
Augustinian Radical Transcendence: Source of Political Excess

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The relationship between Christianity and politics is paradoxical. On one hand, many Christians are inclined to shun politics and to wash their hands of the evils of the world, but, on the other hand, they cannot resist the temptation of creating God's state—a state that surrenders to God and that testifies to the need for salvation, the necessity of the redeemer, and the utter depravity of man.

I do not believe that Christians are necessarily doomed to this contradictory view of politics. Nevertheless, the contradictory stance toward politics described above has been a recurrent feature of Christian thought and sensibility. And it is clearly manifested in the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo and his admirers. It is to be understood that Augustinianism is not the whole of Christianity. Nor are the aspects of Augustine highlighted here the whole of Augustine. But it seems to me that they are the predominant aspect of Augustine's political thought, and, in my view, have inflicted great harm.

In this article, I will argue that the political excesses of Augustinian Christianity have their source in the insistence on radical transcendence. However, I also believe that Augustinian Christianity is unable to sustain its own posture of radical transcendence. The latter position is so harsh, so immoderate, and so inhuman that it leads its advocates to succumb to an extremism of another kind—it leads them to the political temptations of using the power of the state for dogmatic ends. I will borrow

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some ideas from Hegel to show how the excesses of radical transcendence can be overcome, and I will defend a Hegelian position against the histrionic criticisms of Eric Voegelin, whom I regard as one of the representatives of Augustinianism in our time.

Augustinian Christianity

The excesses of Augustinian Christianity are well illustrated in Augustine's approach to two political issues: the Roman practice of torturing criminal suspects and war. I will discuss each in turn.

As much as he abhorred the Roman practice of torturing criminal suspects as well as totally innocent witnesses, and as much as he was opposed to the practice in court cases where the Church was involved (as in the proceedings against the Donatists), Augustine believed that this abhorrent practice was nevertheless a necessary and inevitable aspect of temporal order with which Christians need not meddle, since they are not part of the earthly city, but merely pilgrims, strangers, and sojourners in this world. It is not the duty of Christians to make right the wrongs of the world.

Augustine maintained that a righteous and godly man, even if he were to find himself in a position of power, need not make any effort to discontinue this terrible Roman practice. On the contrary, Augustine insisted that a good and wise judge need not shrink from the darkness in which human society is necessarily shrouded. As Augustine wrote, the wise and godly ruler

"No wickedness that innocent . . . are tortured."

thinks it *no wickedness* that innocent witnesses are tortured . . . or that the accused are put to the torture, so that they are often overcome with anguish, and, though innocent, make false confessions regarding themselves, and are punished; or though they be not condemned to die, they often die during, or in consequence of, the torture; . . . These numerous and important evils he does not consider sins; for the wise judge does these things not with the intention of doing harm, . . . he is compelled to torture and punish the innocent because his office and his ignorance constrain him.¹

It may be argued that Augustine is someone with high ideals and low expectations, and that this is not an altogether unwise posture. However, it seems to me that, if our ideals are so high

¹ Henry Paolucci (ed.), *The Political Writings of St. Augustine* (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, 1962), 135-36.

that they transcend altogether the domain of mundane existence, then we will lose sight of them and they will be of no relevance to the world in which we live. There is no doubt that Augustine's expectations of politics are low, but the exorbitant depths to which he carries his low expectations allow him to make drastic compromises with the ordinary standards of justice and decency. Such an understanding of Christianity not only undermines virtue, it invites depravity. I contend that it is the sort of picture of Christian piety that inflames the anticlerical imagination—from Lessing's Patriarch of Jerusalem to Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor.²

Augustine does not even pretend that these evils are *necessary* for maintaining order in a sinful world. He has banished the ideals of Christianity to such a distant heaven that they have no meaning, no place, no impact on the world. So understood, Christianity leaves the world not just as it found it, but worse. If there were no Christians around, a pagan man of decency might come to power now and again, and temporarily provide relief from the usual abominations. With Christians in power, no such relief is to be expected.

Augustine's political philosophy is often compared with Machiavelli's, but to my mind there is a very significant difference. Machiavelli believed that the moral standards that apply to private life do not apply to politics. In politics, the preservation of the state is the only good. This supreme end justifies the employment of whatever means are necessary. This is why Machiavelli maintained that a prince may have to do many evil and despicable things for the sake of his country, so he had better be a man who loves his country more than his soul; for the sorts of things he must do will surely compromise the purity of his soul and his chances for salvation. In contrast, Augustine's godly ruler is in the enviable position of not having to choose between his country and his soul. Augustine assures him that the necessary, as well as the not so necessary, evils he performs in his line of duty are not wicked. I am not suggesting that Augustine's godly ruler is a Machiavellian prince; he is more despicable. The evils

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² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, Bayard Quincy Morgan trans. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1955). Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, Constance Garnett, trans. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1948).

he commands are unnecessary; and even if they were necessary evils, Augustine's godly ruler would still be a ghastly spectacle—a Machiavellian prince with a clear conscience!

One thing is undeniable: the rule of the godly can be much more grotesque than that of the godless. With his eyes set on heaven, the godly ruler has little use for this world. Indeed, the more grisly the world gets the more need there is for salvation. Besides, in the face of so much devastation, faith in a good and just God is truly heroic. It is no wonder that Nietzsche connected modern nihilism with the Christian inability to affirm life in this world. If everything of worth is posited in a distant heaven, then, when that heavenly world disappears, all that is left is the worthless world in which we live. This is how Nietzsche understood the relation between Christianity and nihilism.

Christianity drained of earthly significance. The trouble with the Augustinian version of Christianity is that the radical transcendence of God and of the good drains Christianity of earthly significance. Moreover, it makes Christianity so harsh and so uncompromising that it invites a drastic leap to another extreme—the desire to sanctify the world, to make it testify to the love and grace of God, and, most ominously, to use the power of the state to that end.

Augustine's discussion of war is a case in point. He denies that Christianity is a pacifistic religion that is incompatible with the obligations of citizens to fight for the state. He argues that, since political rulers are from God, Christians have an obligation to fight in all wars authorized by the powers that be.³ More often than not, these wars are unjust, but that is irrelevant to the political obligation of Christians. When the Bible says "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's," Augustine interprets this to mean that we should pay taxes to Caesar to finance his wars, which are generally wars of aggression.⁴ So far, his position is totally compatible with the posture of radical transcendence discussed above: War is one of the evils of this world, and, as with other evils, we can do nothing except go along, all the while reassuring ourselves that we are ostensibly the humble servants of God's unfathomable will.

³ It follows that successful revolutionaries are also from God. But this is a conclusion that Augustine was not willing to draw, though his Puritan followers did.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 164, and Matt. xxii, 21.

But Augustine goes further. War is not just one of the evils of this world. God himself has commanded the Israelites to wage righteous wars that would crush the wicked and humble the proud.⁵ Some may think that this Old Testament view comes into conflict with the New Testament, which counsels us to turn the other cheek. But Augustine assures us that there is no conflict, and that the New Testament injunction is not intended to refer to our actions, but only to the “inward disposition of the heart.”⁶ We are to recompense evil with good only in the first instance in order to shame the wicked into changing their ways, but if this fails, then we are entitled to use force and correct them with a “benevolent severity” that is “contrary to their wishes.”⁷ In this way, “wars might be waged by the good” in order to bring the “unbridled lust of men” under the yoke of a just or Christian government that could abolish or at least suppress them.⁸ And in waging such wars Augustine assures us that we are complying with the New Testament injunction to “do violence to no man.”⁹ In waging such wars, Christians are merely imitating the benevolence of God, because there is no greater misfortune than living with an evil disposition. It is for their own good, for the salvation of their souls, that the proud are humbled and the wicked crushed. The only caveat is that, in waging these just wars, we should make sure that we do not take too much pleasure in the violence and carnage of war. For the real evils of war are the “love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust for power.”¹⁰ In other words, we can kill and plunder as long as we have good intentions and don’t enjoy it too much.

Augustine’s position on war is consistent with his view of heretics—namely that it is legitimate to correct them and, by “afflictions and terrors of a temporal kind,” coerce them into joining the Church, which represents the only truth and is the root of all life.¹¹

⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 177, 166.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 179-80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, and Luke iii, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 193ff.

It is well known that Augustine struggled against Manichaean dualism.¹² But it is also the case that he lost the struggle and, as a result, introduced into Christianity a great deal of the dualist vision of the Manichees. For Augustine, the world is made up of the saved and the damned: those who are devoted to God and those who are devoted to their own pleasures; the pious, on the one hand, and the carnal, loose, and wanton, on the other; those who live after the truth and long for eternal life, and those who live after the devil and are destined for perdition. And even though Augustine emphasized that no one but God knows who is saved and who is damned, and that no one is saved but by the grace of God, he nevertheless fell prey to the temptations of dualism, as his discussion of war illustrates.

For he makes it the duty of the saved to deliver the damned from their dreadful spiritual plight. And contrary to what he says in the discussion of the courts, Augustine is not content to resign himself to the evils of the world and leave salvation to God. The result is that he goes from one extreme to the other. On the one hand, he encourages the "godly ruler" to assume that he is helpless to prevent the torture of innocent witnesses because the world is so mired in sin that it is hopeless to do anything but wait for divine salvation. On the other hand, he counsels wars of aggression against infidels to save their souls.

It seems to me that Augustine's insistence on the radical transcendence of God accounts not only for the paradoxical and contradictory nature of his Christianity, but for its moral indecency. If Augustine were the definitive interpreter of Christianity, then one might be led to conclude that the appearance of that religion was a great misfortune for mankind.

Hegelian Christianity

No one understood the shortcomings of radical transcendence better than Hegel. For Hegel, the experience of transcendence is integral to the emergence of philosophy in the West. The history

¹² Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). Elshtain is another modern defender of Augustine. Her book is an apology that glides silently over all the dark and contradictory aspects of his work.

of the West begins from a condition of thoughtless tranquility that is shaken by the eruption of philosophical thought. The latter ruptures the primal oneness of communal life and leaves the world fragmented and confused. Philosophy shatters the spontaneous harmony of the social world by forging a rift between custom and morality, law and justice, the actual and the ideal, the individual and the community. Socrates is a pivotal figure. He destroyed the harmony of the original oneness. But Socrates did not do so in the name of some private caprice. Socrates discovered an "I" deep in his soul that was not just a private or personal voice. It was the voice of the universal, the transcendent, the beyond. By introducing this universal and transcendent standard, Socrates created a rift between heaven and earth, the individual and the community, the legal and the just, the truth of society and the truth of the soul. But Hegel did not lament the rise of philosophy; he understood it as a milestone in the development of human consciousness, the West's first glimpse of the "universal idea" or the "true good."¹³

In the story of consciousness as told by Hegel, Christianity plays a significant role. According to the Protestant Hegel, Catholic Christianity deepens the wounds of the shattered world by relegating truth, beauty, goodness, and justice to a distant and unattainable heaven. This leaves the existing world totally unsanctified. The result is a profound yearning that Hegel described in terms of the unhappy consciousness.

The unhappy consciousness notwithstanding, Hegel did not lament the deepening of the soul that was the legacy of Christ. On the contrary, he thought that Christianity sowed the desire for a rich moral life. But he also thought that the Church had betrayed the promise of Christianity. Hegel therefore sided with the Reformation against the Catholic Church.¹⁴

Unlike others, Hegel did not simply accuse the Church of corruption; he challenged her conception of Christianity—her understanding of Deity, of the moral life, and of spiritual experience. He found the Church Pharisaic, autocratic, self-righteous,

¹³ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 1840, 3 Vols., E. S. Haldane, trans. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1892), Vol. I, 402, 409, 145.

¹⁴ Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, trans. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), 412 ff.

as well as corrupt. And he connected her shortcomings with her doctrine of radical transcendence. He accused the Church of turning God into an exclusive and remote object of her own, and posing as the mediator between heaven and earth. Hegel surmised that the human heart is “wounded unspeakably” by this “trivial and superficial” treatment of God and of the spiritual life.¹⁵

Hegel rightly believed that, once banished to a distant heaven, God will die a natural death. For Hegel, God cannot be relegated to a mysterious beyond, He must live in the hearts and minds of men and women in this world. Hegel rejected the flawed dualistic vision of barbarous vice and lust, on the one hand, and an other-worldly spirituality, on the other. In contrast, Hegel aspired to a life of “faith and spiritual enjoyment.”¹⁶ But in the Catholic vision, the spiritual was about renunciation, not joy—witness celibacy and enforced poverty.

*Conscience
identical with
our very being.*

For Hegel, Catholicism and its radical transcendence represented an unfulfilled humanity—separated from God, divided against itself, experiencing the law as an alien and hostile thing, enduring life as a punishment, a burden to be borne, filled with self-hatred and recrimination, wandering aimlessly and waiting helplessly for salvation. Hegel, by contrast, aimed for a moral life in which the spirit is at home. He aspired to a life in which individuals live according to the moral law, not out of fear, or habit, or unquestioning obedience, but with a glad heart because they recognize it as the same law that springs out of their own hearts. Hegel believed that such a rich moral life was the gift of Christ. For Hegel, the Christian legacy was connected with the development of conscience, and with it, the free ethical personality that follows the moral law not as an external and alien thing, but recognizes itself, its identity, and its very being in that law. Hegel describes a moral life in which the spirit is at home. Cynics may dismiss Hegel’s project as fiction—Eric Voegelin may denounce it as sorcery—but no reasonable person can deny the beauty and legitimacy of Hegel’s moral vision. And even if it is not altogether attainable, Hegel may be right in thinking that it is the sort of homecoming for which every spirit longs.

Two criticisms of Hegel are in order. First, Hegel defended

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 414-15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 415.

the Reformation, although Luther and Calvin revived the Augustinian heritage of radical transcendence. In Catholicism, that heritage was softened by St. Thomas who was more inclined to recognize the goodness of life in this world. But Hegel paid no attention to this notable improvement in Christian doctrine. In Hegel's view Protestantism seemed superior because it gave man direct access to God unmediated by the presumptuous authority of the Church and her allegedly empty symbols and meaningless rituals.¹⁷

Luther and Calvin revived radical transcendence.

Second, Hegel was in quest of a harmony between the moral law, on the one hand, and inclination, passion and desire, on the other. Hegel wanted to unite duty and inclination, reason and desire, the objective and the subjective. Nor was this something new. This account of the moral life is at least as old as Plato's understanding of morality in terms of happiness. While I applaud this vision of the moral life, I do not think that it can be true without a political qualification. That is, it is true under normal circumstances; but politics can make life hellishly abnormal, and simple decency can lead to the sort of suffering that cannot count either as happiness or spiritual enjoyment. In other words, there will always be tragic circumstances in which happiness and the moral life are not reconcilable. But when it is in our power to reconcile them, it is both our duty and inclination to do so. We can resign ourselves to the evils of the world only if we share Augustine's view that there is a profound abyss between this barbarous world and the moral law.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Hegel's account of the Christian impact on the moral life is vastly superior to that of Augustinianism and the excesses it invites.

¹⁷ No one understood the tension between Catholicism and Protestantism and their respective shortcomings better than David Hume. See his "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, Vol. 1, T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, eds. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875). Superstition refers to Catholicism, and enthusiasm to Protestantism. Like Hegel, Hume preferred Protestantism, but, unlike Hegel, he was not so enthusiastic about it.

*The Resurgence of Augustinian Christianity:
The Case of Eric Voegelin*

The resurgence of Augustinianism in our time is illustrated in the work of the late German emigré scholar Eric Voegelin. Although not particularly well known, Voegelin is an extremely prolific writer with a devoted following.

Voegelin believes that the Augustinian interpretation of Christianity is definitive, while the Hegelian one is a manifestation of a spiritual disease that is characteristic of modernity. For Voegelin, Augustine saves Christianity from its millenarian proclivities by declaring authoritatively that the kingdom of God is not of this world. In contrast, Hegel renews the millenarian expectations of Christianity by compromising the correct understanding of God as radically transcendent and totally other.¹⁸

Voegelin attributes the evils of modernity to the rejection of the radical transcendence of God's kingdom. He surmises that radical politics, from the Puritan Revolution to the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, have their source in the inability to cope with the experience of transcendence, the inability to accept the God-given world (the "First Reality") with all its shortcomings, and the desire to invent a new world according to our own lights (a "Second Reality").¹⁹

Voegelin's castigation of Hegel conceals the extent of his intellectual debt to Hegel while revealing what an ungrateful pupil he is. Like Hegel, Voegelin sets out to write a history of human consciousness. He echoes Hegel in telling us that the early history of mankind is characterized by a simple and spontaneous oneness. He invents his own vocabulary, referring to this spontaneous oneness as the "compactness" of experience that is characteristic of "cosmological truth"—heaven and earth, law and justice, the secular and the sacred are one and the same. He as-

*Voegelin
indebted
to Hegel.*

¹⁸ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 109ff. Voegelin's vilification of Hegel can be found in Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regenry, 1968), 105ff, and in "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 12, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). For more of the same criticism of Hegel, see also "The Eclipse of Reality," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 28, edited by T. A. Hollweck and P. Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990).

¹⁹ Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," 217. See also "The Eclipse of Reality," and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 99ff.

sociates this with the rise of the Great Empires of the Near and Far East: the Pharaoh is a god and his order and justice are divine and incontrovertible.²⁰ But this “compactness” of experience is “differentiated” by the recognition of a transcendent source of truth and goodness that is distinct from the existing political order. Although this experience is anticipated prior to the emergence of philosophy, the latter is a momentous step in the history of human consciousness. Like Hegel, Voegelin identifies philosophy with the discovery of the soul as the “sensorium of transcendence.”²¹ Like Hegel, he acknowledges that this discovery has a disruptive effect on the world because the transcendent truth that the philosopher discovers comes into conflict with the truth of society. And, like Hegel, he regards the eruption of philosophy into the world as a significant advance in the development of consciousness.

Voegelin also borrows Hegel’s analysis of Christianity. He echoes Hegel in saying that Christianity resulted in the “de-divinization” of the world—i.e., banishing the gods from the earth and leaving the latter unhallowed and unsanctified. And, like Hegel, Voegelin maintains that the Christian sensibility is filled with yearning and with an existential *angst* that is difficult to bear.²²

Although he has a reputation for obscurantism, I think that it is safe to say that Voegelin regards the history of the West as a progressive development that reaches a climax in “soteriological truth” (the Christian faith) and then begins a steady and seemingly endless decline characterized by a variety of hideously deformed modes of consciousness, which Voegelin analyses in terms of “gnostic” mass movements.²³ For Voegelin, modern politics,

²⁰ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), Vol. 1, Ch. 3.

²¹ Voegelin, “The New Science of Politics,” 75.

²² Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 109 ff.

²³ This is the gist of the first three volumes of Voegelin’s *Order and History*. In the fourth volume, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), Voegelin is said on the jacket cover to “break with the course originally charted.” But it is important not to overestimate this “break.” It is merely a strategic move that allows Voegelin to deal with history in a non-linear fashion and to identify those who have the true consciousness of reality and those who do not. He makes it clear in this book, as he did at the end of *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, that Christianity does not have a monopoly on

modern technology, and modern life in general are gnostic. But what is gnosticism?

Historically speaking, Gnosticism is a Christian heresy of the third century. The Gnostic writings challenged the Church's authoritative (i.e., Augustinian) interpretations of the Bible.²⁴ For example, they wondered why God would prevent Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Why would He not want them to know the difference and freely choose the good? Why would God want Adam to remain childlike and to follow his commands without understanding? Why is knowledge a vice and ignorance a virtue? Why indeed?

The Gnostics rejected the literal reading of the story of Genesis and suggested that it be read symbolically as a true myth with a deep meaning.²⁵ They suggested that the story was a drama of the soul—its self-knowledge and self-awakening. Eve was the voice of the spirit and the heroine of the drama. Acting on behalf of the true God (as opposed to the jealous Creator), she sought the knowledge of good and evil. In coming to know Eve, Adam achieves self-knowledge, because she is his true self. Despite variations on this theme, the Gnostic reading is a dramatic contrast to the misogynistic interpretation of Augustine and the established Church. On the orthodox view, the moral of the story is that men must be warned against women because they are the gateway to hell and must be subjugated by men as a punishment for their sin.²⁶ In contrast, the Gnostics realized that women are not more evil than men, nor are men more evil than women. Good and evil are equal opportunity employers.

The Gnostics struggled against the demonization of knowl-

the true understanding of reality. Otherwise, Voegelin's intellectual position remains unchanged—what constitutes "spiritual clarity" and "spiritual deformity" remains the same.

²⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988); Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

²⁵ Despite his diatribes against the Gnostics, Voegelin shares their love of symbols and their concept of a true myth.

²⁶ Augustine's beloved mother, Monica, was a true Christian in his eyes for submitting to the beatings of her tyrannical husband as a deserved punishment from God. See Augustine's *Confessions*, Vernon J. Bourke, trans. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1953). See also Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and The Serpent*, esp. ch. 3.

edge and wisdom in the story of Genesis. They believed that the orthodox reading celebrates ignorance and blind superstition—qualities that no doubt enhance the power of priests and other self-appointed mediators between man and God. This may explain why the Church burned their writings. But much to the delight of scholars and thinkers, many of the Gnostic writings recently have been found.²⁷

The Gnostics also rejected the Augustinian view of God as an inscrutable other. Instead, they saw the divine as hidden deep within human nature—a spiritual potential to be discovered. This is precisely the position that Hegel adopts and that Voegelin denounces as the “immanentization of the Christian eschaton,” a deformation of the Christian truth, and a revolt against the human condition. For him, God must remain transcendent and wholly other, while man must remain suspended between hope and fear, without understanding.²⁸ In short, Voegelin sides with the Church against the Gnostic heretics. But he makes no attempt to answer the difficult challenges they pose to his orthodoxy.

The divine viewed as spiritual potential to be discovered.

Voegelin expanded the word gnostic and used it as a general term of abuse. He used it to describe every attempt that was, in his estimation, a revolt against the first reality (in which God is other and man is filled with existential *angst*) in favor of the fantasy of the second reality (in which God is not so remote and man is at home in the world).²⁹ He even applied the term to secular modernity, because technological civilization ostensibly rebels against the divine order and endeavors to create a new reality. All the horrors of modernity are supposedly gnostic. This extension of the term may be questionable, but it reveals the degree to which Voegelin identified the departure from radical transcendence with collapse into complete depravity.

Voegelin connects the gnostic “deformity of consciousness” with the cultural success of Christianity. He explains that the rigors of faith are so great and so arduous that they invite escape

²⁷ See Pagels and Jonas above. The resemblance between Gnosticism and Protestantism is not insignificant.

²⁸ Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 114. Voegelin makes it clear that this vision of God as inscrutable is a sign of “high spiritual clarity” even when it takes an Islamic rather than a Christian manifestation.

²⁹ Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 57. See also *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 102-104.

from the uncertainty and hardships involved—hardships for which the masses are unfit.³⁰ Supposedly, the *angst* involved in the true understanding of the human condition is too heavy for ordinary humanity; efforts to escape from it are therefore inevitable. Voegelin reckons that the Christian faith is so heroic that it is unsuitable for mass culture. In short, he turns Christianity into an elite affair.

On Voegelin's assessment, Hegel does not have the heroic stamina that Christianity requires. Hegel is the incarnation of modern sorcery, a manifestation of cosmic impiety, a swindler, a magician, a megalomaniac, a spiritually diseased human being, and the murderer of God. Voegelin denounces him as a false prophet, a rebel against the order of being, and a Gnostic bent on self-salvation. Hegel is a "mystic manqué," an evil "sorcerer," and an "existentially deficient" man.³¹ Gripped by a monstrous *libido dominandi*, Hegel supposedly kills God and sets himself up in His place.³² Hegel is the embodiment of the pneumopathological disease of modernity, a manifestation of the spiritual disorder of the times, and the incarnation of the "deformative will to power."³³ Why? Why is Voegelin so angry with Hegel?

The short answer is that Hegel rejects radical transcendence. He rejects the idea of God as distant, inscrutable, and wholly other. Instead, he shares the "gnostic" understanding of God as dwelling in the heart of man, and he encourages human beings to discover the goodness of God within. The long answer is that this rejection of transcendence, this "immanentization" of God, *supposedly* leads to the megalomaniacal desire to replace God and to remake the world. We are led to believe that the political horrors of the twentieth century are the logical outcome of the Hegelian psyche and its gnostic inclinations.

Several comments and criticisms are in order. First, there is

³⁰ Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 109.

³¹ Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," 216 ff, and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 67, 69.

³² Voegelin denies that Hegel was a defender of Luther and Protestantism. He believes that Hegel intended to inaugurate a new religion with himself at its center. In making his case, Voegelin relies heavily on a "lost manuscript" by Hegel that is partly reported and partly excerpted by a German scholar of unknown repute. See Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," 213, note 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 216, 217, 218, 221. See also Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 67-73, 105ff.

no doubt that Voegelin's diatribes against the radical politics of modernity are a corrective to the inclination to look to politics for the redemption and transfiguration of the world. Voegelin rightly warns that those who expect too much of politics will inevitably become mired in terror and irrationality. But it is also the case that Voegelin himself demands too much of politics, as I will show below.

Second, Voegelin's assumption that the evils of totalitarianism are a consequence of the modern rejection of transcendence and the desire to bring heaven to earth misses the mark. This analysis has the effect of attributing the evils of the world to those who wish to improve the human condition. In my view, attributing the horrors of totalitarianism to a Promethean love of humanity gives the likes of Hitler and Stalin too much credit. By painting them as zealous but misguided humanitarians, we fail to notice the often shockingly gratuitous nature of the evils they inflicted.

Third, even if all the evils of the world have their source in radical immanence, or the quest for an earthly paradise, it does not follow that radical transcendence is the solution. As I have shown in my discussion of Augustine, radical transcendence leads to morally obscene conclusions.

Fourth, Voegelin's immoderate, even histrionic, repudiation of Hegel reveals the excesses of his Augustinianism. Voegelin's world is as dualistic as Augustine's. It is made up of the first reality and the second reality, the searchers for truth and the rebels against reality, formative consciousness (consciousness formed by the truth) and deformed consciousness (consciousness formed by untruth), the spiritually healthy and the spiritually diseased, those who live in openness toward the divine ground of being, and those who do not. The division of the world into the healthy truth tellers and the pathological liars is how Voegelin deals with his intellectual opponents. This is not simply a *medicalization* of the opposition, intended to dismiss them as victims of a disease they cannot control. On the contrary, Voegelin is claiming that his intellectual opponents are knowingly and wilfully perverting the truth or rebelling against the order of God. This is a *demonization* of the opposition.

*Demonization
of opponents.*

Is reality so simple? Is every departure from the view of the divine as radically transcendent the work of the Devil? Is every

effort to improve the world that God gave us a libidinal quest for gnostic self-salvation?

It seems to me that Voegelin's work invites a myopic conservatism that condemns the effort to improve human life as an unspeakable cosmic impiety and a Promethean revolt against the gods. The result is a conservatism that is sensitive to the evils of rebels and revolutionaries but oblivious to evils that are enshrined in the *status quo*—evils as grotesque as torturing innocent witnesses. This is the logic of a politics that is nourished by the philosophy of radical transcendence.

Fifth, Voegelin's work is plagued with a certain incoherence that is characteristic of Augustinian thought.³⁴ The difficulty is illustrated in his response to liberalism in general and to Hobbes in particular. On the one hand, Voegelin accuses Hobbes of being a gnostic who thinks that politics can save us from the evils of life; but on the other hand, he rejects the minimalism of Hobbes's politics because it turns political life into an "empty vessel."³⁵

These two criticisms do not fit well together. If Hobbes is a gnostic, then he is, on Voegelin's own account, someone who expects too much from politics—he expects it to bring heaven to earth, to create a life of ease and pleasure, free of cares, evils, and injustices. And if that is the case, then it is not reasonable to reject his political philosophy for being minimalist.

The truth of the matter is that Voegelin's objection to Hobbes is also an objection to secular liberal politics, which limits itself to the task of preventing harm and eschews the project of promoting any particular conception of the good. But Voegelin is unwilling to leave the world totally unsanctified or "de-divinized." Voegelin objects to a society limited to avoiding the worst evil, or *summum malum*—violent death. He thinks that settling for peace and order is not enough. Politics must do more—

³⁴ This incoherence may have its roots in Voegelin's effort to reconcile the pagan philosophy of Plato with the Christian philosophy of Augustine. But the Platonic vision of life as participation in the divine ground is difficult to reconcile with the radical transcendence of Voegelin's Augustinian heritage. It is also the case, as I shall argue, that radical transcendence is a posture that is difficult to sustain.

³⁵ Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 57. See also *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 102-104.

it must be a participation in transcendent truth and goodness, it must embrace the *summum bonum*. Voegelin argues that failing to do so “suppress[es] the apparent freedom of the spirit and its order.”³⁶

Had he been consistent, Voegelin would not have rejected Hobbes’s political philosophy as an “empty vessel.” But Voegelin is no more consistent than Augustine. Objecting to minimalism in politics is not an appropriate posture for an Augustinian. After all, what is wrong with an empty vessel? Is that not the God-given condition of human existence? Is that not the first reality? And is not the demand for more a revolt against the order of God? Indeed, Hobbes would be quite justified in turning the charge of gnosticism against Voegelin himself.

*Voegelin a
gnostic?*

It is Voegelin who is a gnostic. It is Voegelin who lacks the heroic stamina that the Christian experience of transcendence requires. It is Voegelin who needs to sanctify the political by wedding it to the divine. It is Voegelin who accords Augustinian theology Koranic status and denounces every departure as demonic. It is Voegelin who demands too much of politics. To require the political order to be a microcosm of the transcendent order, or a reflection of the soul in its openness to God, is to ask too much. How can such a demand be compatible with the painful awareness of the imperfection of man and the world? How can such a philosophy not invite wars of aggression to subdue any heathens who do not share our formative consciousness?

Like Augustine, Voegelin cannot resist using politics for religious ends. Voegelin betrays more than a little nostalgia for the Middle Ages when the Church (that “flash of eternity in time”) was politically powerful and theologically unchallenged. He fails to recognize that the experience of God cannot be politically represented without being tarnished by power. What is the persecution of heretics and the burning of witches but a political effort to stamp out manifestations of deformed consciousness? I am not saying that God cannot be manifest in the world. I am merely saying that He cannot be *politically* represented without being defiled by power.

Finally, it may be objected that Voegelin is not a Christian at all, let alone an Augustinian. In my view, it is not necessary to

³⁶ Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 105.

be a Christian in order to be an Augustinian, or vice versa. The doctrinal beliefs of Christianity (e.g., the divinity of Jesus or the immaculate conception) are not at issue. What is at issue is the Augustinian sensibility: the extreme deprecation of the world, the excessive otherworldliness, the radical transcendence, the profound dualism, the emphasis on original sin (Voegelin likes to call it *superbia*), the abysmal helplessness of man, and the inscrutability of God. I contend that the moral and political implications of this sensibility are not as innocuous as the self-righteousness of their adherents would lead one to believe.

Conclusion

The Augustinian sensibility leads to morally repulsive conclusions. It leads Augustine to recommend actions on the part of the powerful that are so morally hideous that even Machiavelli would find them daunting. Moreover, the radical transcendence at the heart of Augustinianism is so harsh and inhuman that it cannot be consistently sustained. Its deprecation of the world is so excessive that it leads to a profound yearning for sanctification, which is satisfied only by the kind of dualism that it purportedly rejects. In the end, the world is not made up of imperfect women and men, who recognize their own shortcomings and examine their motives, but of the godly and the ungodly, the city of God and the city of man, the formative consciousness and deformed consciousness, the spiritually healthy and the spiritually diseased. These are distinctions with grave political implications. They are an invitation to exaggerate the deficiencies of others while ignoring one's own. Such dualistic thinking is certainly not a recipe for a free or tolerant society. Augustine endorses wars of religion. And Voegelin rejects the modest aims of Hobbesian politics as an "empty vessel" and demands a political order that mirrors the soul's openness to the divine ground.

The excesses and paradoxes of Augustinian Christianity are not remote and isolated phenomena. Nor are they exclusively Christian. They are echoed in the dramatic resurgence of religious fundamentalism in our time—Islamic Fundamentalism in the Middle East, Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel, Hindu Fundamentalism in India, and Christian Fundamentalism in the United States. Like Augustine and Voegelin, these fundamentalists are

not satisfied with an empty vessel. They are eager to use political power to establish their own particular notions of what the state of God would be like. It is therefore difficult to believe those who insist that the world's present troubles are connected to a general godlessness. There is no dearth of a certain kind of "godliness" in the politics of our time. In the absence of any spontaneous concord regarding the authenticity of revelation, and faced with a plethora of conflicting dogmas concerning transcendent truth, the state must approximate to some extent an empty vessel if any degree of earthly peace is to be achieved.³⁷

³⁷ This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Voegelin Society Meetings of 1994 in New York city. I would like to thank Professor Ellis Sandoz for inviting me to the Voegelin Society on various occasions. I would also like to thank Paul Gottfried for his helpful comments. I am very grateful to the HUMANITAS reviewers for their excellent comments and suggestions. Most of all I would like to thank Ken Reshaur of the University of Manitoba for his inspiring help and support.