

# Hyperdemocracy and the Gnostic Impulse

*William D. Gairdner*

For two thousand years Western civilization has struggled with and vacillated between two logically possible but quite different doctrinal responses—the Gnostic and the Christian—to the most fundamental theological question of all: How can there be a good God and a bad world?

The Gnostic response has been characterized by scholars such as Ioan Couliano as a system of thought that necessarily generates one of a number of logical solutions to this basic problem. For like Platonism, it was, and remains, a system “starting from simple premises. Once such premises are switched on, the system continues to produce solutions that require no prior ‘experience of the world’ in order to be held . . . it is the system that creates the world-view, and not vice versa.” He elaborates on the strictly limited number of ways in which such systems operate as “a device serving theodicy” that aims “to reconcile the existence of a good Creator with the patent imperfections of the world and of human existence.”<sup>1</sup> Both responses manage to absolve God of responsibility for worldly evil, but they do so in utterly irreconcilable ways.

## *The Two Solutions*

The “Good God, Good World, Bad Man,” or standard Christian solution, achieves the absolution of God by laying the blame on fallen man. It then offers a way out in the form of faith, atonement, redemption, and eventual bodily resurrection to eternal life. It is a solution that generates love of all creation and worldly optimism through the expectation of future salvation for all believers.

The “Good God, Good Man, Bad World,” or standard Gnostic solution, takes an opposing view.<sup>2</sup> It argues for a god beyond this evil world who is so good he simply could not have willed or created such a manifestly bad place. Evil must therefore have been introduced not by man but by a rebellious “trickster” god whose only use for humans was as a material means to trap the sparks of the one true God that have fallen into this evil place. Under this solution, a kind of immediate salvation is possible through recognition and personal embrace of the *spark of divinity*, or *gnosis*, carefully husbanded within

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**William D. Gairdner** is a private scholar living near Toronto. His most recent books are *The Trouble with Canada . . . Still!*, *The Book of Absolutes: A Critique of Relativism and a Defence of Universals*, and *The Trouble with Democracy*.

the Gnostic believer. The endgame of Gnosticism, its morality—and especially its politics—is necessarily and logically rooted in a repudiation of this world of gross matter from which each living Gnostic eagerly seeks to escape inwardly, until a final spiritual escape of the soul becomes possible with the death of the body.<sup>3</sup>

### *Can It Be Gnosticism?*

In *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Eric Voegelin listed his six well-known characteristics of modern Gnostic movements, as follows. The Gnostic is (1) “dissatisfied with his situation” because the world is (2) “intrinsically poorly organized” and to blame for all wickedness; yet (3) “salvation from the evil of the world is possible,” but (4) “the order of being will have to be changed in an historical process,” especially through (5) “a salvational act . . . through man’s own effort,” by way of finding (6) “a formula [the actual *gnosis*] for self and world salvation.” This change of the existing order, assisted by “the murder of God,” he claimed, is “the central concern” of the self-exalted Gnostic prophet.<sup>4</sup>

He attributed a certain complex of symbols to “modifications of the Christian idea of perfection,” but at least in this brief study did not elaborate. To those familiar with the Gnostic religion, however, it may seem that Voegelin’s six features are in too many respects contradicted by the true Gnostic faith, and the reparative idea of “immanentization of the eschaton” does not appear to resolve this contradiction unless someone can explain how this process can be selective. In other words, in what way does the fact of immanentization explain how extreme anti-mundane pessimism becomes extreme pro-mundane optimism?

In a key essay, Stephen A. McKnight queries exactly this loose use of Gnostic

terminology, observing that “the belief that the world is or can be made into a suitable home for man is, to the Gnostic, one of the fundamental demonstrations of a profound state of ignorance (*agnoia*),” concluding that we need a demonstration as to how and why “the radical dualism of ancient Gnosticism becomes transformed into a doctrine of inner-worldly fulfillment.”<sup>5</sup>

In short, the true Gnostic believes so deeply that this world is forsaken that his one true God must exist beyond and apart from it altogether, a God who has nothing to do with us, or even with anything as disgusting as gross matter. Hence, he does not wish to murder God, as Voegelin puts it, but rather to escape this world and join him as soon as possible. It is this pure desire for God that evinces such a strong sense of radical pessimism and repudiation with respect to this world and the material body—a *contemptus mundi*—that is for most, if not quite all, Gnostics<sup>6</sup> the very badge of their faith.

Hans Jonas puts it succinctly: “the pneumatic morality is determined by hostility toward the world and contempt for all mundane ties.”<sup>7</sup> Kurt Rudolph more amply describes the same reality. Gnosticism, he says, “took no interest of any kind in a reform of earthly conditions but only in their complete and final destruction. It possessed no other ‘revolutionary’ programme for altering conditions, as they appeared to it, than the elimination of earthly structures in general and the restoration of the ideal world of the spirit that existed at the very beginning.”<sup>8</sup>

This is a clear description of a Gnostic eschatology that necessarily produces its own axiology, the logic of which forces the conclusion that for a Gnostic merely to imagine, let alone attempt, political perfection in this world would betray the Gnostic solution to the “guilt” of God,

unravel the internal logic of the faith, and thus trigger a profound theological crisis.

However, there is another, more likely candidate for such mundane “Gnostic” behavior that, as I have suggested, is not really Gnostic at all. I would argue that Voegelin’s six features are more likely to be found in an immanentized form of Christian millenarianism, most likely of a Protestant variety.<sup>9</sup> Its main features are the expectation of a prophet-savior; a fervor to transform this world totally in anticipation of a time of social harmony, equality, and perfection; a need to evangelize this new world order in radical—often hysterical—optimism; and (the gruesome part) a commitment to reform (or eliminate) all non-believers. This formula requires only the substitution of Man for God in order to continue as a debased secular framework for a political absolutism rooted in optimism of a kind that simply cannot be found anywhere in the Gnostic religion. It is this framework that more readily explains not only the origins of modern totalitarianism and other “political religions” but also, in the combination suggested below, the evolution of modern postwar democracy into the novel form of what I have suggested is our present “hyperdemocracy.”

To grasp the essence of how this hyperdemocracy has developed, we need to imagine a strategic interplay between the secular-millenarianism that I am suggesting is one of the main forces at work and the well-known ancient and very Gnostic notion of a “kingless” sovereignty on which this debased millenarian form has been able to superimpose itself successfully in modern times.

### *The Descent of Sovereignty*

The sort of self-exaltation that flows naturally from the Gnostic solution for absolving

God—an ecstatic conviction of personal godly knowledge—has been around for a long time. But after the Middle Ages, it erupted in a deeply Christian and democratic impulse expressed, among other ways, in successive repudiations of established notions of higher sovereignty. Accordingly, we can track the locus of sovereignty, so to speak, as it has cascaded downward in levels from God, to kings, to aristocrats and elites, to “the people” as divine, where it is summed up in the phrase *vox populi vox Dei*.<sup>10</sup> Corollary to the thesis developed here is the fact that modern democratic ideas seem to have flourished not first as calls for political or economic freedom, or to relieve class oppression as in ancient times,<sup>11</sup> but rather as instruments to facilitate a general tolerance of religious conscience and expression during and following the Reformation. The insistence on the right of the people to sovereignty, on the “divinity” of their voice and will, supports the historical development of the Gnostic-millenarian format explored here.

But this downward movement, or relocation of sovereignty, has not stopped, and there is great irony in the fact that its contemporary, and perhaps final, resting place under our hyperdemocratic regimes has moved well beyond the people to deep within the autonomous individual. Again, I am using the term *hyperdemocratic* to describe the somewhat hysterical and certainly radical extension of the original concept of democracy beyond its ordinary or logical sense. For notwithstanding the frequent claims by individuals to a “democratic right,” by definition democratic sovereignty cannot be rooted in any individual, and at best only in a collection of individuals. Nevertheless, we are frequent witnesses to how this new and formidable notion of personal sovereignty is dignified—if not quite deified—in constitutionally entrenched abstract language

about individual freedom, choice, equality, and rights, and is all too often upheld *against* the people and their communities.

If we are looking for the secular high priest of this hyperdemocratic process in the Western world, it suffices to examine John Stuart Mill's canonical text, *On Liberty*, wherein, and despite his own oft-ignored caveats, human freedom is categorically defined as doing whatever you wish as long as it does not harm someone else. This is now sanctified as Mill's "harm principle," which defines our core human and democratic freedoms and is upheld almost everywhere in the Western world as an untouchable standard in defense of freedom, moral relativism, and autonomism.

Three high-level examples of this process at work in our midst will suffice.

In 1992 the Honourable Antonio Lamer, chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, held forth: "I think a person is the most important thing. Anything else is there to assist the person to fulfill one's [*sic*] life . . . everything else is subordinate. Even collectivities." Justice Lamer had in mind an abstract ideal of a modern liberal (egalitarian) "person" into the dumbed-down empty form of which he was content to pour his personal and generally liberal judgments.

In another case before the Supreme Court of Canada (now known as the "swingers" case) in which local citizens complained that a swingers' sex club should not be permitted in their community because it offended community moral standards, a majority of the judges specifically cited Mill's harm principle in ruling that henceforth this should replace community standards as a new moral principle in Canada.<sup>12</sup>

But surely the most bombastic instance of such autonomist fetishism is the loftily oblivious opinion formulated in 1992 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, wherein it was declared

that "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." Here was the highest American court dismissing the most venerable belief of humankind that reality must have some ultimate meaning that precedes us, however inscrutable of attainment, and cheerfully replacing this with the opinion that the meaning—the very definition—of the entire cosmos is a matter of what? Of personal opinion. This was modern Gnosticism relativized and judicialized.

Elsewhere I have argued that there is an inherent conflict between the egalitarian objectives of our hyperdemocracies and the exclusivist nature of all human communities; or more to my point, that hyperdemocracy erodes community.<sup>13</sup> That is because all human communities are powerfully held together by social bonding that is the result of a universal four-step induction process aimed at recruiting and binding members as insiders within specific expectations and limits. In other words, all forms of genuine human community are boundary phenomena. They require a willingness among members to *sacrifice* self-interest to the group (a plain example is the Rotary International motto "Service Above Self"); *subordination* to the group's authority and rules for the sake of internal control and order; and some process or ceremony of *commitment*, whether a solemn vow, contract, or simple ritual.

Finally, when all this is done, as reward they reserve *privileges* and a special status for accepted members that must be rigorously denied to all outsiders. This is true whether we are members of families, clubs, universities, corporations, volunteer groups, or any other social group created by means of this process. Owing specifically to this fact of reserving privileges for committed members, we can see that nothing to do

with true human community is, or could possibly be, “democratic” in the contemporary egalitarian sense, and indeed, it is precisely this inherent clash between the illiberal power of human social bonding and the levelling function of statist governments that explains why every modern privilege-despising state operates as a solvent on its own civil society.

Whence comes this trend? In the popular and political mind at least, our radical autonomism can be traced to what is commonly called “Romanticism” in literature and the arts. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the Romantic movement generally fought to shift the “locus of reality” from outside to inside the self. Against neoclassical defenses of aesthetic and moral truth and verisimilitude as discoverable in objective standards, the Romantics asserted an inner, and unique higher, truth. Typical expressions are the expansive emotionalism of Rousseau in France, the sensibility trend pursued by Shaftesbury in England, and its continuation in Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and others. Various latter irruptions can be seen in the psychological and the stream-of-consciousness novels as practiced by such as Joyce and Woolf in the early twentieth century (not to mention extensions of this impulse into symbolism, surrealism, Dada, and so on). In the present context, then, the entire Romantic movement—we live now in a neo-Romantic age—may be seen as the consequence on an aesthetic level of a religious but now secular Gnostic resurgence that began in the Reformation. Especially germane to the argument of this article is that the single most powerful influence on J. S. Mill in the formation of his philosophy of moral autonomism in *On Liberty* was the Romantic mystique of the Self that fascinated him for the rest of his life after exposure to the poetry of William Wordsworth.<sup>14</sup>

*Hyperdemocracy: A Gnostic People  
under Millenarian Elites?*

All this points to the thesis that in modern times what is being played out, particularly under the tenets of our almost fanatically egalitarian liberalism, is a strategic dualistic interplay between two active but interdependent political zones, each rooted in its own belief system.

The first comprises roughly the *apolitical* features of Gnosticism and forms a public belief system of the masses, the chief features of which are self-exaltation, a quasi-official atheism (public banishment of God, if not his murder), moral relativism, social determinism, scientism, pantheism, the elevation of individual rights over responsibilities and duties, and the rejection of traditional concepts of common good or virtue. This system is the political embodiment of pessimism.

However, superimposed on this mass is a second secular-millenarian zone in which are expressed the extremely *political* features of a public belief system of elites. Its chief features are meliorism; collectivist politics; progressivism; the cult of the political personality; New World Order and universal Human Rights talk; and a highly tax-and-debt-leveraged manipulation and regulation of national, and even world, masses to these ends. This much smaller but much more aggressive and controlling system is the political embodiment of optimism. A cruel example of the hard form of this process was in our midst for seventy years in the form of totalitarian rule. When asked the reason for it all, former Soviet general Makashov gave a millenarian’s answer: “What is our maximum program? The Kingdom of God on earth—or Communism, as we call it, before the third millennium.”<sup>15</sup>

In our softer, hyperdemocratic and managerial-state form, we increasingly observe courts, law professors, bureaucrats,

rights tribunals, the state itself, and even international organizations eagerly attacking the only two levels of authority remaining that have traditionally been competitive with Western states for the people's allegiance. Attacked above are all forms of venerable transcendent belief, law, and obligation (God, natural law concepts, differential customs rooted in human nature, and so on). Attacked below, directly or indirectly—and always in the name of equality—are the many forms of social authority as well as legal, economic, and tax benefits that favor membership in and/or adherence to exclusive social practices or institutions. Favorite targets (not for dissolution but for “equal” treatment) are the privileges afforded the traditional family. But attacked also are the moral discriminations of religious entities and, in short, any intentional policy discriminations that have evolved naturally according to the privileging social-bonding process described above. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that successful human social bonding is necessarily illiberal, or it cannot bind, and as such it is a process that is inherently a barrier to the growth of state power. As all states hold a monopoly on the taxing and regulatory powers, however, the long-term consequence of the egalitarian solvent thus applied is that human communities become atomized, so to speak, and then easily bent to the will of a superimposed host of millenarian visionaries (made up of progressivist politicians, bureaucrats, academics, media, and judges). In this way, democracy in its original sense gets hijacked or, rather, efficiently contained for ideological purposes.

At this point it may be useful to ask how this has so effortlessly come to be. What is the trade-off that has seduced the modern hyperdemocratic masses into the gradual surrender of so many of their ancient political, economic, and social rights, their self-reliance, duties, and liberties?

The short answer is sex. For although any honest rendering will show a massive loss of the above-mentioned things in all Western democracies—the sovereignty of municipalities to states, of states to central governments, and of nations to international dictates—the reverse is manifestly true for most matters sexual, with respect to which an astonishing increase in personal liberty has been the rule. Pervasive statism as well as pervasive sexual libertarianism? But how, when these two ideologies are so obviously opposed? Are we then socialists, or libertarians? The answer, I submit, is that we are all now libertarian-socialists, and the boundary between these two normally radically opposed ideologies is the skin.

Those engineering the worldly perfection of our modern democracies have been keenly aware that if the masses are permitted their bodily and sexual freedoms, they will hardly notice the loss of their higher rights, freedoms, and duties (and income). So the trend almost everywhere has been: give them abortion on demand, homosexual rights, transgender rights, rights to unilateral no-fault divorce, and saturation pornography for the asking (or paying), and so on. Thus, individuals now—in rather stark contrast to fifty years ago—have near complete freedom with respect to everything within their own skins, while modern states have increased rights and control over providing equally to all citizens the goods and services outside that very personal boundary (pensions, employment insurance, welfare, medical care, education, and so much else). In short, modern egalitarian states have long since recognized that success in the struggle for ever greater regulatory and taxing power over the people is easily achieved by the offer of sexual liberty as compensation. We are all libertarian-socialists now.

In conclusion, in both the earlier totalitarian, and the more recent hyperdemocratic

political regimes that have evolved during the past century, what we see is not Gnosticism immanentized but the ancient war between Gnosticism and Christianity *politically resolved* and expressed as an activist secular-millenarian form above that promotes and feeds on a quietist Gnosticism

encouraged as an enlightened and self-indulgent secular orthodoxy in the people below. Those prepared to read the entrails will see in all this a Western civilization foundering under a debased transformation of its own winning solution to the absolutism of God.

- 1 Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 74. Couliano discusses these idea-systems from a structuralist (or synchronic) as well as historical (or diachronic) perspective, relying on the systems-analysis techniques of de Saussure (structural linguistics), Levi-Strauss (anthropology), and Propp (myth and folktale).
- 2 For the general theological and psychological basis of the Gnostic religion and culture, I rely on Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), but for particulars on the more sober and textual, if less philosophical, post-Nag Hammadi rendering of Gnosticism in Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987).
- 3 Of interest is the difference between the Christian and Gnostic conceptions of what happens to the soul upon death. The emphasis of Christian theology is on the eventual postjudgment resurrection of the body of each believer (only). The Gnostic emphasis is on the immediate separation of the soul from its imprisonment within the corrupt material body upon death. Yet when asked what they think will happen to the soul when they die, most Christians will give a Gnostic answer, to the effect that their soul will immediately go to God, or heaven.
- 4 As a newcomer to Voegelin's work, I am relying on his treatment of Gnosticism and politics in *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 1987), and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1968). My colleague John von Heyking reminds me that after these two seminal books, Voegelin dropped Gnosticism as the primary "deformation" at the root of the modern malaise. Nevertheless, I address the Gnostic question here both because it continues in the role of central culprit in much of the literature surrounding this topic and because it assumes an important subsidiary role in my analysis. I am indebted to Ellis Sandoz, past president of the Eric Voegelin Society, for so kindly indulging my curiosity on these questions when this paper was first drafted, and then surprising me with an invitation to present it at the annual meeting of the Society in Washington, D.C., August 28, 1997.
- 5 Stephen A. McKnight, "Voegelin's New Science of History," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Eric Voegelin's Significance for the Modern Mind* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 46–70.
- 6 A certain type of libertine Gnostic does indeed embrace and indulge the body and all its passions but only because all things material are so deeply despised. In other words, the more total the disrespect of the body, the more complete the abuse of it may be. The prototype for moderns is the Marquis de Sade, arch-sexual Gnostic and revolutionary of the modern age.
- 7 Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 46.
- 8 Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 264–65.
- 9 On this note, see especially the engrossing study by Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and the Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- 10 An especially useful collection concerning the movement from claims of divine right to those of popular sovereignty in England during the seventeenth century is David Wootton, ed., *Divine Right and Democracy* (London: Penguin, 1986). The OED states that "vox populi vox Dei" appeared frequently in English works from the fifteenth century on.
- 11 For an excellent collection on the role of "the people" under Greek democracy, see Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick, eds., *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996). Also very useful is Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- 12 The relevant section of the case cites the authority of Mill's harm principle, at section 105: "The philosophical underpinnings of the majority's harm-based approach are found in the liberal theories of J. S. Mill. This philosopher argued that the only purpose for which state power can be rightfully exercised over a member of the community is to prevent harm to others: see J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, at p. 8."
- 13 This was not true of organic, religious, hierarchical, nonegalitarian democracies in their early stages, such as existed in Canada and the United States until the early decades of the twentieth century. I have elaborated on the features of hyperdemocracy in William D. Gairdner, *The Trouble with Democracy* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 2001; and BPS Books, 2008). For another recent manifestation of this same concern, see Kenneth Minogue, *The Servile Mind: How Democracy Erodes the Moral Life* (New York: Encounter Books, 2010).
- 14 For a minute tracing of this influence, see William D. Gairdner, "Poetry and the Mystique of the Self in John Stuart Mill: Sources of Libertarian Socialism," *Humanitas* 21, nos. 1 & 2 (2008).
- 15 *Time*, April 8, 1996.