiritual evocations. We might add that in this sense it provided a cosmion of coherent meaning that was far richer than the ecumenical alienation provided by the Persian and Alexandrian empires or the "power apparatus" of "conquest and organization" provided by the Roman Empire, that classical "graveyard of societies." It can also be said to have had a rise and a fall, with the two centuries from 1070 to 1270 comprising its 11 spiritual flowering and culmination." Its disintegration--which was primarily a spiritual dissolution that expressed itself physically in the formation of national units out of the imperial territories--began even while its intellectual and spiritual flowering reached its height in the integrative work of Thomas Aquinas.

Like any empire and any cosmion, the sacrum imperium was a continuing enterprise that required for its maintenance ongoing renewal and restoration. While the Reformation of the sixteenth century that dissolved the sacrum imperium was the product of specific institutional pressures, the reform movements of the tenth century that preserved the sacred empire showed that these pressures were not lacking earlier. Voegelin argued that the "fundamental questions that appeared in the Reformation of the sixteenth century" were present in these medieval reform movements. It was therefore the specifically "changed conditions" of the sixteenth century, and not any new human motivations, that led to its "disruptions of the medieval unit of the sacrum imperium." Most importantly, this breakdown appears to have been related to the decreasing ability of the Roman Catholic church to absorb movements of spiritual renewal and institutional reform after 1300.

The disintegration of this imperium was only a traumatic "cultural disaster," however, if the imperium contained features that one admires and/or if the Reformation movements that dissolved it contained specifically deplorable features. For Voegelin, both were the case. Four specific characteristics of the sacrum imperium served him as the criteria for critiquing the Reformation movements and their aftermath. These features therefore comprised core counterpoints to Voegelin's ongoing critique of modernity. They are: (1) the possibility of representing the life of the spirit in public institutions; (2) the existence of such spiritually representative institutions combined with a secular power that preserves them without ruining their spiritual integrity; (3) a concomitant possibility of a life of intellectual inquiry or philosophy that is open to public view, being preserved in and by the publicly representative institutions of the life of the spirit; (4) a publicly preserved community of the faithful.

What does this list mean? Political existence, recall, is existence within a cosmion, which is an analogy of the cosmos, and which is "illuminated from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization." Political existence is therefore not merely physical, but also intellectual and especially spiritual existence. The genius of the *sacrum imperium* was that it developed a set of institutions that expressed and preserved together at the same time the life of the mind, spirit, and practical politics. The ideal characteristics of such a life were given by classical philosophical inquiry, which had analyzed and articulated them and which had passed the results on into the Christian tradition. This latter tradition, in turn, had preserved, critically extended, and articulated this classical inheritance after the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire.

The "evocation of [a] cosmion with its ancillary ideas" is "a reality, effective in history." This "effectiveness" can extend to philosophical and spiritual realms, out of which it influences public practice. But such evocations can be of radically varied quality and scope. The evocation of the *sacrum imperium* in the high Middle Ages had "absorbed so many elements of reality, worked into a balanced compromise, that the philosopher [could] wander a long way in pursuit of reality before he realiz[ed] the limits of the evocation." Voegelin found at the core of the *imperium* a medieval spiritualism that holds the relationship of *amicitia* between God and man, and therefore man and man, to be the highest end of human life. This relationship of friendship has both an intellectual and a spiritual or faith component, whose character and relationship were most precisely articulated by Thomas Aquinas. According to Voegelin, the experience of *amicitia* with God is unique to Christianity, and in Thomas' articulation of this experience and in his theory of *fides caritate formata* that is linked to it, Voegelin finds a "grandiose, systematic philosophy of man and society." As Hollweck and Sandoz have it, this theory is, first, "not merely the climax of the interpenetration of Christianity and a historical civilization, but perhaps the very *raison d'être* of the West itself historically." Second, "it establishes the experiential standard that is the measure for subsequent theories of man and reality." Against this standard, according to Voegelin, Reformation Christianity fails.

The philosophical genius of the *sacrum imperium* construction is its "aspiration to find the comprehensive unity of all things, human and divine, temporal and spiritual," and unite them into itself. "Since the political evocation of the empire is based on the evocation of the spiritual Christian community, there are few questions concerning the spiritual personality of man and his relations to God and to his fellow men that have [no] direct or indirect bearing on the political evocation proper." Following the nominalist lead of Ockham, modern thought disaggregates this articulate unity. Perhaps the character of the medieval conception is therefore understood best in a contrast:

What disconcerted the nineteenth-century scholar was the fact that medieval political evocations include the spiritual personality of man, while the modern Western constitutional system leaves the spiritual personality free to become institutionalized in the churches or not at all. We find an evocation similar to the medieval in the political system of Plato.

"The symbolic universe of medieval Christianity," Professor Moulakis argues, was for Voegelin via rare moment of balance between the evocative reality of a particular order and the freedom of the person to contemplate such an order in theoretical openness [that] does not result from a

religious commitment or predilection, but [that] is the upshot of historical and philosophical inquiry. What is at issue is the historically rare possibility of upholding the imaginative structures of an evocation, that is, of a finite microcosm of meaning, without losing sight of the absolute beyond, that is of the truth of human existence."

The balances of medieval Christianity may also be evaluated as a configuration of compromises. Voegelin identified three as central to the efficacy of a Christianity that served as the civilizing force and spiritual underpinning for European civilization. They are: (1) the transformation of the rite of baptism from a ceremony in which an adult believer signals his faith and is received into the visible and socially separate community of faith into a rite of "sacramental reception" in which the institutional Christian Church makes all members of society members of itself involuntarily in infancy; (2) the inclusion, by the ninth century, of the activity of secular political rule-- formerly an occupation not considered part of the panoply of Christian spiritual activities-- into the list of spiritual gifts Christians may receive and use in the service of the Church; (3) the "compromise with history," in which believers, or at least Christian thinkers, recognize that "God revealed himself to the pagans through the law of nature and to the Hebrews through the Old Law before he revealed himself to the world at large through the Logos that had become flesh." This compromise enabled early Christian theologians and philosophers to "absorb the Stoic natural law into Christian doctrine, and by virtue of this absorption to create for Christianity a system of ethics that was applicable to relations between men who live in the world." In other words, it made it possible to move from the radical quality of early Christian ethics to a less "sectarian" ethic that could include not merely assenting believers, but any reasonable person in a society.

The church mediated these compromises to society through a "sacramental objectification of grace" or "sacramental organization" that enabled the many to receive grace objectively, without the efforts of "religious enthusiasm" or "heroic saintliness." The balance between the thisworldly and otherworldly concerns of the church and the *sacrum imperium* requires a third, balancing symbol, captured in the Christian eschatological symbol of "the kingdom of Christ." As David Walsh explains, the symbol of Christ's kingdom is:

a symbol of the end (*eschaton*) that describes in figurative language characteristics of our existence other than those of the life between birth and death. Above all it reflects a well-ordered existence in which the inequities of life are balanced out. In eschatology, existence is furnished with symbolic institutions (e.g., Christ's kingship), which by their well-ordered balance are the measure for all of life's institutions, relegating them to a level of diminished symbolical significance. Actual institutions, because they are inextricably both composite and unitary, cannot be perfected to the level of wholeness represented by the eschatological symbolism.

Maintaining this intricate set of balances, compromises, and insights that constituted the medieval sacred empire required the panoply of practical and intellectual virtues among at least some of the ruling and spiritual elites to sustain it.

b. reformation

By the time of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the careful balances of the *sacrum imperium* were coming undone: "the surrounding political reality of the Western world no longer [could] adequately absorb the spirit into its public institutions," and the unity of "spirit and politics" in the *sacrum imperium* was coming apart. In this now ruptured world, the life of the spirit could no longer find adequate public representation. In consequence, Dante, along with such later figures as Erasmus and Machiavelli, had discovered a "new spiritual loneliness."

A loss of spiritual unity in one's social environment has historically produced two responses—efforts at reform or revolution on the one hand, and an "attempt to find the proper relation of the individual spiritual realist to the political structure of the age on the other." While thinkers as diverse as Dante, Erasmus, and Machiavelli either despaired of publicly representative institutions of the spirit or else reduced their expectations of them, the hope of reformers like Luther and Calvin was a "new spiritual church." Both reformers "tried to recreate spiritually determined political institutions out of the fading church substance," but in Voegelin's estimation, the attempt, "resulting in the split of the [Western] church, failed grossly." The failure is marked by the four specific characteristics that correspond to those features of the *sacrum imperium* that Voegelin found particularly laudable.

The first failure is found in the intellectual substance of the Reformation. The most serious problem underlying Calvin's and Luther's enterprise was that their antiphilosophism blinded them to the philosophical premises of their enterprises. Both reformers were knowingly hostile to the forms of philosophical inquiry developed in the high Middle Ages: their antipathy to philosophy destroyed the hard-won developments that made Christianity a proper preserver, bearer, and extender of Platonic/Aristotelian philosophical inquiry. While both were influenced by the Augustinian tradition, their strict biblicism made both strikingly unaware of the intellectualism of Augustine's conversion and of the deeply philosophical nature of his theology. Similarly, both were strongly influenced by Ockham's philosophy, but without much philosophical attention to the consequences of such influence. Thus, the dogmatic nature of the Reformers' work (and often of their opponents' responses) made a life of intellectual inquiry in contrast, say, to blunt-edged scriptural exegesis, increasingly unlikely.

Second, alongside the extirpation from Christian thinking of philosophical inquiry and natural law doctrines, which Voegelin saw as one of the formative compromises Christianity had made with paganism, early Protestantism also set aside the inclusion of secular political office into the panoply of spiritual gifts and was ambiguous about the social uses of the sacraments. In Luther's thought in particular, the contradiction became clear. While the intent of the Reformers was to restore purity to the ecclesiastical institutions, Luther's perceived need to do so by extricating the church from political entanglements was combined with his call to the secular rulers for help against his Roman Catholic enemies and against the internal fragmentation of his own reform movement. In both cases, ironically, the help came with a price attached, namely "an increasing secular control over the church." Such control, which was well underway before the Protestant Reformation, made the public representation of the life of the spirit increasingly unlikely, and the public preservation of a community of the faithful fraught with unforeseen compromises. On the one hand, Luther allowed for no interference between the secular political authorities and the spiritual authority or church, institutionally dissolving the Gelasian compromise between the sacred and secular arms of European society. On the other hand, he assumed that the local rulers

whom he addressed were "Christian" princes who would, wherever possible, rule in accordance with Christian principles of grace, mercy, and tempered justice. Submission to secular rule was absolute for Christians where matters of conscience do not intrude. What such matters might be in practice remains unhelpfully elusive in Luther's writings. When practical matters are at issue, Calvin's Institutes are similarly unhelpful, being replete with startling tensions and contradictions. Thus, while the reformers strove for a publicly preserved community of the faithful, they could not, on their own premises, promote a life of intellectual inquiry of the kind that Voegelin would have desired, and the secular powers increasingly compromised the integrity of the spiritually representative institutions they sought to control. One nadir of such compromise was manifested in the complicity of German Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches with the National Socialist regime in the 1930s and 1940s.

The roots of several of Voegelin's complaints seem overly intellectual or philosophical, and one might wonder why anyone should be particularly concerned about them. But if the life of spirit, intellect, and body are closely linked in a cosmion of whatever kind, then to object in this way is already to take the modern path and to ignore the very real problems of political society as cosmion. Indeed, the societies of the post-Reformation era did consist in a certain kind, or even varieties, of cosmion, but these were relatively "fragmentary, narrow, and worthless," even if they were "expression[s] of faith," casting their "magic over man," and establishing the "boundaries ... [of] the realissimum enclosing their horizon." The more limited philosophical possibilities of such fragments made conflict more likely between the inhabitants of the dogmatized cosmion and the political philosopher, who seeks a more sufficient knowledge of the world, a larger horizon, and a "public status" for the results of his inquiries. Calvin was one reformer who had attempted to reclaim the shape of the *sacrum imperium* and give it cosmic significance, but on the basis of new and philosophically shaky premises. It is to Calvin's new construction and Voegelin's critique of its gnostic premises that we now turn.

III. Voegelin on Calvin

a. koran

The *History of Political Ideas* contains Voegelin's most elaborated evaluation of the Reformation, but his summary remark on Calvin occurs in his *New Science of Politics*. There he calls the *Institutes* a gnostic "koran," a "genus of gnostic literature" of which Calvin has given us "the first deliberately created" exemplar. Voegelin intends "koran" as a technical term, but it refers first and foremost to an empirical, historical object. The technical term is inevitably metaphorical: what are the concrete characteristics and functions of the historical Koran such that Voegelin could label other texts "koranic"?

The original Koran is a book of prophecy that claims to be the final and complete revelation of God to humankind through His prophet, Muhammed. The message that the prophet delivers therefore supersedes all previous prophetic claims. The message of the prophet, moreover, does not develop historically, nor is it delivered within an historical context that requires contextual interpretation when it is broadcast into another society, culture, or even time. The message is complete, once-for-all, without blemish or need of revision. While the Koran reveals aspects of God's nature, the human response to the message is primarily expressed legalistically. Arabic

philosophers, including Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, ingeniously used this legislative quality of the Koran to provide a space of freedom for philosophical inquiry. In various ways, they argued that the Koran speaks *only* to legal behavior, not to essence. Thus, as long as he conforms to the external requirements of the law, the Koran allows the philosopher to proceed with his inquiries whither he will. Social and political stability are ensured by the fact that only those very few who are intellectually and spiritually able to do so are permitted to engage in philosophical inquiry. For the many, legal and literal interpretation is both sufficient and salutary.

There is nothing necessarily gnostic in any of this. While it is possible for (gnostic) millenarian movements such as Malidism to emerge from Islam, Islam is not intrinsically gnostic any more than Christianity. Voegelin does not say that the Koran is gnostic, but that Calvin's *Institutes* are a "gnostic koran." "A man who can write such a koran, a man who can break with the intellectual tradition of mankind because he lives in the faith that a new truth and a new world begin with him," writes Voegelin, "must be in a peculiar pneuriopathological state." Voegelin recalls Richard Hooker, "who was supremely conscious of tradition, [and who] had a fine sensitiveness for this twist of mind."

In his cautiously subdued characterization of Calvin he opened with the sober statement: "His bringing up was in the study of civil law"; he then built up with some malice: "Divine knowledge he gathered, not by hearing or reading so much, as by teaching others"; and he concluded on the devastating sentence: "For, though thousands were debtors to him, as touching knowledge in that kind; yet he (was debtor) to none but only to God, the author of the most blessed fountain, the Book of Life, and of the admirable dexterity of wit."

It seems that the gnosticism expressed in Calvin's *Institutes* is therefore to be found in its peculiar legislative function in combination with its philosophical and literary characteristics. In the remainder of this paper, I will examine these three aspects under the rubrics of dogma and philosophical inquiry, faith and predestination, and gnosticism.

b. dogma and philosophical inquiry

In his "prefatory address" to Francis I, versions of which he retained in all editions of the *Institutes*, Calvin claims that the *Institutes* are a kind of training manual, a transmission "of rudiments by which those who feel some interest in religion might be trained to true godliness." This "prefatory address" is in part a polemical defense against "certain bad men" in Francis' realm, whose "Miry" allows "no place" in that realm for "sound doctrine." These opponents to Calvin give the "name of *error and imprudence* to that which they know to be the infallible truth of God, and of *ignorant men* to those whose intellect they see that Christ has not despised, seeing he has deigned to intrust them with the mysteries of his heavenly wisdom." It is for the defense of this wisdom that Calvin appeals to Francis, and it is the content of this wisdom, "the true religion which is delivered in the Scriptures" and a "hidden treasure," that Calvin will reveal in his work. The *Institutes* is the means by which this old doctrine, long buried and unknown as "the guilty consequence of men's impiety," will be restored to all believers. This doctrine is perfectly contained in the Holy Scriptures, but finding it there may require guidance and direction. Those, like Calvin, "who have received from God more light than others" have a duty

to "guide and assist" the simple "in finding the sum of what God has been pleased to teach us in his word." The *Institutes* provides "a rule by which to test whatever is presented" to the reader in the Scriptures, and thereby "to make more progress in the School of God in one day than any other person in three months." It is a "kind of key opening up to all the children of God a right and ready access to the understanding of the sacred volume." Indeed, the book is not Calvin's work, but the work of God, providing a summary of Christian doctrine, a guidebook to the proper reading of the biblical writings, and an authoritative interpretation of human experience. As a training manual for "candidates for the sacred office," the *Institutes* is "a summary of religion in all its parts ... digested ... in an order which will make it easy for any one, who rightly comprehends it, to ascertain both what he ought chiefly to look for in Scripture, and also to what head he ought to refer whatever is contained in it."

Two "koranic" functions of the *Institutes* are revealed in this summary self-evaluation. Both, as Voegelin claims, deflect competent criticism and create group unity. First, Calvin formulates his new doctrine in scriptural terms, standardizing both scriptural interpretation and scriptural selection in support of that interpretation. He thereby suppresses the chaos of the early Reformation, in which everyone was free to interpret the scriptures "according to his preference and education," and he also eliminates the need to engage the "tradition of the church, which, after all, was based on an interpretation of Scripture, too." Indeed, those who would know God must be "led as by the hand to find him," and those who are skeptical of Calvin's particular leading are the willing and bewitched victims of folly, which is "the result not only of vain curiosity, but of licentious desire and overweening confidence in the pursuit of forbidden knowledge." Such an attitude "cannot be excused." Calvin thereby puts a dogmatic taboo, on critical interpretation, which fulfills not merely a koranic function, but, as I will argue, a gnostic one.

The Koran of Islam, recall, is a self-consciously supersessionist collection of prophecies that delivers once and for all God's truth to humankind. The legalistic quality of this truth enabled Arabic philosophers to advocate an outward adherence to the rules prescribed in the Koran while permitting private inquiry into philosophical questions for those intellectually and prudentially competent to do so. Christianity, however, is not a legal code: the canonical Christian documents are not a set of lawlike prescriptions, but a collection of stories, letters occasioned by specific problems or events, and brief, fragmentary historical accounts of the early Christian movement in Palestine and of the missionary efforts of Paul of Tarsus in Greece and Asia Minor. The historical development of Christianity, moreover, made theology and not jurisprudence its paramount science." Thus, "the Christian community was constituted not by a single divine Law that comprehensively prescribed opinions and actions of every kind, but rather by a sacred doctrine. The custodians of this doctrine were apostolic successors, the hierarchy, and the theologians, not the jurists." In Islam and Judaism, in contrast, theology receives less emphasis, because both are constituted first and foremost by "a comprehensive revealed Law, the interpretation, elaboration, and application of which gives priority to the activities of jurists.

From its earliest days, therefore, the core substance of Christianity was more closely related to theoretical considerations than either Islam or Judaism, because its tenets are not readily expressed in legalistic terms. Doctrinal, theological, theoretical, and philosophical interpretation have always been an ineluctable part of Christian life and thought. Calvin seeks to do away with

the need for further interpretation and move to a legal framework of discussion. First, by putting a "taboo on the instruments of critique," namely "classic philosophy and scholastic theology," he prohibits the use of theoretical argument, thereby making impossible a public theoretical debate concerning issues that involve the truth of human existence." For Calvin, as for the eighteenth century Hawaiians from whom our technical term originates, a "taboo" is not an argument, but an exclamation or unreasoned declaration. Second, Calvin's exegetical method is unerringly developed in support of a specific "predetermined doctrine" that "would use Scripture when passages torn out of context would support the cause, and for the rest it would blandly ignore Scripture as well as the traditions and rules of interpretation that had been developed by fifteen centuries of Christianity." One example may be found in Calvin's doctrine of baptism. The practice of pedobaptism is difficult to support with a prima-facie examination of the Christian scriptures--Calvin sees this (and modern scholarship tends generally to confirm it), but his aversion to the Anabaptists and his vision of a new *sacrum imperium* lead him into contorted exegeses to sidestep the problem. Foremost in Calvin's mind are not the theological issues involved, in terms of which his Roman Catholic opponents articulated and defended pedobaptism much more successfully and coherently than he could hope to, but his predestinationist founding of a new *sacrum imperium*. This intent makes most sense, for example, of his highly dubious analogies between baptism and circumcision.

In numerous other contexts, even a brief perusal of the *Institutes* makes Calvin's bad arguments and their underlying purpose evident:

In fact, the foundation of an unequivocal system of doctrine on Scripture, as we know, is impossible. Calvin can arrive at decisions with regard to true doctrine only by relating scriptural texts, first to the doctrinal intentions that have emerged since Luther and, second, to the aim toward which he wants them to converge. In some instances such a relation between scriptural passages and Calvin's intentions does exist, in other instances it does not; but whether it exists or not, it must be shown to exist. Since Calvin is a marvelous lawyer, the result is quite exhilarating--or rather it would be if there were the faintest touch of humor or rascality in the man; to our regret, however, we cannot cast even a shadow of doubt on Calvin's complete seriousness and good faith. Nevertheless, there is enough objective comedy in the enterprise to provide chapter after chapter of solid entertainment for the connoisseur of dirty tricks in argument.

c. faith and predestination

Calvin's fideism, which is a kinder way, perhaps, of characterizing his dogmatic rejection of theoretical inquiry, is present throughout the *Institutes*. To "divest" our minds of "all doubt" concerning the authority of scripture, for example, we are not led through reasoned arguments, but to "convictions given solely by the Spirit, who "enlightens" our minds and whose "inward testimony" is superior to reason, sealing the hearts of men:

We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate. This, however, we do, not in the manner in which some are wont to fasten on an unknown object, which, as soon as known, displeases, but because we have a thorough conviction that, in holding it, we hold unassailable

truth; not like miserable men, whose minds are enslaved by superstition, but because we feel a divine energy living and breathing in it--an energy by which we are drawn and animated to obey it, willingly indeed, and knowingly, but more vividly and effectually than could be done by human will or knowledge....

Calvin appears here to be describing an experience of faith or of God's power and of being drawn to God that is the privilege of many a Christian. This experience, however, need not lead necessarily to a suspension of our critical faculties, as Calvin seems to demand:

Such, then, is a conviction which asks not for reasons; such, a knowledge which accords with the highest reason, namely, knowledge in which the mind rests more firmly and securely than in any reasons; such, in fine, the conviction which revelation from heaven alone can produce. I say nothing more than every believer experiences in himself, though my words may fall far short of reality.... only let us now understand that the only true faith is that which the Spirit of God seals on our hearts.

"None," moreover, "comprehend the mysteries of God save those to whom it is given." Those, therefore, who disagree with Calvin's exegesis and "restoration" of the old Gospel, however obscure and circuitous it may at times be, are "arrogant" and "stupid," condemning without reason "whatever their carnal sense cannot comprehend" and showing themselves to be "furious madmen."

Calvin certainly seems dogmatic, close-minded, contradictory, and fideistic, but the passage poses further difficulties. The most important, as with so many others in Calvin's work, is that it is consistent on the surface with common Christian experiences of faith, which include being overwhelmed by a mystical experience, or being grounded in a deeply-rooted experience of Divinity. In orthodox Augustinian and Thomistic understandings, however, such experiences are tempered by the knowledge that wisdom (a kind of ratio) and the love of God provide, and especially by the humility they engender regarding our capacity to know:

Translated into terms of psychology, the doctrine of grace resolves itself into the doctrine that 'my love is my weight' and that the greater love is ultimately irresistible. As such, the working of the Spirit emerges, not as magic but, in the deepest and truest sense of the word, as 'natural law'. Accordingly, it may be described as *ardor caritatis*, or *ignis voluntatis*, the 'heat of love', the 'flame of the will'. Its efficacy as a means of salvation thus depends upon the assumption that the image of God, i.e. of the creative and moving principle, has not been wholly effaced from the hearts even of unbelievers. This being so, the process of salvation may be understood as one of sublimation in which the same human love discovers a new centre of fixation; concupiscence, which is self-love, being thus transmuted into dilection, which is love of God.

Calvin reveals no understanding of this Augustinian distinction between magic and spirit in his own doctrine of human knowledge. The magical qualities of human knowing that give Calvin the "conviction which asks not for reason" but that is nevertheless engaged in the practical, everyday world of rational activities move us closer to the gnostic forms of medieval mysticism in which the experience of transcendence immanently and permanently transform the mystic, conferring

on him or her a new status as "novus homo." This medieval forerunner of such exemplars of the philosophical bestiary as Nietzsche's overman and Marx's post-historical producer-laborer may be contrasted with the other type of medieval mystic, in whom the transformation of the mystical experience is a temporary transportation into ecstasy, and whose lasting effect is spiritual and not a fundamental transformation of his nature or his status. It is immanent only in the sense that it propels him to deeds of service and to growth in virtue.

Finally, Calvin tends to dogmatize his own religious experience. Similarly to Luther, Calvin seems to have suffered a crisis of faith at a young age. He could find no consolation in the Catholic tradition, but eventually found a resolution in a new understanding of the Christian faith. This new insight was not, however, a personal one, but a new, universal and dogmatic one:

Still, as nothing better offered, I continued the course which I had begun, when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountainhead, and, as it were, clearing away the dross, restored it to its original purity.... it was with the greatest difficulty I was induced to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error.

Calvin's dogmatic interpretation stems in part from his inclination to see the source of his melancholy and alienation in a universally false doctrine:

My mind being now prepared for serious attention, I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, in what a style of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted.... And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but instead of defense, earnestly to supplicate Thee not to judge according to its deserts that fearful abandonment of thy Word, from which, in thy wondrous goodness, Thou has at last delivered me.

Having established the universal falsity of his previous thinking and assuming that this thinking was an accurate reflection of the doctrine he now opposes, Calvin has received a new, equally universal, liberating insight. It is a mystery of God that cannot be comprehended by any "save those to whom it is given." The *Institutes* are the institution of experience into dogma, echoing the Stoic treatment of philosophy with which Calvin, having published a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, was familiar.

Calvin therefore follows a pattern, according to Voegelin, that begins with the "Christian thinkers and church leaders" of the late Middle Ages who allowed Christian dogma "to separate in the public consciousness of Western civilization from the experience of "the mystery" on which its truth depends:"

The dogma develops as a socially and culturally necessary protection of insights experientially gained against false propositions; its development is secondary to the truth of experience. If its truth is pretended to be autonomous, its validity will come under attack in any situation of social crisis, when alienation becomes a mass phenomenon; the dogma will then be misunderstood as an "opinion" which one can believe or not, and it will be opposed by counter opinions which dogmatize the experience of alienated existence. The development of a nominalist and fideist conception of Christianity is the cultural disaster, with its origins in the late Middle Ages, that

provokes the reaction of alienated existence in the dogmatic form of the ideologies, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

How do this fideism and dogmatism move us into gnosticism?

d. gnosticism

The *Institutes*, in Voegelin's view, is not a systematic theology in either sense of term: it neither attempts to harmonize the several theological strains of the New Testament writings into a single, coherent system of doctrine, nor does it attempt to harmonize faith and reason in the long Western tradition of systematic theology. Instead, it is the extended working out of a problem, initiated by Luther. The substance of the problem, the misapprehended need for its solution, the character of Calvin's solution, and Calvin's procedure in solving it together give the *Institutes* its specifically gnostic character.

The substance of Calvin's problem is how Luther's principle of justification by faith alone, which unhinged the balance of human existence underlying the order of medieval civilization, could be harnessed as a founding principle for the "establishment of a new public order." The first problem is that justification by faith alone seems inherently to lead to a highly individual faith containing no intrinsic tendency to establish a community of the faithful. Calvin's solution was to combine this new Protestant principle with a doctrine of predestination in order to identify and establish a new ruling elite of the faithful. Understood in a certain way, a doctrine of immanent predestination can be given a quasi-Aristotelian character by suggesting that predestination is for something in the purpose of the predestinator. The term "human being" thereby retains its Aristotelian functional character. That function cannot be known naturally, however, being given purely through the divine conferral of a special status and a corresponding special insight. Its meaning is therefore "prophetic," and not philosophically discernible, knowable, or debatable. This claim to special knowledge, and specifically its character, is not merely a form of dogmatism, but the substance of Calvin's gnosticism.

Lacking a coherent theological or metaphysical system, but being centered on the doctrine of predestination toward a practical purpose, Calvin's *Institutes* is a "lawyer's plaidoyer for a cause," a massive "political tract" or "livre de circonstance" that "suggests a solution" to the passing of the intellectual and civilizational order of Europe. Voegelin claimed that "a careful, analytical reading of the whole work" shows that Calvin, writing in the face of this "civilizational catastrophe," established a "plan for founding a new universal church" to replace the old order." To accomplish this end, he engaged in an anti-philosophical effort to transfer the transcendence of God into an empirical experience. This effort makes the *Institutes* appear to be the solution to a theological matter when it is in fact intended chiefly to serve a practical purpose. How do we know we are elected to be among the saved? Because we have an experience of election. God has predestined this experience--those without it are historically excluded, and those with it are called to a new communal purpose, namely to lead the new church.

This doctrine of predestination is a theological misconstruction. Calvin invokes it out of the need to assure certainty to the new elect, to assure "predestined election through the experience of vocation." Having nullified the *fides caritate formata* that animated the medieval cosmion "by

declaring the love of God a command of the law," and not an experience in the soul of being lovingly drawn to the divine in the "in-between" of human existence, Calvin turns to predestination as the new means of creating community. Predestination in orthodox theology, however, is part of a "theory of the nature and attributes of God, not an empirical claim about human experience in history:"

The necessity or ineluctability, of God's decrees arises speculatively from the problem of God's timelessness; because God is out of time, all that occurs in time is in eternal presence for him; he "foreknows" what is going to happen because to him it is not the future but his presence; and insofar as he is the *prima causa*, all that happens in the distention of time happens of necessity in his timeless causation. "*Scientia Dei est causa rerum*." These speculations with regard to God, however, in no way affect the structure of reality as experienced by man. The speculative necessity of God abolishes neither the experience of contingency in nature nor the experience of free will in man. Calvin's fallacy, thus, can be defined as a misunderstanding of speculative symbols, by which theologians attempt to describe the relation of the world to its creative ground analogically, as propositions in *oratio directa* that refer to a content of world-immanent, human experience.

In the same way, "God's grace," is not "an empirical cause with guaranteed effects." When Calvin gives this grace a "predestinarian necessity," his fallacious construction causes problems in scriptural exegesis that make apparent the deliberately anti-philosophical and gnostic principles of his new founding.

The core of gnosticism is not bad argument, but bad thinking that is publicly masked by bad argument. While Voegelin makes much of Calvin's specious argumentation, he does so to unmask bad thinking, which is for Calvin, as for all gnostics, a claim to a special knowledge. Calvin's gnosis is of predestined election, and it is intended to found "a new universal church with Calvin in the role, not of a successor to Saint Peter, but of a new Saint Peter himself." Voegelin's charge is audacious, but Calvin confirms it:

Calvin reflects on the offices of apostles and evangelists as extraordinary offices at the time of foundation; they have no place in 'well-constituted Churches.' Then he continues: 'Though I do not deny, that even since that period God has sometimes raised up apostles, or evangelists, in their stead, as he has done in our own time. For there was a necessity for such persons to recover the Church from the defection of Antichrist.' The apostolic function is secured for him; at the same time it is barred to others once he has constituted the true church.

This particular doctrine of predestination is not needed merely to give the elect historical certainty of their empirical election, however: there also exist other claims to universality. Since these elect "are called not only to salvation, but also to historical ecclesiastical foundation," their intent to do so must be justified against other claims of divinely sanctioned legitimacy. Disputing such claims is an added reason for Calvin to establish the dogma of predestined, empirically verifiable election. Resting on a predestinarian certainty, this new ecclesiastical foundation stands in stark contrast to the ecclesiastical mediation of the Roman Catholic church, which, while making its own assertions to universality, claims less epistemological certainty for itself.

Voegelin also links Calvin's doctrine of predestination to a philosophy of history. In my view, this linkage is the least convincing aspect of Voegelin's argument. It is certainly the case that such a connection is an integral part of later Puritan millenarism, but Voegelin's reading of Calvin's exegesis of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer is much more immanentistic than Calvin himself seems necessarily to imply. It is the case, however, that not much need be added to Calvin's exegesis to create the historically "highly active" elect that take up arms to help in the aggrandizement of God's kingdom on earth, and who become responsible for the energetic expansion of Calvinist doctrines that Tawney noted several centuries later. When we reach Calvin's treatise on civil government in *Institutes* IV.xx, we may have bridged this gap, but only, it seems to me, with a glance forward to what developed later.

We have circled around the core quality of Calvin's gnosticism--his claim to special knowledge--in several ways. Calvin claims his book is a revelation of heavenly the wisdom that is hidden in the Christian Scriptures. He establishes a new church, unifying it by means of declarations of truth concerning its status based on empirical experiences of transcendent reality (the call of election), and he excludes criticism by means of taboos. His fideism opens the truth of existence--articulated in declarations--to those to whom it is given to know it, closing such declarations to rational criticism and debate. He also tends thereby to dogmatize his specific religious experiences. The final piece of this gnostic assemblage is his peculiar claim to knowledge in the face of depravity, which we find articulated in the opening paragraphs of the *Institutes*.

"Our wisdom," declares Calvin, "in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." It would seem that Calvin follows the classical conception of things, in which human beings are linked through their ratio "with the infinite transcendental reality." But in good Ockhamist fashion, he severs this link, making reason little more than calculating ratiocination. Calvin hovers around the possibility that reason is more than this, but he never touches down. Human sin resulted in a corruption of man's natural gifts and the withdrawal of the supernatural ones. The latter include faith, love to God and towards one's neighbors, and the study of righteousness and holiness. The former include "soundness of mind and integrity of heart." A "residue of intelligence and judgment" as well as will render our minds are "both weak and immersed in darkness." We are, therefore, in a bad way:

As to the will, its depravity is but too well known. Therefore, since reason, by which man discerns between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is a natural gift, it could not be entirely destroyed; but being partly weakened and partly corrupted, a shapeless ruin is all that remains.

But human beings build and have built complex, flourishing civilizations. Calvin must acknowledge some ability of the intellect to make its way in the world. He therefore makes a distinction between "earthly" and "heavenly" or "inferior" and "superior" objects of human cognition. Earthly things are those "which relate not to God and his kingdom, to true righteousness and future blessedness, but have some connection with the present life, and are in a manner confined within its boundaries." The heavenly, on the other hand, are "the pure knowledge of God, the method of righteousness, and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom." The basic principles of justice and knowledge of the manual and liberal arts, all belong to the

former, in part as a kind of "instinct." When it is directed toward "inferior objects," reason is sufficient, even showing traces of "the divine image" in its doings. In regard to the heavenly things, however, "men otherwise the most ingenious are blinder than moles." Accordingly, "to the great truths, what God is in himself, and what he is in relation to us, human reason makes not the least approach," and it is "a truth ... beyond dispute," that "human nature possesses none of the gifts which the elect receive from their heavenly Father through the Spirit of regeneration." These gifts include a "special illumination," beyond the bounds of "ordinary natural gifts." Calvin gives no reason for the categorical distinctions between the domain of natural and supernatural gifts--an especially curious oversight, since one kind of justice is an "instinct" in the category of "inferior" things and therefore seems linked to other perceptions or conceptions of justice. Were the illumination of super nature for private, personal benefit only, we might see this as a quaint philosophical incoherence, but since it is Calvin's intent to extend the competence of the supernatural illumination to every realm of human endeavor, one is less inclined to mirth. Insofar as the claims of the supernatural contradict the insights of our naturally given faculties, the latter must yield, without argument, since none can be given. For example, while the bounds of natural justice can be instinctively known, Calvin's illumination, not natural knowledge, defines the true purpose and boundaries of government as an "order established by God," and seemingly for his purposes, inscrutable to all but the elect.

Gnosticism consists at its core of a claim to special knowledge that will release the knower from the perceived disorder of being into a new realm of order. The worm at the core of existence was for Calvin human depravity, from which immanent salvation was possible only through God's predestined election, which could be empirically known through the experience of the call and a concrete response of legalistically conceived response to it. Assurance of election makes the one called "utterly unshakable." In contrast to a general Lutheran pessimism regarding human capabilities, Calvin displays "optimism as to God despite pessimism as to man" in the face of election. He is optimistic that God "is able to perform that which he has promised" according to a "plan for mankind to be achieved within the historical process." The fulfillment of this plan depends upon the chosen agents of God, his elect. Who those are we can know. What they know, they can only know by special, divine dispensation. It is this claim to knowledge as the certainty of "inner illumination"--as opposed to the faith being formed by love in the human experience of divine transcendence--that makes Calvin a gnostic. This gnosis may be contrasted with the philosophical tradition of medieval civilization that it sought, with considerable success, to replace. Calvin's polemical presentation of incoherent or self-contradictory arguments are merely a sign of the deeper problem--a claim to knowledge that leads to civilizational. transformation, but that cannot, on reasonable grounds, be made good. The new form of Christendom that results must consequently share the problems of the old and besides be defective philosophically in ways the sacrum imperium was not.