

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show why the early version of Voegelin's Gnosis-thesis, as proposed in the *New Science of Politics*, is not convincing. The main argument is that processes of immanentization can be fully explained within the tradition of Judaeo-Christian eschatology, without invoking Gnostic sectarianism. Joachim of Fiore, according to Voegelin the originator of modern Gnosticism, serves as an example for illustrating the argument. The paper also shows that Voegelin became increasingly aware of this problem and accordingly formulated a much more differentiated and convincing version of the Gnosis-thesis in *The Ecumenic Age*.

Joachim of Fiore and Gnosticism

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1. The Gnosis-theses in the *New Science* and related writings

The later volumes of the *History of Political Ideas*, written in the 1940s, already display Eric Voegelin's increasing interest in Gnosticism. He had studied some of the recent research on the ancient Gnostics and believed to have identified Gnostic symbols in the writings of Jean Bodin and other thinkers who played a crucial role in the formation of Western modernity. But it was not before Voegelin's *Walgreen Lectures*, given at University of Chicago in 1951 and later published as the *New Science of Politics*, that the Gnosis-thesis became a central -- If not *the* central element -- of his thought.¹ [1]

In short, the Gnosis-thesis suggests identifying the essence of modernity with the growth of Gnosticism.² [2] Modernity, understood as a process of immanentization, emerges from medieval sectarianism as "a continuous evolution in which modern Gnosticism rises victoriously to predominance over a civilizational tradition deriving from the Mediterranean discoveries of anthropological and soteriological truth,"³ [3] that is, over Greek philosophy and Christian revelation. In a number of

1 [1] The initial impetus to formulate the Gnosis-thesis came from H.U. v. Balthasar's relatively short introduction to Irenaeus: *Die Geduld des Reifens*, 1943. In this text, Balthasar refers to the Gnostic principle of self-redemption, which became seminal for the application of the category Gnosticism to modern movements. The copy in Voegelin's private library (now in the Voegelin Library at University Erlangen) includes the bill which shows that Voegelin bought it in a bookstore in Cambridge MA, in 1945. Thus, the origins of the Gnosis-thesis are datable. I thank Prof. Jürgen Gebhardt for this information.

2 [2] *New Science*, CW 5:190.

3 [3] *Ibid.*:196.

publications up to the early 60s, Voegelin restated the Gnosis-thesis, most famously in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, an essay based on his Munich inaugural lecture in 1958. In these writings Voegelin deepened the psychological analysis of the motivational forces behind the Gnosticism of individual thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger; at the same time, he clarified what movements would qualify as "modern Gnostics". "By Gnostic movements," he wrote in 1960, "we mean such movements as progressivism, positivism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, communism, fascism, and national socialism."⁴ [4] In other words, the Gnosis-thesis covered everything commonly addressed as modern ideologies. What unites them is the Gnostic immanentization, an act of self-divinization which results in the re-divinization of the world that previously had been de-divinized by the philosophers and the Judaeo-Christian revelation.⁵ [5] The new political science was to be understood as an exorcism and a remedy, contributing, by means of *episteme*, to the expulsion of the Gnostic demons, the reopening of the soul toward the transcendent ground, and the reestablishment of the truth of existence.⁶ [6]

2. Joachim of Fiore

The problems arising from the Gnosis-thesis may be perfectly illustrated by the example of Joachim of Fiore. The pivotal role of Joachim in the narrative of the *New Science* is evident. He is the Gnostic prophet, within whom earlier sectarianism crystallizes, and who initiates the age of modern Gnosticism. In the early Middle Ages the Gnostic sects work silently in the underground; after Joachim, Gnosticism rises to dominance in the Western world. In Voegelin's words: "In his trinitarian eschatology Joachim created the aggregate of symbols that govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day."⁷ [7] These symbols were: the third age as a symbol of immanent fulfillment, later to be found in Turgot, Comte, Marx, and National Socialism; the leader in the third age, later identified with Saint Francis just as much as with Adolf Hitler; and finally, the "brotherhood of autonomous persons", a spiritually perfect society without institutional authority.

A re-evaluation of Voegelin's claims is only promising if based on the ground of recent research and scholarship -- if it is not to engage in irrelevant Voegelin-philology. There is now a great difference in the dynamics of scholarship on Gnosticism, on the one hand, and on Joachim of Fiore, on the other hand. The spectacular discovery of a whole Gnostic library near the Egyptian town Nag Hammadi in 1945 led to a huge progress in the scholarly evaluation of ancient Gnosticism.⁸ [8] Today the scholar of Gnosticism is confronted with a huge variety of primary sources in various editions and translations.

4 [4] Ersatz Religion, CW 5:295.

5 [5] New Science, CW 5:189f.

6 [6] Politics, Science, and Gnosticism, CW 5:277.

7 [7] Ibid. 179.

8 [8] Rudolph 1994: 40-58; see also Robinson's introduction.

The situation is totally different in the case of Joachim. Most of the editorial work happened only after Voegelin's death; even today the situation is anything but satisfactory. Even though an edition of Joachim's *Opera Omnia* is now in progress, some of his main works are still not available in critical editions; none of them is available in a modern language, except some Italian translations. Joachim's longest work, the *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, still awaits publication, and the same goes for the second half of his second main work, the *Liber Concordiae*.⁹ [9] The third main work, *Psalterium Decem Chordarum* was published only this year. A true knowledge of Joachim's original writings is still almost completely restricted to specialized Medievalists. For my own research, however, I was given the unique opportunity to use all the unpublished materials of the *Opera Omnia*, and thus had full access to all extant writings of Joachim of Fiore.¹⁰ [10] From this perspective, I want to attempt a short re-evaluation of Voegelin's claims.

First, it is not convincing to put Joachim in a sectarian context, even though many later sects referred to him, or, more frequently, to writings published under his name. Joachim considered himself an orthodox Catholic and submitted all his writings to the supervision of the Church in his testament. He was an advisor to popes and cardinals, and throughout his work fought for the primacy of Rome against all claims of kings, emperors, and the Eastern churches. When one of his works was condemned in the IV Lateran Council, the only issue at stake was his Trinitarian speculation. Joachim was so unfortunate to have polemicized against Petrus Lombardus, the rising star of scholasticism who was canonized by the same council. Ironically, Joachim's eschatology was not found problematic. Pope Innocence III himself had adopted elements of Joachim's eschatological speculations and cited long passages from Joachim's *Expositio* in one of his letters. The decree of the council also ascertains that Joachim's is *vir catholicus* and that the condemnation does not extend to him as a person or his many other writings.¹¹ [11] Pope Gregory IX strongly supported Joachim's Florentian order and in 1234 declared it one of the four pillars of the church.¹² [12] It was not until 20 years later, when the Franciscan radical Gerardo Borgo San Donnino caused great turmoil in Paris by claiming (against the author's intention) that the writings of Joachim would constitute a new Gospel for the coming Third Age that the abbot fell under the suspicion of heresy. Up to this day, however, Joachim has not been officially condemned as a heretic. The opposite seems to have happened.

9 [9] For the edition of the first half see: Daniel, E. Randolph : „Abbot Joachim of Fiore: Liber de Concordia Noui ac Veteris Testamenti", in: *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 73/8. Philadelphia 1983.

10 [10] See my monograph *Joachim von Fiore*, 2004; an English summary of the research results forthcoming in *Essays in Commemoration of Marjorie Reeves*, ed. J. Wannenmacher (2009), and *Brill's Companion to Joachim of Fiore*, ed. M. Riedl/J. Wannenmacher, (forthcoming 2010).

11 [11] *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. H. Denzinger/A. Schönmetzer: 262f., §807.

12 [12] Wessley 1990: 2, 46

In his early monograph on Bonaventure, the current pope, Benedict XVI, saw very well the problematic side of Joachim's eschatology, but also emphasized his positive role. In the very moment Joachim claimed that the incarnation of Christ was not the only significant turning point in history, but that the future general dispensation of the Holy Spirit would mark another one, he accepted the existence of the Church in her own historical right and not just as part of eschatological events. From this perspective, he strengthened the authority of the clerical church and explained her deficiencies as a temporal necessity of the second age.¹³ [13] It would not be surprising if the canonization of Joachim, which is currently in progress, would be completed under the present pope.

All these arguments could still be rejected as superficial; and the popes might very well have gone wrong in their appreciation of the Calabrian abbot. It seems advisable to look at the four symbols Voegelin identified as crucial and see how they appear in Joachim's actual writings.¹⁴ [14]

1) The brotherhood of autonomous persons: Voegelin goes wrong when he says that Joachim formulated the idea of a community of the spirituality perfect without institutional authority. The sketch of the constitution for the third age, as found in his *Liber Figurarum* shows that the future community will be governed by a small number of charismatically gifted persons. But the whole society displays a strictly hierarchical structure, differentiated according to the traditional orders of monks, clerics and laics, who do not mix. The real novelty is that the monks take the highest rank instead of the clerics. Yet, even the majority of the monks lives under the government of a *pater spiritualis*, who might be discerned as an abbot, or if the constitution is applied to Christian society as a whole, as a monastic pope.¹⁵ [15] Joachim also maintains the traditional separation between clerics and laics and condemns the contemporary Waldensians for confusing the spheres of the sacred and the profane.¹⁶ [16] This also speaks against a sectarian context of Joachim's thought.

2) The leader or dux. Joachim makes very clear that this leader is nothing else but a pope, the highest priest of the universal Jerusalem, i.e., the Holy Mother Church (*ascendet quasi nous dux de Babilone, uniuersalis scilicet pontifex noue Ierusalem, hoc est sancte matris ecclesie*). He is the *dux e Babylone* because he frees the Church from the hand of the German rulers, the new Babylonian kings according to Joachim's typology. Moreover, the prophecy of the *dux* contains another element, not mentioned by Voegelin: The papal leader will "go to Jerusalem", but not by a change of locations (*immutatio locorum*), but rather by a reform and a subsequent extension to the whole world (*dabitur ei plena libertas ad*

¹³ [13] Ratzinger, *Geschichtstheologie*: 108.

¹⁴ [14] Cf. my essay „Gioacchino da Fiore padre della modernità. Le tesi di Eric Voegelin," in Gian Luca Potestà (ed.), *Gioacchino da Fiore nella cultura dell '800 e del '900. Atti del 6° Congresso internazionale di studi gioachimiti*, Rome: Viella, 2005, pp. 219-236.

¹⁵ [15] *Liber Figurarum*, tav.12.

¹⁶ [16] *Tractatus I,9*, ed. Santi: 196, l. 10-25.

innouandam christianam religionem et ad predicandum uerbum dei).¹⁷ [17] In other words, the leadership of this pope will not materialize in a crusade; rather he will "rebuild the temple" by spiritual renewal. Joachim clearly rejects violence as a means of eschatological acceleration. The precondition of ecclesiastical growth is inner reform.

3) The Gnostic prophet: Joachim was certainly not a Gnostic. The yet unedited *Expositio in Apocalypsim* contains a clear refutation of the only contemporary Gnostic sect, the Albigensians. It is obvious that Joachim in no way belongs to the neat line of Gnostic movements and sects from Manicheans over Paulicians and Bogomils up to the Albigensians, that scholars have constructed and that Voegelin also invokes in the *New Science*.¹⁸ [18] Yet, Joachim's refutation of the Albigensians is not just the anti-heretic reflex of a faithful catholic; it shows that he had quite intimate knowledge about Gnostic doctrines and realized how much they contradicted his own teaching. According to Joachim, the error of the Gnostics is a misconception of the relation between body and spirit. In Voegelin's terms, one could say that he accuses them of pneumopathology. They wrongly define redemption as the liberation of man's spiritual substance from the prison of the evil body (*disputando de corpore et spiritu, ut diceret omne corpus esse fugiendum*).¹⁹ [19] Joachim, on the other hand, explains in traditional Pauline terms that the redemptory act of Christ is the crucifixion of the flesh that enables man to join the mystical body of Christ. In other words, the Christian redemption is an act of divine grace, the transformation of the body from the flesh into the *soma pneumatikon*, and not the escape from the body.²⁰ [20] Redemption is necessary not because the human soul got lost in the creation of an evil god but because of original sin. Evil, therefore, has no external source outside God's creation. The father as the creator, the son as the redeemer, and the spirit, who completes the act of redemption, are three persons of the same Divine essence. God created the world and he will save it. Yet, when Joachim says "world", he means mankind and not the cosmos. In full agreement with Catholic orthodoxy Joachim rejects all cosmological speculation, as we find them not only in Gnosticism but also in Eastern Christian theology, especially of the Alexandrian type. The *gnosis*, the redemptory knowledge of the Gnostics, is cosmological knowledge and finds no equivalent in Joachim's writings. All relevant knowledge is enclosed in the Holy Scripture, especially the *Book of Revelation*, and it will remain hidden from the

¹⁷ [17] Liber Concordiae IV,31, fol.56^{rb}, ed. Daniel: 402, l. 1-9; Sach 4:9; Rev. 7:2; cf. Ezra 3; Hag 1:12-15.

¹⁸ [18] For a critique of this construction see Coulianu, *The Tree of Gnosis* (1998), King, *What is Gnosticism?* (2003).

¹⁹ [19] *Expositio III*, fol.130^{vb}.

²⁰ [20] „Seculum futurum quod erit post resurrectionem ascribendum est Spiritui sancto, quia ibi non solum anime, que natura subtiliores sunt, verum etiam corpora nostra spiritalia erunt et templa Spiritus sancti, quando et, consumptis universis corruptionibus carnis, solus idem Spiritus regnabit in eis." *Expositio/Introductorius*, fol.6^{ra}; (text of the Venice edition corrected according to K.-V. Selge's yet unpublished edition).

sapientes and *prudentes* who are preoccupied with cosmology.²¹ [21] What Gnostic would ever say such a sentence? This is the inversion of Gnosticism. Therefore, Joachim's concept of knowledge (*scientia*) has no relation to Gnosticism whatsoever. Certainly, he says that knowledge will be multiplied in the coming age of the Spirit.²² [22] Yet firstly, this knowledge is nothing but a more perfect understanding of the mysteries in the Old and New Testament; secondly, it results from the dispensation of the Holy Spirit and not from the efforts of individuals; and thirdly, it will not be given to intellectuals but to humble believers (*fideles*).

4) The third age: Joachim cannot be understood in the context of Gnostic sectarianism but only in the context of Catholic Church reform. This reform program, which led to the Investiture Controversy, always implied two components. Firstly, the papal (Gregorian) reform program of *libertas ecclesiae* aimed at the liberation of the church from the influence of the lay rulers or, put differently, the exclusion of the temporal rulers from the charismatic order of the church. The new concept of the church was practically reduced to the *ordo ecclesiasticus*, the ordained clergy, which formed a hierocratic church governed by the pope.²³ [23] Secondly, the monastic reform program, emerging from Cluny and carried on by the Cistercians aimed at a spiritualized church. The unprecedented outbreak of monasticism in the 12th century, the amazingly successful efforts to spiritualize and monasticize parts of the clergy (Premonstratensians, Regular Canons, etc.), and the moral victory of the church in the investiture controversy could be taken as evidence that the reform could actually be accomplished.

Joachim's contribution is a radically consequential reflection on the future status of the church should the reforms actually succeed: Christian society would be governed by the Church and not by temporal rulers who would either submit or perish. The church would be spiritual, monastic, and no longer preoccupied with earthly concerns. The glory of this church would shine forth throughout the whole world and lead the return of the Eastern churches as well as the conversion of Jews and infidels. This second transformation of the people of God would be as significant as the first transformation from Israel to the Christian church. In a visionary experience, it became clear to Joachim that this status, the *tertius status ecclesiae*, would in fact constitute a new age (*in initio tertii status positi sumus*).²⁴ [24] The

21 [21] „Quod si hi qui iuxta Salvatoris vocem norunt iudicare faciem celi et terre signa temporum, aut non cognoscunt aut non credunt agnoscentibus ea, non est meum iudicare de eis. [...] Confiteor tibi, Pater, domine celi et terre, quia abscondisti hec a sapientibus et prudentibus et revelasti ea parvulis." Expositio/Liber Introductorius, fol.2va; cf. Mt 11:25, 16:4, Lk 10:21.

22 [22] „Et notandum quod in tercio statu nuda erunt misteria et aperta fidelibus, quia per singulas etates mundi multiplicatur scientia, sicut scriptum est: pertransibunt plurimi et multiplex erit scientia." Liber Concordiae V,67, fol.96^{va}.

23 [23] Kempf, Friedrich: „Das Problem der Christianitas im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert", in: HJ 79 (1960), S.104-123, v.a. S.108ff.; vgl. Beinert 1973, S.80f.; Jordan 1980, S.12ff.; Ullmann 1960, S.403ff. u.ö.

24 [24] Expositio I, fol.39^{rb}.

new age, however, would not so much be the result of human reform efforts; rather, the reform of the church is interpreted as the final result of God's continuous re-education and restitution of mankind, beginning right after Adam's fall (*ut restituens commutaret in melius*).²⁵ [25] There is no place for the Gnostic self-redemption in Joachim's writings, nor do they provide evidence for the Promethean attitude that Voegelin identifies as an essential characteristic of Gnosticism.²⁶ [26] However, this third age would be as temporal as any other age and perish in the tribulations at the end of times. Yet, the mystical body of Christ would find its final perfection in the Beyond. Joachim of Fiore is best understood as an apocalyptic thinker, who maintains the apocalyptic faith in a divinely structured linear course of history, but whose pessimism about sinful mankind is overcome by the optimism of reformatory progress. In any case, he firmly stands in the Catholic tradition.

Having said all this, I still think that Voegelin was right in discerning Joachim's thought as a turning point toward the immanentization of eschatology. But to say it one more time, this immanentization and its inherent progressivism is to be understood as a radicalization of Catholic church reform and not as an outcome of sectarian undercurrents. It is the result of the new concept of the church, as developed by the Gregorian reformers. Augustine once declared that the wheat and the chaff grow side by side in the church, as long as it is a *civitas peregrina*, a peregrine community in this world.²⁷ [27] Only the Last Judgment would purify the church and unite it with the City of God.²⁸ [28] The Gregorian reformers, however, aimed at a purification of the church in historical times. They wanted to separate the wheat from the chaff and achieve personal continuity between the historical church and the eternal heavenly society. This is exactly what Joachim describes as progress (*profectus*). At the end of the reform process,

²⁵ [25] The following quote illustrates how Joachim relates the reformation (*reformare*) of humanity after the fall to the previous formation (*formare*) in the creation. The agent of reformation is God and not man: „Si enim voluit et potuit *formare* corpus Ade, qui fuit pater omnium, de limo terre, cur non possit eodem modo corpora filiorum Adam *reformare* de terra? Eras aliquando pulvis terre et esse cepisti quod non eras -- siquidem in Adam omnes fuimus a principio pulvis --, et non potest Deus reversum in pulverem *restituere in formam primam*, ut esse incipias sicut eras? An quia tunc erat Verbum Dei, per quem facta sunt ista, modo autem esse desiit, ne horum similia operetur? O stulta corda hominum et tarda ad credendum in omnibus que locuti sunt prophete! Nonne hec pati oportuit genus hominum propter malum superbie et sic per mortem carnis pertingere ad vitam eternam? [...] Voluit Omnipotens exercere iudicium hoc in genere humano, non ut dissiparet opus suum, sed ut ostenderet illi altitudinem magnitudinis sue et incuteret ei timorem discipline, ut non saperet alta, sciens quia, qui potens fuerat ad *formandum*, non erat impotens ad *reformandum*, non solum *ut restitueret quod dissolutum erat*, verum etiam *ut restituens commutaret in melius*." Exp. I, fol.67^{vb}, my italics, (text corrected according to Selge's yet unpublished edition); cf. Gen 2:7; Lk 24:25; Rm 12:16.

²⁶ [26] Science, Politics, and Gnosticism, CW 5:269-271.

²⁷ [27] "Nec tamen cum illo [Christo] regnant zizania, quamvis in ecclesia cum tritico crescant." De civitate. Dei XX,9.

²⁸ [28] Ibid.

in the third status, or, according to the Augustinian periodization, the seventh time of the world, the church will partially display the heavenly glory (*pars quaedam claritatis Ierusalem manifesta erit in septima, et tota generaliter in octava*).²⁹ [29] The church will mirror in detail the heavenly Jerusalem, and the members of the church are identical with the members of the society in the Beyond:

"[...] in the seventh age, even the smallest detail of the structure of Jerusalem will be completed just as the convocation of all the people that will dwell in it (*perficiatur in septima, quicquid minus erit in structura Ierusalem, et vocatione universi populi, qui futurus est in ea*) -- insofar as in the future world, which will be like an eighth age, everything will evidently be fulfilled, which is related to this [convocation]."³⁰ [30]

It has to be mentioned that this interpretation of Joachim coincides with Voegelin's earlier chapters on Joachim in the *Political Religions* and the *History of Political Ideas*, where Joachim is not seen in a Gnostic context.³¹ [31] It occasionally also comes up in the *New Science*, too, where the experience of reform is seen as an additional component in the process of immanentization;³² [32] but these remarks are covered up by the all-comprehensive Gnosis-thesis. However, a Gnostic influence on Joachim can not be verified in his original writings. Joachim's immanentizing faith in progress can be fully explained within the Christian tradition and the reformatory efforts of his time.

3. The revision of the Gnosis-thesis

In the summer of 1973, Eric Voegelin gave a number of interviews to a young scholar and former student of his, Ellis Sandoz, later to be published as the *Autobiographical Reflections*. Now, Voegelin was not so sure anymore about the comprehensive explanatory value of his Gnosis-thesis:

"Since my first application of Gnosticism to modern phenomena in *The New Science of Politics* and in 1959 in my study on *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 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 is the metastatic apocalypse

²⁹ [29] *Enchiridion*, ed. Burger: 49, l.1313f.

³⁰ [30] *Expositio VIII*, fol. 221^{rb}, my translation.

³¹ [31] *Political Religions*, CW 5:50-52; *History of Political Ideas 2*, CW 20:126-134. Both chapters do not see Joachim in any Gnostic context.

³² [32] Surprisingly, Voegelin says at one occasion, that Gnosticism does not necessarily lead to immanentization but a further component is needed. He adds: "This further component is the civilization expansiveness of Western society in the Middle Ages. [...] The spiritual growth of the West through the order since Cluny expressed itself in Joachim's speculation in the idea of a Third Realm of the monks." *New Science*, CW 5:191.

deriving directly from the Israelite prophets, via Paul, and forming a permanent strand in Christian sectarian movements right up to the Renaissance."³³ [33]

This, however, is not just a slight revision. It is not only that Voegelin mentions other elements of modernity that he had previously overlooked, such as the new construction of an intramundane order in the "miscarried" revival of Platonism in Renaissance Florence and the "egophanic revolt" in 18th century France;³⁴ [34] the revision points to a deeper question, which had already been formulated in the *New Science* but was covered up by the all-comprehensive Gnosis-thesis. The question is whether at least some of the roots of modern immanentism are to be sought in the Judaeo-Christian revelation itself. I will return to this question below.

As I think, Voegelin's revision of the Gnosis-thesis resulted from a variety of factors. However, two factors are related to the growth of empirical knowledge.

1) I already mentioned the discovery of the Coptic Nag Hammadi Library in 1945. Unfortunately, the editorial process was slowed down tremendously by political turbulences, such as the Suez Crisis.³⁵ [35] The significance of these discoveries becomes apparent if one considers that at the time Voegelin wrote the *New Science*, the sum total of primary sources amounted to no more than 50 printed pages.³⁶ [36] Today, only the English paperback edition of the Nag Hammadi Library provides more than 500 pages primary texts.³⁷ [37] As Hans Jonas pointed out, there is hardly any other field in scholarship where a single archaeological discovery has so completely changed the picture.³⁸ [38] In the early 1950s, all more systematic considerations on the nature of Gnosticism still had to rely on the heresiological writings of the Church Fathers, i.e., on the writings of the enemy. Voegelin's perspective in the *New Science* is also heresiological. As the standard work on Gnosticism he recommends the *Adversus*

³³ [33] Autobiographical Reflections, edited with an Introduction, by Ellis Sandoz, Baton Rouge and London : Louisiana State UP, 1989, pp.66f.

³⁴ [34] In a conversation with Eric O'Connor in 1976, he takes it even further: "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." Cited from D. Germino 1998, p.23.

³⁵ [35] Another important primary source, the *Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*, was discovered already in 1898 but due to an almost unbelievable series of mishaps and disasters published only in 1955. Rudolph 1994: 33f.

³⁶ [36] Rudolph 1994:

³⁷ [37] Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Library ...

³⁸ [38] Jonas 1999: 20.

Haereses of Irenaeus of Lyon, written in the 2nd century CE.³⁹ [39] By the early 1970s, most of the new texts were available in excellent editions as well as in translations in several modern languages. The edition was accompanied by the publication of a huge amount of secondary literature. A lengthy footnote in *The Ecumenic Age* shows that Voegelin had meanwhile familiarized himself with the most important primary and secondary sources.⁴⁰ [40] It is evident that the new basis of knowledge was one of the major factors behind Voegelin's revision of the Gnosis-thesis. The new basis of texts made obvious that Gnosticism was a quite complex phenomenon, comprising a tremendous variety of different trends. Moreover, the lines between Gnosticism and orthodox Christianity cannot be as clearly drawn as it had appeared in the heresiological writings.

In some cases it is yet undecided if we are dealing with Christian or Gnostic texts. One of the most debated texts of the Nag Hammadi Library is the *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, formally not unlike the hypothetical source Q that New Testament scholars assume as a common source for Jesus' sayings in the synoptic Gospels.⁴¹ [41] In fact, many of the sayings coincide with the ones found in the New Testament. It is not unlikely that a Syrian, maybe Aramaic original of the gospel was written around the same time as Mark, Matthew, Luke.⁴² [42] The sayings of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* are much more adaptable to Gnostic theology,⁴³ [43] but cannot be ascribed to any Gnostic group or school and display similarities to the Gospel of John. The *Gospel of Thomas*, then, could be interpreted as early evidence for an independent Gnostic or proto-Gnostic tradition, providing an alternative understanding of the epiphany of Christ. As we will see, such an interpretation coincides with Voegelin's reformulation of the Gnosis-thesis in *The Ecumenic Age*.

39 [39] New Science, CW 5:190f.

40 [40] *The Ecumenic Age* (1974): 25, note 2.

41 [41] Nag Hammadi Codex II,2, ed. Robinson: 124-138;

42 [42] Cf. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*: 16; Robinson: 124-26; Jonas: 386.

43 [43] Cf. The programmatic prologue (verses 1-3) emphasizes the importance of knowledge for salvation and the co-substantiality of the inner and outer dimension of the Divine:

These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. (1) And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death." (2) Jesus said, "Let him who seeks continue seeking until he find. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule all over the all." (3) Jesus said, "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you [cf. Luke ...], and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty." Ed. Robinson: 126.

2) Originally Voegelin had planned six volumes, describing five types of order and symbolization. The first three were published, comprising the cosmological form of the Ancient Near Eastern empires, the historical form of Israel, and the Hellenic myth and philosophy arising from the Polis. In the introduction to *The Ecumenic Age* Voegelin explains that his increasing empirical knowledge made him deviate from the original program. The program for the fourth volume on the multicivilizational empires since Alexander and the emergence of Christianity proved to be too limited, as Voegelin became aware of China as a parallel and independent ecumene, and of historically independent spiritual outbursts in India. Equally, the description of modernity by only one type, the national state, and Gnosticism as its symbolic form, turned out to be impossible. The situation, however, could not be remedied by the addition of other types:

"What ultimately broke the project was, however, was the impossibility of aligning the empirical types [of order and symbolization; M.R.] in any time sequence at all that would permit the structures actually found to emerge from a history conceived as a 'course'."44 [44]

In other words, the grand narrative behind the whole project of *Order and History* collapsed. The narrative said that the great differentiations of consciousness, the revelation of Israel and the logos of the Hellenes, merged in Christianity under the condition of the multicivilizational Empires. The resulting anthropological and soteriological truth was later corrupted by Gnosticism and brought about modernity. As soon as Voegelin had discovered the "pluralistic field of outbursts,"45 [45] he realized that the "process of history, and such order as can be discerned in it, is not a story to be told from the beginning to its happy, or unhappy, end."46 [46] If the spiritual outbursts resulting in a differentiation of consciousness constitute a pluralistic field and not a unilinear development, the same goes for the deformative processes. Thus, the above quoted revision of the Gnosis-thesis is partly explained: modernity is composed of a variety of factors and is not the result of a single process. Accordingly, the two concluding volumes of *Order and History* on early modern and modern Gnosticism, which had been announced in the preface to *Israel and Revelation*, were never written.47 [47] However, the above quote also makes clear that Voegelin did not drop the Gnosis-thesis completely. Yet, he gave it an altogether new shape in the introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*.

4. The Gnosis-Thesis in *The Ecumenic Age*

If Voegelin gave up the linear construction of history, he did not give up the basic idea that the "peculiar structure in history originates in the stratification of man's consciousness through the process of

44 [44] *The Ecumenic Age* (1974): 2.

45 [45] *Ibid.* (1974): 5.

46 [46] *Ibid.*: 6.

47 [47] *Israel and Revelation* (1956): x.

differentiation."⁴⁸ [48] The differentiation results from "theophanic events" in which man becomes aware of a transcendent divine reality but also "discovers the something in his humanity that is the site and sensorium of divine presence; and he finds such words as *psyche*, or *pneuma*, or *nous*, to symbolize the something."⁴⁹ [49] The theophanic events, however, always imply a certain danger as they create a tension between the experience of the Beyond in the soul, on the one hand, and the experience of a divine Beginning of spatio-temporal existence in the cosmos, on the other hand. The human carriers of spiritual outbursts are liable to a confusion of the two.⁵⁰ [50] Voegelin writes:

"Though the divine reality is one, its presence is experienced in the modes of the Beyond and the Beginning. The Beyond is present in the immediate experience of movements in the psyche; while the presence of the divine Beginning is mediated through the experience of the existence and intelligible structure of things in the cosmos. The two models require two different types of language for their adequate expression. The immediate presence in the movements of the soul requires the revelatory language of consciousness. This is the language of seeking, searching, and questioning, of ignorance and knowledge concerning the divine ground, of futility, absurdity, anxiety, and alienation of existence, of being moved to seek and question, of being drawn toward the ground, of turning around, of return, illumination and rebirth. The presence mediated by the existence and order of things in the cosmos requires the mythical language of a creator-god of Demiurge, of a divine force that creates, sustains, and preserves the order of things."⁵¹ [51]

The confusion of the languages, however, can easily lead into a confusion of existence. The first example that might come to our mind today is the great confusion of creationists who mistake the cosmogonic myth of the Genesis as immediate revelation. Voegelin's example is the Gospel of John. John, who is confronted with the epiphany of Christ, i.e., the presence of the Divine word in the cosmos, confuses Beyond and Beginning by the identification of the revelatory word from the Beyond with the creating word of the Beginning. He identifies the word that becomes flesh with the word "by which all things are made", as he says in the prologue to his Gospel. Nevertheless, the same word that has created this world promises a salvation beyond this world, speaks a truth which is not of this world, wants to establish a kingdom which is not of this world, and assembles the believers who dwell in this world but are not of this world. This, says Voegelin, is exactly the problem of Gnosticism, because the question

⁴⁸ [48] The Ecumenic Age (1974): 8.

⁴⁹ [49] Ibid.: 8.

⁵⁰ [50] "The new truth pertains to man's consciousness of his humanity in participatory tension toward the divine ground, and to no reality beyond this restricted area. The human carriers of the spiritual outbursts do not always realize the narrow limits of the area directly affected by the differentiating process. For the differentiation of consciousness indirectly affects the image of reality as a whole; and the enthusiastic discoverers of the truth are sometimes inclined to treat such secondary effects as they believe themselves to perceive, and not always correctly, as direct insights." Ibid.: 8; cf. The Beginning and the Beyond, CW 28.

⁵¹ [51] The Ecumenic Age (1974): 18.

arises: "Why should a cosmos exist at all, if man can do no better than live in it as if he were not of it, in order to make his escape from the prison through death?"

In *The Ecumenic Age* and partly already in *Israel and Revelation* Voegelin's philosophical and historical inquiries have reached a stage where he no longer hesitates to identify the origins of modern deformation in the biblical texts themselves. The Gospel of John is not just affected by Gnostic influences, as Voegelin said earlier; it displays a "Gnostic manifestation in its own right."⁵² [52] This explains why the modern Gnostics, Schelling and Hegel, do not refer to the symbols of the ancient Gnostic system-builders Valentinian and Basilides but to the Gospel of John. Realizing how much the Christian promise of a salvation beyond this world has aggravated the danger of confusing Beginning and Beyond, Voegelin takes it even further: "I am inclined to recognize in the epiphany of Christ the great catalyst that made eschatological consciousness an historical force, both in forming and deforming humanity."⁵³ [53]

I do not have to emphasize the significance of these words and rather return to the Gnostic experience. Voegelin says:

"The fallacy at the core of the Gnostic answer to the question is the expansion of consciousness from the Beyond to the Beginning. In the construction of Gnostic systems, the immediate experience of divine presence in the mode of the Beyond is speculatively expanded to comprehend a knowledge of the Beginning that is accessible only in the mode of mediated experience. In the imagery of the expansive speculation, the process of reality becomes an intelligible psychodrama, beginning with a fall in the pneumatic divinity, continuing with the 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."⁵⁴ [54]

This is not the place to discuss the details of the Gnostic psychodramas. Important is the motivating experience: The Gnostics, just as the Evangelist John, are motivated by an extremely intense experience of the Beyond. John's experience of "the divine oneness and its presence in man" is so strong, that the experience of the cosmos is drawn into it. And equally the Gnostic is motivated by an "intensely experienced presence of the Beyond."⁵⁵ [55] The more he experiences the Beyond, the more he feels alienated from the cosmos. Out of his alienation he creates the anticosmic psychodrama that allows him to integrate the experience of the deficient spatio-temporal existence into the experience of the Beyond.⁵⁶ [56] The psychodrama, however, is not identical with the myth, as it takes the cosmogonic

⁵² [52] Ibid.: 21.

⁵³ [53] Ibid.: 20.

⁵⁴ [54] Ibid.: 19.

⁵⁵ [55] Ibid.

⁵⁶ [56] In this respect Voegelin agrees with Hans Jonas. Jonas 1999: 76-79.

events as certain knowledge, and as redemptory *gnosis*. The difference to the early version of Gnosticism is apparent. Fifteen years earlier, in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Voegelin said that "in the gnostic movement man remains shut off from transcendent being".⁵⁷ [57] Now he says exactly the opposite: The Gnostic has "a consciousness of the movement toward the Beyond of such strength and clarity that it becomes an obsessive illumination."⁵⁸ [58] Every reader of the Nag Hammadi documents will readily admit that the primary sources support only the latter solution.

Yet, the psychological dimension does not suffice to explain the degree of alienation from the cosmos as we find it in the Gnostic texts. Voegelin now provides an analysis of the political context: "In pragmatic history, Gnosticism arises from six centuries of imperial expansion and civilizational destruction." One empire destroys and the other; Israel, Hellas, as many other societies fall victim to imperial conquest.

"This pragmatic impact of conquest on the traditional forms of existence in society is abrupt; and its abruptness is not matched by an equally sudden spiritual response to the situation. The divine authority of the older symbols is impaired when the societies whose reality of order they express lose their political independence, while the new imperial order has, at least initially, no more than the authority of power. Hence, the spiritual and intellectual lives of the peoples exposed to the events are in danger of separating from the reality of socially ordered existence."⁵⁹ [59]

If the psychological and the political ("pragmatic") argument are taken together, the origin of Gnosticism may be explained by an intense experience of the divine which can find no symbolic expression and, consequently, gain no social relevance in a hostile political environment. Under the circumstance of the ecumenic empires the alienation reaches a degree where it turns into pure hate against the cosmos. I have to admit that this is the most convincing explanation of Gnosticism I ever encountered. It provides a true explanation of the symbolisms in the original sources. It fully explains why the Gnostic psychodramas extend the political symbolism to cosmology, as it is expressed in the symbols the archons and the evil demiurge. Not only society, but all eight Aeons are governed by alien rulers. Salvation means a final victory over the cosmos, enabled by the sending of a redeemer from the Beyond. Thus, Jesus says in the Gospel of John: "Though in the cosmos you have affliction, be confident, for I have been victorious over the cosmos."⁶⁰ [60]

However, the Gnostic solution is not a necessary one. Other reactions are possible, such as Stoic cosmopolitanism, which aims to reconcile ecumenic rule and the Hellenic philosophy of the polis; or actual political resistance against the ecumenic rulers as with the Maccabees or the Zealots. The most important possibility in this context is what Voegelin calls the metastatic apocalypse. It expresses the same hate against the ecumenic empires, but turns to a historical solution instead of a cosmic one, as in

⁵⁷ [57] *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, CW 5:265.

⁵⁸ [58] *The Ecumenic Age* (1974): 20.

⁵⁹ [59] *Ibid.*: 21f.

⁶⁰ [60] John 16:32f.; cf. *The Ecumenic Age* (1974): 17.

the case of Gnosticism. In the vision of Daniel (Dan. 2), history is described as a succession of hostile empires. Yet, the faith of the believer is so strong that it anticipates a future transformation of the world in a metastatic act which implies the destruction of imperial reality altogether.⁶¹ [61] The alienation from reality is as complete as in the Gnostic case, but the specific symbolic tradition of Judaism recommends historical rather than cosmological speculations. Again, this is the tradition in which Joachim belongs. The decisive novelty is only that, under the circumstances of church reform, the metastatic transformation of reality -- the creation of a new world -- is not awaited at the end of times but experienced in the present (*in hoc tempore videmus de novo dominum creasse celum et terram*).⁶² [62]

As Voegelin rightly saw: "From the Ecumenic Age, there emerges a new type of ecumenic humanity, which, with all its complications of meaning, reaches as a millennial constant into the modern Western civilization."⁶³ [63] However, this new ecumenic humanity finds expression in different symbolic forms articulating the varying experiences of the ecumenic situation. Many of these symbolic forms, the Gnostic, apocalyptic, mystic, and ecclesiastic types, have a long legacy in Western civilization and beyond. Admittedly, they often merge and interact; but for the sake of historical clarity and exactness, any unnecessary confusion should be avoided. For a confusion of symbolic articulations also means a confusion of the underlying experiences. Therefore, the early version of Voegelin's Gnosis-thesis was a dead end.

Conclusion

The Ecumenic Age provides a convincing analysis of ancient Gnosticism. It accounts for the psychological and spiritual as well as the historical and political context. It does justice to the sources and the contemporary state of scholarship. Eric Voegelin was not granted the time to re-evaluate the impact of Gnosticism on modernity, applying his new understanding of the Gnostic phenomenon. This work remains to be done and promises interesting results.⁶⁴ [64] To this end, however, the earlier version of the Gnosis-thesis must finally be abandoned, as Eric Voegelin himself did more than thirty years ago.

⁶¹ [61] "When the conflict between the revealed truth of order and the actual disorder of the times becomes too intense, the traumatic experience can induce the transformation of the mystery into metastatic expectations." *The Ecumenic Age* (1974): 239f.

⁶² [62] *Liber Concordiae* V,21, fol.70^{vb}; vgl. *Expositio* VIII, fol.215^{vb}.

⁶³ [63] *The Ecumenic Age* (1974): 58.

⁶⁴ [64] There are a few interesting remarks in the last and unfinished volume of *Order and History*, which show that Voegelin continues to identify Gnostic elements in modernity, but now clearly keeps the Gnostic, apocalyptic, and mystic symbolic forms separate. In *Search of Order*, CW 18: 47f. and 78.

