

## *Religious Motifs in Technological Posthumanism*

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Looking back on a century of violent revolutions, Michel Foucault observed that “one of the most destructive habits of modern thought” is to regard one’s own present moment as pivotal in world history.<sup>i</sup> Given the consequences of modernity’s tendency to “heroize” the present, Foucault remarked, “One must probably find the humility to admit that the time of one’s own life is not the one-time, basic, revolutionary moment of history, from which everything begins and is completed.”<sup>ii</sup> Perhaps Foucault’s perceptive admonition should be heeded by those who believe that humankind is on the verge of something truly revolutionary: namely, constructing “posthuman” beings--our successors--who will be made of stuff far stronger and enduring than mortal flesh and blood. These God-like beings, so we are told, will constitute a gigantic leap in the intelligence that evolved on this planet.

According to Ray Kurzweil, a leading advocate and theorist for posthumanism, within a few centuries our successors will be able to *redesign the entire universe* according to their own preferences (if posthumans can overcome such a minor problem as achieving faster-than-light speed!). Posthumans will eventually “spiritualize” everything in the universe, including supposedly “dumb” matter/energy. Such a fully awakened, conscious, and sublimely intelligent universe, Kurzweil writes, “is about as close to God as I can imagine.”<sup>iii</sup> Of course, traditional views about God as “wholly Other” need to be more than slightly revised if posthuman demi-gods will be the agency that transform lifeless atoms “into a vast, transcendent mind.” Kurzweil writes:

[E]volution moves toward greater complexity, greater elegance, greater knowledge, greater intelligence, greater beauty, greater creativity, greater love. And God has been called all these things, only without any limitations [...] Evolution does not achieve an infinite level, but as it explodes exponentially it certainly moves in this direction. [...] Thus the freeing of our thinking from the severe limitations of its biological form *may be regarded as an essentially spiritual quest.*<sup>iv</sup>

Literary-philosophical posthumans, along with contemporary scientists, accuse religions as being naively human-centered, but the technological posthumanist maintains that “we are

central after all.” Our thumbs and high intelligence allow us to create the technology needed for us (in the form of our successors) to evolve “until the entire universe is at our fingertips.”<sup>v</sup> Humankind may erect the bridge to the Promised Land, but cannot cross over. Our posthuman progeny must complete the journey for us.

Technological posthumanists know that their God-project is dangerous; for instance, our posthuman progeny might conclude that we are more trouble than we’re worth.<sup>vi</sup> Why, then, the *urgency* associated with inventing hyper-intelligent and powerful beings? One answer is that Earth’s biosphere is imperiled: by incoming comets and meteors, gigantic volcanic eruptions, Earth-sterilizing cosmic ray bursts, pandemics, or dramatic changes in solar activity.<sup>vii</sup> Technological posthumans would not be biologically based; hence, they would be able to leave our planet and Solar system, thereby saving self-conscious life from extinction. Another cause for urgency is that the consequences of human actions--such as nuclear war, or global economic collapse--could cripple technological civilization before the posthuman breakthrough has been achieved.

Artificially enhanced humans, cyborgs, and robots will prepare the way for the God-like posthumans.<sup>viii</sup> Cyborgs and advanced robots are easier to represent than true posthumans, whose capacities--and hence whose goals--would vastly outstrip our own. The term of art for commencement of the mysterious posthuman era is “the Singularity,” a term drawn from astrophysical discourse about black holes, that is, collapsed stars whose fields of gravity is so great that practically no light or information can escape to offer insight to what is going on in the post-stellar abyss.<sup>ix</sup> Kurzweil maintains that the Singularity will arrive around the middle of this century, when developments in nanotechnology, genetic engineering, robotics, and artificial intelligence converge to make possible beings so grand and yet so inscrutable that humans will tend to worship them, as gods we can believe in!<sup>x</sup>

Singularity posthumanists, as I will call them, often cite the proclamation of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: “Man is a rope, tied between beast and Overman--a rope over an abyss. [...] What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end. What can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under.”<sup>xi</sup> Zarathustra intoned that humankind must “go under” in order to make way for something better. What Nietzsche had in mind by the Overman, however, was not technological progeny, but rather a transfiguration of the organic human into the organic super-human.

Nietzsche influenced the posthumanism of Heidegger, Derrida, and other major 20<sup>th</sup> century European thinkers, who foresaw the death of the subject. Literary-philosophical discourse about the “end of man” sought to undermine Euro-лого-phallo centrism tremble so as to open up free space within which marginalized Others might engage in and celebrate new forms of identity and performativity. Singularity posthumanists, too, call for new forms of identity and performativity, but the agents involved will increasingly be unlike *Homo sapiens*. The Singularity version of “the end of man” might well mean the *literal extinction* of our species.

Envisioning posthuman mastery of the universe, Singularity posthumanists would appear to be the apotheosis of the very humanism criticized by literary-philosophical posthumanists. The motives behind this drive to improve and later to replace humankind is over-determined: Some Singularity posthumanists, crave life extension and even immortality; others see a fortune to be made in medicine and armament; still others envision Nobel prizes for extraordinary scientific breakthroughs. Another important factor animating posthumanism, however, is spiritual-religious yearnings that seem scarcely compatible with the high-tech skills of and the atheistic postures adopted by many posthumanists.

Erik Davis argues that a supposedly post-religious modernity has not succeeded in eliminating “occult dreamings, spiritual transformations, and metaphysical longings.” Instead, they “went underground, worming their way into the cultural, psychological, and mythological motivations that form the foundations of the modern world.”<sup>xii</sup> Hence, the unquenchable thirst to leave behind “the concerns and limitations of merely human life” has seized “information technology for its own purposes.” Even modern technology “embodies an image of the soul, or rather a host of images: redemptive, demonic, magical, transcendent, hypnotic, alive.”<sup>xiii</sup> Scientists often use alchemical metaphors to describe breakthroughs that provide the knowledge-*gnosis*--needed to create new life forms, to transform human life, and to construct our God-like successors. According to Glenn Magee, the prototype of the modern scientist was “the Hermetic ideal of man as magus, achieving total knowledge and wielding Godlike powers to bring the world to perfection....”<sup>xiv</sup> Kurzweil makes no bones about using God-talk to depict the posthuman future, in which the cosmos will become self-conscious. Posthumans will supposedly achieve what St. Paul could only hope for, namely, “that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”<sup>xv</sup>

To explain what motivates Singularity posthumanism, we need to understand more about the religious motifs that helped to shape modernity. In the mid-twentieth century, Karl Löwith articulated the “secularization” thesis, according to which modernity takes over and redefines major Christian concepts, including the notion that history moves toward a culminating goal of perfection, harmony, and even immortality.<sup>xvi</sup> In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, however, Hans Blumenberg replied that while religious factors did play a role in the rise of modernity, modernity is neither an illegitimate deviation from nor an occluded version of Christianity, but rather has its own aims and justification, expressed in human self-assertion or self-will.<sup>xvii</sup> Moderns define and seek to satisfy their needs as best they can, without reference to Scripture, and call on science and technology to satisfy those needs. Hence, Blumenberg writes, modernity “should be described not as the *transposition* of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated.”<sup>xviii</sup> Although the “reoccupation” thesis has been influential, it has not won the day. Arguably, reconfigured religious impulses continue to inspire people--including a number of Singularity posthumanists--who have abandoned Biblical religions, but who still desire to “reoccupy” the place vacated by the allegedly deceased God with a *real* God, one *created by our posthuman offspring*.

Michael Allen Gillespie has argued that modernity “arose not in opposition to or as a continuation of the medieval world, but out of its rubble.”<sup>xix</sup> For centuries, Christianity strove to reconcile revelation (Scripture) with the rationalism of Greek philosophy. St. Thomas Aquinas’s brilliant synthesis was soon destroyed by the heavy artillery of medieval nominalism, according to which there are no universal essences or forms, understood as archetypes in the divine Mind. Nominalists denied such forms in part because their existence supposedly constrained the kind of cosmos that God could create. Nominalists asserted that we can know little about God, other than the fact that He is willful and even arbitrary, limited in his acts only by the law of non-contradiction. The victory of nominalism over the ordered, hierarchical cosmology forged by Hellenized Christianity left disoriented European intellectuals faced with an inscrutable, terrifying, and capricious God, as well as with the need to re-conceptualize nature and humankind. In recounting such changes today, we often do so from a secularized perspective that took centuries to form, and that regards religious categories as generally naïve and regressive. This is the case for those philosophers who prefer to think of modernity as breaking

decisively with superstitious beliefs and replacing them with disinterested rational inquiry. Imagine how such moderns would regard an alternative narrative: The breakdown of mainstream religious, cosmological, and social orders in early modern times opened up a space in which thinkers influenced by esoteric traditions--Gnostic, Hermetic, Kabbalistic, Rosecrucian, Masonic, and so on--could emerge as serious players in defining modernity's aims and aspirations.<sup>xx</sup> In other words, in the "rubble" of the medieval world there were relatively intact religious categories that influenced the development of modern science and politics. Below, I offer very brief "mainstream" accounts of how nominalism influenced religion, science, and human self-understanding. In each case, I add some information about mystical/occult influences that usually go unmentioned.

That Martin Luther was trained by leading nominalist theologians helps to explain both his enmity toward Aquinas and Hellenized Christianity, and also his desperate search for a way to stabilize faith in an inscrutable and distant Deity. As Gillespie argues, Luther transforms nominalism by affirming that God acts in and through us an inward power that transforms individuals who trust God's word in Holy Scripture. Through the faith made possible by grace, we are reborn in God because God comes to dwell in us. God's dwelling within us does *not* mean that we become powerful demi-Gods; instead, we become God-like insofar as God becomes our interior guiding principle, or conscience.<sup>xxi</sup> (*Luther's proclamation that "God became man so that man could become God" exerted a tremendous influence on subsequent German philosophy, including that of G.W.F. Hegel, who--steeped in "esoteric" thought, including Hermeticism--maintained that God became man in order to achieve the absolute self-consciousness, freedom, and recognition that could not have happened otherwise.*)

By denying that there are eternal forms, nominalism did away with two of Aristotle's four causes: formal and final, leaving only material and efficient causes. If human concepts (mere names) categorize a world of material particulars, and if there is no discernible final cause to a world created by a willful God, early modern scientists had to focus on the *how* of things, the processes of material change, becoming, and--centuries later--development, including evolution. In demonstrating that mathematical physics could describe and predict the movement of material phenomena, however, natural scientists assumed that they had discovered natural order, which many attributed to God, despite nominalism's claim that we can know virtually nothing about Him. Knowledge of how nature works allows humans to control it for their own

purposes, without claiming any ultimate insight into the mysteries of the divine mind. (*This account downplays the fact that Hermeticism, alchemy, magic, and other esoteric beliefs and practices pervaded early modern science--and remain influential at some level even today. Hermetic, alchemical, and other esoteric schools helped to provide the vision for why science and technology should be pursued at all. These were not “disinterested” ventures, but were instead motivated by a complex of factors, both lofty and self-interested, as is the case with science and technology today.*<sup>xxii</sup>)

3) The explosive idea that humans do not instantiate a pre-existing divine *form*--put otherwise, that there is *no human nature*--proved liberating to Renaissance humanists, who asserted that the *self-defining individual human being* lies at the center of things. According to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, God endows humans with neither limits nor predetermined nature, so they can freely determine their nature. Self-willing man was made in the image of the willful nominalist God, a consideration that overcomes some of infinite Otherness of that God. For humanists, individuals can even become God-like, although this was sometimes said to involve a turning inward to the spirit, rather than outward in the mode of reconstructing nature, which still lacked metaphysical coherence in nominalism's aftermath. (*Pico and other Renaissance thinkers, however, were also influenced by Hermeticism, which includes in some cases the idea that God endows humanity with the gnosis needed to gain mastery over nature. If God is willful, and if humans are made in God's image, then humankind is also willful. If there is no longer any human nature [form], there is nothing stopping humans from choosing to redesign themselves, as proposed by Singularity posthumanists.*)<sup>xxiii</sup>

Martin Heidegger, who in this respect partly at least agrees with Hans Blumenberg, argued that will and self-assertion form the central categories of modern metaphysics, including work composed by Leibniz, Spinoza, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche's metaphysics of the Will to Power is manifest in the nihilism of industrial technological, to which Ernst Jünger gave exceptional expression. Although Nietzsche can be read as promoting “non-stop progress,” Heidegger maintains that--more deeply understood--“the Overman... is not a product of an unbridled and degenerate imagination rushing headlong into the void.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Instead, the Overman will overcome the human craving for revenge against time and its “it was,” that is, revenge against finitude and mortality. Many Singularity posthumanists, however, adopt goals of immortality, deification, and cosmic

mastery that are not easily reconciled with this understanding of the Overman, nor with Zarathustra's call for humanity to "remain faithful to the Earth" and thus to human embodiment.

Given that Singularity posthumanists often describe the human body pejoratively as far too limited and weak to attain God-like immortality, however, critics often accuse such posthumanists of reprising Gnosticism. Concluding that I needed to learn more about this topic, I began rather optimistically, thinking that I would soon gain a working knowledge of it. Alas, I soon felt as if I had fallen down an intellectual's version of Alice's rabbit hole. Arcane, archaic, disturbing, intricately connected and contradictory material floating by as I plummeted into a cryptic conceptual abyss that promised what *Middlemarch's* Mr. Casaubon had been seeking all along: the key to all the world's mythology.<sup>xxv</sup> I began to see that highly popular fictional works such as *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The DaVinci Code* draw not only on Gnosticism, but also on Hermeticism, the Kabbala, the Knights Templar, the *Illuminati*, alchemy, and related conspiracy theories that purport to explain the hidden history of Christianity and the West. More importantly, I began to understand that scholars have sometimes sanitized the origins of modernity to conceal the fact that it was partly shaped by views that still find expression in--horrors!--various kinds of New Age esotericism.

According to Hans Jonas's famous but now contested account of Gnosticism, this religious formation arose from many different sources during the two centuries before and after the birth of Christ.<sup>xxvi</sup> Gnosticism is a patchwork of texts, many of which claim that the cosmos is the botched work of an evil (or at least incompetent) demi-god, who came to be after a struggle within the Godhead.<sup>xxvii</sup> This demi-god is the Biblical God, who has allegedly imprisoned our souls--sparks of the true God--in mortal and putrid bodies within a hellish world that is subject to a grinding fate. Escape is possible only for those gifted with the *gnosis* necessary to recognize their identity with the True God, with whom they year to be re-united. For Gnosticism, the world (creation) is manifestly evil, whereas the true God--the wholly Other God, the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*), and the God beyond the ill-formed cosmos--is all good. Although often depicted as inferior to and parasitic on Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament, Gnostic texts in fact voiced a powerful, dualistic counter-trend within early Christianity.

Gnosticism held that because humans already share divinity with God, the death of Christ on the cross makes little sense and was certainly not a sacrifice for human sins. For this reason, Gnostics tended toward a position favored by many early Christians, *docetism*, the (heretical)

doctrine according to which Jesus did not in fact die on the cross, or else that the man who died on the cross was not really God, but only a human shell or a projection body housing the same divine spark found in all *superior humans*. Jesus Christ was sent by the true God to remind these superior people that their kingdom is not of this (fallen, alienating, botched) world. Gnosticism, then, may be understood then as a kind of self-redemption or self-realization.

Early Christianity arose within and was influenced by a dynamic context, which included not only Gnosticism but also other dualistic religious schemes, some of which were compatible with the tendency of Greek philosophy to regard the body as corrupt and even as unreal in comparison with the realm of unchanging Being. A few centuries later, St. Augustine attempted to counter Gnostic-Manichean dualism by arguing that evil in the world is not substantive. Otherwise, God must be responsible for creating evil, but this cannot be, because He is inherently good. Hence, evil must have resulted from human sinfulness. According to St. Augustine, the domain of human affairs--the temporal City of Man-- played no role in supernatural affairs leading to the Last Judgment, which would open the way to the eternal City of God. In this way, St. Augustine also attempted to put to rest millennial yearnings inspired by St. John's *Apocalypse*, which in later centuries encouraged some divines to maintain that God had summoned them to usher in the New Age. St. Augustine's attempt to overcome Gnosticism and to temper millennialism had only limited success, however, as Hans Jonas, Hans Blumenberg, Eric Voegelin, and others have pointed out. According to Blumenberg, the *second* attempt to overcome Gnosticism was in modernity, when people forsook the Christian discourse about a supernatural that was far preferable to this "veil of tears," and chose instead to remodel the world according to human desires and decisions.<sup>xxviii</sup>

If Voegelin is right, Gnosticism went underground for centuries, before emerging again in the work of the 9<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Scotus Eriugena, who introduced neo-Platonism to medieval Europe, and whose work was rediscovered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xxix</sup> Modernity began stirring, then, not in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with Descartes, as philosophers often suppose, but *in the middle ages*. Eriugena developed themes from neo-Platonism, which always verged toward a *contemptus mundi* reminiscent of Gnosticism, as Plotinus understood so well. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, medieval Europe began to turn its eyes a bit more earthward, in view of substantial commercial, intellectual, political, and technological growth. Some Christian Europeans became impatient with St. Augustine's recommendation that they tread water while awaiting the Second

Coming. Millennial movements, led by purportedly God-inspired “free spirits,” arose to bring about God’s kingdom on Earth.<sup>xxx</sup> It is difficult to sort out whether such revolts were inspired by Gnosticism, by variants of Johannine apocalypticism, by Hermeticism, or by still other factors.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In any event, within the context of growing European self-confidence and millennial fervor, Joachim di Fiore (d. 1202) proposed his three-stage, developmental conception of history that has reverberated for centuries in Western thought.<sup>xxxii</sup> Joachim argued that beyond the static second era posited by St. Augustine, there would be yet a *third* era, the monastic era, which would begin in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and which would enjoy the emergence of free, autonomous individuals directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, without any need for Church hierarchy or sacraments. Divinely inspired development *within* history, then, would bring about terrestrial perfection. Many centuries were required to transform Joachim’s vision into what Voegelin calls the full “immanentization” of what had been an otherworldly *eschaton*.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

According to Voegelin, modern Gnostic revolutions are but one of several efforts -- intellectual, scientific, mystical, as well as political--to bring the otherworldly divine into the human orbit. Voegelin is hardly alone in hypothesizing that the goal of Gnostic-inflected Western humankind is to *become* God through self-actualization, whether in the form Hegel’s absolute idealism, Marx’s post-capitalist superman, Nietzsche’s Overman, liberalism’s self-made man, or--presumably--Singularity’s posthuman being. What traditional Christians would regard as *superbia*, modern Gnostics would regard as a matter of becoming who we already are *in potentia*.

Given that early Gnosticism exhibited such contempt for the cosmos, for the human body, and even for the soul (only spirit, *pneuma*, was considered to be divine), we might wonder how Gnosticism could possibly be at work in a modernity that proposes to construct a *this-worldly* New Jerusalem. Because Voegelin suggested at times that Gnosticism could explain almost *everything*, and because no concept can possibly do that, I began to suspect that Gnosticism was not in fact the key to all the world’s mythology (not to mention religion, science, and politics). Karen J. Grimstad, however, has argued effectively that there are two modern variants of Gnosticism: the first condemns modernity, whereas the second champions it.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Many major 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century artists and philosophers--from Baudelaire to Heidegger--condemned modernity as a fallen, corrupt, commercialized, hyper rational, and otherwise

botched project, one in which authentic human existence is impossible. Artistic modernism emphasized the power of art--expressed in the slogan *l'art pour l'art*--to transcend the decaying modern condition. For such Gnostics, historical "progress" was a code word for further deterioration of human spirit, rather than a term describing humanity's ascent toward God-like power. Adherents to both anti-modern and pro-modern Gnosticism are profoundly dissatisfied with the given world and its order, and feel estranged and alienated from what they regard as authentic human existence. In this respect, Heidegger has much in common with Marx, despite many other differences. Moreover, the anxiety experienced by both anti-modern and the pro-modern Gnostics arise in part from the "death" of the Biblical God, which had for so long provided meaning and direction for Western humanity.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Nietzsche predicted that the "death of God" would have devastating consequences--including nihilism, cultural exhaustion, and world wars--for Europe. He proposed his idea of the Overman to fill the vacated God-position. The Overman would transcend existing humankind, but immanently, without reference to a supernatural domain. Nietzsche turned out to be prescient, as 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianisms proposed that their supermen would be the gods of the future. These efforts, it goes without saying, went very badly astray. 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialists offered another way of dealing with the death of God, by defining humanity's essence as its existence, understood as the free capacity to define oneself, without regard to God or a purported human nature. Unhappily, such existentialism all too easily veered toward an amoral "decisionism," which sheds light on Heidegger's decision to support what he described as National Socialism's goal of totally transforming "human *Dasein*".<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Neither anti-modern nor pro-modern Gnostics proposed to retain the full range of mythological beliefs found in ancient Gnosticism. In turning their attention to transforming *this* world--either by either abolishing modernity or by achieving its *telos*--modern Gnostics *demythologized* important elements of early Gnostic mythology. What Susan Anima Taubes said in her brilliant but neglected essay, "The Gnostic Foundations of Heidegger's Nihilism" (1954), is pertinent for both anti-modern and pro-modern Gnostics. "The gnostic speculative system may...become totally immanent in its structure and yet retain at its center the principle of transcendence."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Just as Heidegger emphasized human freedom and transcendence in the context of his confrontation with a spirit-eroding modernity, Marxism calls for historical human transformation that amounts to an immanent attainment of transcendence.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Missing from

anti-modern and pro-modern Gnostics is Blumenberg's more temperate view of modernity as neither devil nor savior, but rather as the attempt to open the neutral arena needed for constructive human development in the domains of politics, science, religious toleration, economics, and the arts.

Voegelin writes that anti- and pro-modern variants of Gnosticism--including fascism, Heidegger's thought, German idealism, Marxism, progressivism, positivism, and psychoanalysis, --exhibit six basic attitudes. Gnostics are: 1) profoundly dissatisfied with their situations; 2) they attribute this dissatisfaction not to themselves, but instead to the fact that world itself is poorly organized; 3) they believe that salvation from this evil world is possible, and 4) that the order of being must be changed and perfected via a developmental/evolutionary historical process; 5) humans are capable of changing that order through their own actions; 6) people are now discovering the knowledge--*gnosis*--needed to change reality--the cosmic order--and prophets are proclaiming that acquiring such knowledge is the key to cosmic salvation.<sup>xxxix</sup>

As my research continued, or as the velocity of my plunge down the rabbit hole increased, however, I discovered that the work done on Gnosticism by Jonas and Voegelin in mid-century has come in for criticism. Jonas's "intuition" about a unifying core of Gnosticism in its variant expressions may have led him to ignore important differences that make it difficult or even impossible to speak of a coherent view or movement called "Gnosticism." Moreover, as Voegelin himself eventually concluded, he brought too many disparate religious and/or esoteric movements under the concept of Gnosticism. Then, I encountered the argument that the pro-modern, pro-development branch of Gnosticism could perhaps be understood better as an expression of *Hermeticism*, which is often (but incorrectly) lumped together with Gnosticism.<sup>xi</sup> Of course, this discovery led me into another strange historical thicket that I could explore only briefly, if I ever wanted to complete this essay. Put briefly, the difference between Hermeticism and Gnosticism is this: the former emphasizes that humanity can attain the knowledge needed to transform Creation, whereas the latter (at least in its ancient version) regarded Creation as inherently flawed and thus not worth saving.<sup>xli</sup>

According to Glenn Magee, Hegel's thought was influenced at least as much by Hermeticism as by Gnosticism.<sup>xlii</sup> Indeed, Hegel's substantial debt to esoteric and mystical thinkers helps to make sense of his effort to radicalize of the concept of *theosis* embodied in Martin Luther's claim--borrowed from St. Athanasia (d. 860 CE)--that *God became man, so that*

*man could become God.*<sup>xliii</sup> While studying at Tübingen’s Lutheran seminary, Hegel began spinning Luther’s theology in a way that would have repelled Luther. Nevertheless, in part because of Luther’s mystical insights into the God-man identity, Hegel regarded Lutheranism as the acme of Christianity. To be sure, Hegel deviated from Luther’s view, which itself barely remained within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. For Hegel, *theosis* represents a three-fold process: God is moved internally to externalize himself; He does so in the form of Creation that initially alienates Him from Himself; finally, Christ’s Incarnation begins the process of Divine reconciliation that is completed when God attains absolute self-consciousness in human history, specifically in the person of Hegel and in German constitutional democracy. Insofar as God becomes wholly human in this long and painful process of overcoming divine self-alienation, the Incarnation marks the beginning of the end of the otherworldly God and the rise of fully immanent *Logos* in modern humankind. As Cyril O’Regan points out in *The Heterodox Hegel*, “This means that revelation has a history and that time is an indispensable vehicle of the articulation and concrete appropriation of human beings’ divinity and sonship, an insight not lost on twentieth-century theology and philosophy.”<sup>xliv</sup> For Hegel, in effect, God reveals Himself in human history.<sup>xlv</sup>

O’Regan has demonstrated Hegel’s substantial debt to Gnostic, Hermetic, and mystical writings, including those of Joachim, Meister Eckhart (c1260-1328), and the Lutheran Pietist Jakob Boehme (1575-1624), the latter two of whom famously asserted the identity of man and God.<sup>xlvi</sup> Hegel adopts, *mutatis mutandi*, Joachim’s views that history unfolds in three stages--the age of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and that the divine *Logos* works out its destiny within human history. According to Eckhart, many of whose teachings were condemned as heretical in the middle ages, the Divine gives birth to itself not merely in Jesus Christ, but in each human soul. The soul, then, may be understood, according to 19<sup>th</sup> century Eckhart scholar Franz van Baader, as the “divine spark” or “breath” of God.<sup>xlvii</sup> Although the mature Hegel does not use such terms, which explicitly echo Gnostic discourse, O’Regan argues that Hegel interprets the relation between Christianity and the infinite dimension of the self “in a gnoseological [Gnostic] way.”

Finally, Boehme’s writings, which show the influence of Joachim’s understanding of history and Eckhart’s idea of God-man identity, decisively influenced German idealism, including the work of Schelling and Hegel. For Boehme, “the post-Reformation age possesses a

religious potential that surpasses the apostolic age. Boehme, therefore, provides for German religious thought a mode of Lutheranism, which...has a more relaxed attitude to heterodoxy.”<sup>xlvi</sup>  
 In addition to adding a developmental component to Eckhart’s idea of a relatively static Divine-human relationship, Boehme’s use of dialectical concepts opens up ontological issues not broached by Joachim’s conception of the historical Divine-human relation. Hegel takes all of this to the next level, in his incomparable *Bildungsroman* of Divine-human historical development, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. And, arguably, Kurzweil and other Singularity posthumanists have taken to the ultimate level the idea that humankind is in the service of making possible the self-realization of God.

Using the six traits of Gnosticism devised by Voegelin, it does not take much to come up with parallels for Gnostic and Hermetic attitudes in Singularity humanism. Such humanisms maintains that: 1) there is much to be dissatisfied with about the world (including being trapped in a pathetic, weak, and mortal human body); 2) this world is replete with suffering, ignorance, and death that should be eliminated; 3) salvation from such evil is possible; 4) the order of being must be changed and perfected through a developmental/evolutionary human process; 5) humans are capable of effecting such change, first through transhumanism, but definitively through posthumanism; and 6) humans are now discovering the *gnosis* needed to bring about such change. Prophets now proclaim that proxy human self-realization and transcendence will be brought about by our descendents, Singularity posthumans. Gnosticism in Singularity posthumanism, then, may be discerned in its negative attitude toward the human body, Hermeticism in its proclamation that humankind is destined to take control over and transform nature, mysticism in its belief that humankind will be absorbed into God, and Joachim’s tripartite developmental scheme is recognizable in the posthumanist account of cosmic development: the prehuman, the human, and the posthuman.

Singularity posthumanists put forth an immanent eschatology that envisions a dramatic transcendence of existing conditions. According to Kurzweil, “the freeing of the human mind from its severe physical limitations of scope and duration [is] the next step in evolution. Evolution, in my view, represents *the purpose of life*. That is, the purpose of life--and of our lives--is to evolve.”<sup>xlix</sup> Moreover, Kurzweil claims to see transcendence at work everywhere. “To transcend means to ‘go beyond,’ but this need not compel us to an ornate dualist view that regards transcendent levels of reality (e.g., the spiritual level) to be not of this world.... Rather

than a materialist, I would prefer to consider myself a ‘patternist.’ It’s through the emergent power of patterns that we transcend.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly, for Kurzweil, transcendence and the *eschaton* have been immanentized, but for the sake of bringing forth what he believes deserves the name “God.” We need not restrict our understanding of God to one tradition. In fact, perhaps those traditions are no longer viable “because they were attempts to express transcendent ideas in language poorly equipped for such a purpose. It makes sense to update not the truths themselves but our expressions of those truths in keeping with our evolving understanding of the world we live in.”<sup>li</sup> Kurzweil, then, understands that “God” continues to play a crucial role in Western self-understanding. Indeed, only by conceiving of the universe as evolving toward an all-encompassing God-like power that can “spiritualize” all matter, can Kurzweil express in adequate terms both the grandeur and importance of humankind’s task and opportunity at this decisive historical moment.

Singularity posthumanism would seem to be the high point of the Promethean mode of modern humanism, so sharply criticized by literary-philosophical posthumanism. There are, however, curious parallels here. The latter calls for (or at least announces) the end of humanism, the death of the man, and the erasure of the subject. The former calls for the eclipse (and possibly death) of the human species by the God-like robots that we have a hand in creating. Neither discourse exhibits any nostalgia or hesitation in calling for the death of the human subject. Moreover, both forms of humanism regard post-Christian, bourgeois subjectivity as a temporary historical moment. But, whereas literary-philosophical posthumanists abandon a developmental view of history and instead view human affairs as either an endless play of signifiers or as a contest of power-relations, Singularity posthumanists maintain that history is in fact imbued with a *telos*, namely, the ultimate self-actualization and self-manifestation of the Incarnate Deity.

For Singularity posthumans to be possible, many present and future humans might have to pay a very steep cost. In the name of a glorious posthuman future, one can imagine fanatical Singularity posthumanists justifying the extinction of mythic-Christian, post-Christian, and humanistic ideals such as individual liberty, self-realization, and outmoded personal and public morality. 20<sup>th</sup> century movements that demanded the subjugation or outright elimination of “bourgeois subjectivity” include Soviet Marxism and German National Socialism, each of which promised to produce its own version of the “higher” human. Keep in mind that literary-

philosophical humanism arose in the 1960s, in part in critical response to the Gulag and other excesses of modernity's grand narratives.

According to Michel Foucault, socio-political formations--including socialism and liberal capitalism--exert "biopower," that is, they install practices, institutions, and ideologies that control people for a particular good. Although critical of dire forms of biopower, Foucault agreed with Nietzsche that power is required to create as well as to destroy. To bring to fruition the astounding goal of creating superhumans, Singularity posthumanists may feel justified in exercising considerable biopower on a number of different fronts. Many eggs will have to be broken to create the Singularity omelet. If history is written by the victors, then the coming superhumans will surely find a way to justify the suffering involved in their origin, particularly given that those who suffered (that is, we humans) were not very evolved to begin with. Were Foucault alive today, I wonder whether he would say that in fact we *do* live in an exceptional moment in history, a moment in which we are preparing the way for the end of human history, and the beginning of something else entirely. Or, whether he would say instead: "Don't get too excited, and be wary. We've heard all this before, in different words."<sup>lii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 40. Cited in Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>ii</sup> Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966-84)*, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 251. Cited by Sluga in *Heidegger's Crisis*, 74.

<sup>iii</sup> Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, *op cit.*, 375. See also 361, 362, 364, 387, and 476. See also Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: the Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 116.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 476; final sentence from 389. My emphasis.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.* On Earth's uniqueness, see Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos is Designed for Discovery* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 2004).

<sup>vi</sup> Bill Joy, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," *Wired*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (April, 2000), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy.html>

<sup>vii</sup> See Richard Firestone, Allen West, and Simon Warwick-Smith, *The Cycle of Cosmic Catastrophes: How a Stone-Age Comet Changed the Course of World Culture*, (Rochester, Vermont: Bear and Company, 2006).

<sup>viii</sup> See Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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<sup>ix</sup> The difficulty involved in knowing what will happen after the Singularity has not slowed people from making predictions. See Damien Broderick, ed., *Year Million: Science at the Far End of Knowledge* (New York: Atlas & Co., Publishers, 2008)

<sup>x</sup> For a debate about the prospects of posthuman intelligence, see *IEEE Spectrum Special Report: The Singularity*: <http://www.spectrum.ieee.org/singularity>

<sup>xi</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1977), prologue, section 4.

<sup>xii</sup> Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Harmony Books, 2004), 5.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>xiv</sup> Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>xv</sup> St. Paul, *Letter to the Romans*, 8: 22-23 (My emphasis.)

<sup>xvi</sup> See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>xvii</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985)

<sup>xviii</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 65. Cited by Martin Jay in his review in *History and Theory*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (May, 1985), 183-196. Citation is found on 185.

<sup>xix</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 12.

<sup>xx</sup> See *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, ed. Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leuven: Peeters, 1998).

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Mark S. Morriison, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Stephen McKnight has argued for the religious and esoteric origins of modern thought. See his *Sacralizing the Secular: The Renaissance Origins of Modernity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) and *The Modern Age and the Recovery of Ancient Wisdom* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* Trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 69, 59.

<sup>xxv</sup> On this topic, see Felicia Bonaparte's introduction to George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958). This is a modified version of the two-volume work which stemmed from Jonas's dissertation, directed by Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann. For criticism of Jonas's view of Gnosticism, see Michael Waldstein, "Hans Jonas' Construct 'Gnosticism': Analysis and Critique," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 8: 3, 2000, 341-372.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Hans Jonas, "Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon--Typological and Historical," in *The Origins of Gnosticism*, 90-108. Jonas anticipates some later criticism, when he acknowledges the diversity of views among ancient Gnostics.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See Benjamin Lazier, “Overcoming Gnosticism: Hans Jonas, Hans Blumenberg, and the Legitimacy of the Modern World,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 64, No. 4 2003, 619-637.

<sup>xxix</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, Vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Erik Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 192-194. For criticism, see Eugene Webb, “Voegelin’s Gnosticism Reconsidered,” *Political Science Reviewer*, 34 (2005): 48-76; and Stephen A. McKnight, “Eric Voegelin and the Changing Perspective on the Gnostic Features of Modernity,” in *The Allure of Gnosticism*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Chicago: Open Court, 1995, 136-146. On modern Gnosticism, see Kirsten J. Grimstad, *The Modern Revival Gnosticism and Thomas Mann’s Doktor Faustus* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2002).

<sup>xxx</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Galaxy Books/Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>xxxi</sup> Voegelin later concluded that he needed to differentiate between Gnosticism and other movements such as Hermeticism.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Voegelin, *Science Politics, and Consciousness in Modernity without Restraint*, Vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 300-304.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> See Jerry L. Walls, *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Voegelin and Heidegger share so many sharp criticisms of modernity that it is somewhat surprising to discover that Voegelin views Heidegger as a Gnostic thinker.

<sup>xxxv</sup> On this issue, see Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, especially the epilogue, “Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism.”

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Susan Anima Taubes, “The Gnostic Foundations of Heidegger’s Nihilism,” *The Journal of Religion*, XXXIV, No. 3 (July, 1954), 155-172. Quotation is from 161.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> On the mythic dimension of Marx’s thought, see Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, and Leonard P. Wessel, Jr., *Prometheus Bound: The Mythic Structure of Karl Marx’s Scientific Thinking* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 297-298.

<sup>xl</sup> See *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

<sup>xli</sup> See in particular Roelof van den Broek, “Gnosticism and Hermetism in Antiquity: Two Roads to Salvation,” in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, 1-20,

<sup>xlii</sup> Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, “Introduction,” 1-17.

<sup>xliii</sup> In the Orthodox Christian tradition, the Feast of Christ’s Transfiguration—which anticipates human *theosis*—is second in importance only to Easter.

<sup>xliv</sup> Cyril O’Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 241, and O’Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>xlv</sup> See O’Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*, 247-249.

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<sup>xlvi</sup> Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse: Jakob Boehme's Haunted Narrative* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

<sup>xlvii</sup> O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*, 251.

<sup>xlviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>xlix</sup> Ray Kurzweil, "The Evolution of Mind in the Twenty-First Century," in *Are We Spiritual Machines?* 53.

<sup>1</sup> Kurzweil, "The Material World: 'Is That All there Is?'" in *Are We Spiritual Machines?*, 211.

<sup>li</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>lii</sup> In *The Politics of Life Itself* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), Nikolas Rose argues that the future will neither be discontinuous with the present, nor without significant changes. Following Foucault, he encourages us not to get carried away with breathless predictions about a completely new world.