

Understanding Modernity: A Reappraisal of the Gnostic Element

ALTHOUGH Gnosticism is hardly new as a subject of scholarly endeavor and as a concept helpful in understanding modernity, there is a growing enthusiasm for the subject among scholars from a wide range of disciplines and which will be further sparked by the recent publication of valuable new material.¹ New insights into the character of ancient Gnosticism, its relation to other Hellenistic religions and philosophical schools, and its significance for understanding modernity will all, no doubt, be forthcoming, but before much progress can be made a more careful and precise concept of Gnosticism must be formulated, and, in particular, its application to modern phenomena must be refined. The term "gnostic" is frequently used almost synonymously with "apocalyptic" and "utopian" and is supposed to describe a bewildering panoply of mutually contradictory phenomena. If it is to serve as something more than a general term of opprobrium, clarification is needed, and while this essay will focus attention on the political aspects of modernity derived from

ancient Gnosticism, a similar critique could be applied to other areas.²

In its political aspect, modernity is characterized by an intense apocalyptic yearning to transform the prevailing disorder into an earthly paradise. In the last two centuries, the modern epoch has been dominated by secular messiahs who claim the knowledge to redeem mankind from his alienated state and deliver him into a realm of unending happiness and fulfillment.

But the dream of enlightenment and rebirth does not originate with these relatively recent figures. Modernity is given its basic character by Petrarch in the 14th Century. Moreover, it is Petrarch who first develops an immanentized salvation history, which is also characteristic of the epoch.

Where all Christian thinkers before him had thought of it [history] as a continuous development, beginning with the creation of the world and leading up to

1. James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). John Dart's book, *The Laughing Savior: The Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), gives an account of the various scholarly and political intrigues and joustings that delayed the complete translation for more than thirty years. In addition to the Vanderbilt Conference on Gnosticism and Modernity at which this paper was given, Yale held an international Conference on Gnosticism that drew hundreds of scholars from all over the world. Even with four sessions running concurrently for two and a half days, there was standing room only for most sessions.

2. Jonas' important study, *The Gnostic Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press), has remained so much a part of the recent debates that it was revised again in 1977. Harold Bloom, the noted literary critic, gave a plenary lecture at the Yale Conference entitled "Lying Against Time: Gnosis, Poetry, Criticism."

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the writer's own life time, he saw it sharply divided into two periods, the classical and the recent, the former comprising the *historiae antiquae*, the latter the *historiae novae*. And where his forerunners had conceived of that continuous development as a steady progress from heathen darkness to the light that was Christ. . . . Petrarch interpreted the period in which the "name of Christ began to be celebrated in Rome and adored by the Roman emperors" as the beginning of a "dark" age of decay and obscuratation, and the preceding period—for him simply the period of royal, republican and imperial Rome—as an age of glory and light.³

Secular society and human cultural achievement for Petrarch substitute for the Christian revelation and the transcendent kingdom of God.

In transferring to the state of intellectual culture precisely those terms which the theologians, the Church Fathers and Holy Writ itself had applied to the State of the soul (*lux and sol as opposed to nox and tenebrae*, "wakefulness" as opposed to "slumber", "seeing" as opposed to "blindness"), and then maintaining that the Roman pagans had been in the light whereas the Christians had walked in darkness, he revolutionized the interpretation of history no less radically than Copernicus, two hundred years later, was to revolutionize the interpretation of the physical universe.⁴

3. Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969; originally published in 1960 by Almqvist and Wiksells, Stockholm, Sweden), 10. See also Theodore Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'" in *Speculum*, XVII (1942), 226-42.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11. Panofsky has also shown the key role of Vasari as a major Renaissance figure developing a "modern" progressivist construction of history—a model that is virtually a prototype of the 18th and 19th century constructions. Vasari, the father of modern art history, judges the various periods in art by the standards of his own time, "the age, which is the topmost height of perfection."

[T]his conception of history is based upon a theory of evolution according to which the

If modernity is characterized from the beginning as a period of regeneration and enlightenment which is obtained within human culture, then there are serious problems in deriving it from ancient Gnosticism. There is first of all the problem that Gnosticism is radically dualistic. Indeed its loathing of the world is a primary distinguishing feature in relation to other Hellenistic religions and philosophies. There are equally serious problems in deriving the dream of an apocalyptic installation of a secular Paradise from Gnosticism. In addition to being radically dualistic, it is also not apocalyptic. That is, Gnosticism made no effort to operate on the world; the task was to escape or overcome its corrupting influence. In fact, the dream of making a home in the world was a certain mark of ignorance (*agnoia*) not knowledge (*gnosis*).

historical "progress" of art and culture passes through three predetermined and, therefore, typical phases (*eta*): a first primitive stage in which the three arts [painting, sculpture, and architecture] are in their infancy and exist, as it were, only as a rough sketch (*abbozzo*); a second, transitional stage, comparable to adolescence, in which considerable advances have been made, but which cannot as yet attain to absolute perfection; and finally, a stage of full maturity in which art has climbed so high that one is inclined to fear a recession rather than to hope for further advancement. [*Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955), 215.]

Vasari's analogical construction of the three ages of culture to three ages of man draws its inspiration from the Christian *heilsgeschichtlich* models rather than from secular or cultural historians like Florus. Florus uses the analogy but takes it to its completion by adding the stages of old age and death. Vasari, on the other hand, will not admit the possibility of decline and extinction.

Thus we witness the remarkable spectacle that the theological dogma of the Church Fathers and the humanist dogma of the Renaissance historiographers led to analogous results: in both cases the comparison of historical periods with the ages of men could be maintained only under the condition that the parallelism stop at the stage of maturity. Thereby Vasari could subordinate the idea of biological growth and decay to the idea of spiritual progress which can be furthered by external factors (for instance by the natural surroundings, or by the rediscovery of Roman antiquities) but is essentially contingent upon the "nature of the arts" themselves. (*Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 219)

Before exploring other influences which could account for the character of the modern epoch, it is apposite to raise one further question regarding modernity. Is the present period modern? Admittedly, this is a peculiar question. Modernity has always denoted the present. But modernity, as we have seen, has a specific world-feeling. It is a period of apocalyptic expectation, a period of belief in saving knowledge. It would appear that these convictions have been worn thin in our own time. The delay of the Eschaton and the abrasive passage of time have practically destroyed the dream. We are left with the experience of alienation, but now it is unrelieved by a belief in saving truth. The present is not marked by *gnosis* but by *agnoia*—the experience of profound existential ignorance. It would be unfortunate indeed if the enthusiasm for Gnosticism and modernity obscures the fact that ours is a “post-modern” world in which both the traditional and the secular religions have disintegrated, or appear to be in the process of disintegration.

But now we must return to our primary issue. If modernity’s immanentism and apocalypticism do not derive from Gnosticism, then what are the key influences? The work of Hiram Haydn, D. P. Walker, and Francis Yates⁵, suggests that Hermeticism, Orphism, and Alchemy, which become incorporated into the mainlines of Western intellectual and cultural history by Ficino and the Renaissance Neoplatonists, are among the strongest sources. These systems, which are contemporaneous with Gnosticism, share its experience of alienation and its yearning for saving knowledge, but unlike Gnosticism, they possess a belief in the perfectibility of the mundane order through the recovery of true wisdom. Moreover, certain strands develop

dreams of an apocalyptic transformation or restoration of the natural order.

The teachings of the ancient “pagan” theologians, the *prisci theologi*, were viewed by the Church as containing veiled Christian revelations. When properly read in relation to the Christian gospel, the *prisci theologi* demonstrated the universal validity of the Christian revelation and confirmed the Christian gospel as the fulfillment or culmination of the collective wisdom of all people. Hermes Trismegistus, regarded as a contemporary of Moses, was held in particularly high esteem. Indeed, some Christian theologians hypothesized that he was the teacher of Moses and was responsible for the reform of Hebrew religion during Moses’ sojourn in Egypt. His exalted position is demonstrated in part by the fact that Cosimo di Medici, who was the patron of the Platonic Academy founded by Ficino, directed Ficino to set aside his translation and commentary on Plato to begin a translation of the *Pimander* and *Asclepius*, which were thought to be records of the teachings of Hermes.⁶

Exposure to hermetic wisdom, while undertaken with the most pious motives leads Ficino dangerously close to heresy. For Pico, who was only pragmatically devout, and for self-appointed religious reformers like Agrippa, Bruno, and Campanella, the hermetic and related occult teachings came to be cherished over Christian doctrine. Indeed, Bruno comes to view Christianity as an impediment to humanity’s discovery of the truth and calls for the radical reformation of Christianity to comply with the teachings of Hermes. Campanella, convinced of his messianic calling, proposes to reeducate the clergy to his version of the truth and thereby make Christianity a viable ecumenic religion again.

The *Poimandres* or *Pimander*, the first of the hermetic books translated by Ficino, contains a creation myth that is especially important for our consideration. Hermes

5. Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York: Harbinger Books, 1950); D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975), reprint of 1958 original, *The Ancient Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); and Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1978, reprint of 1972 edition by Routledge and Kegan Paul).

6. In addition to the works of Yates and Walker, see Wayne Shumaker, “Hermes Trismegistus,” *The Occult Sciences of the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California, 1972), 201–251.

Trismegistus is visited in his sleep by the divine Pimander and has the true nature of the world and of man revealed to him. Man is created by the divine Father and not by the Demiurge that created the world. Because he is created in the image of his Father, Primal Man is beautiful; and as the Son of God he shares the divine powers of the Father. Upon viewing the creation fashioned by the Demiurge, he wished also to use his divinely given creative powers and obtained permission from the Father to assist the Demiurge in the creation of the natural order. Man is taught the essence of the nature of the created order by the Demiurge who loves him, and through his knowledge is able to participate in the creation.

Then Man, who had full power over the world of mortal beings and of irrational animals, bent down through the Harmony and, having broken through the celestial vault, showed to lower Nature the beautiful form of God. When Nature saw that he had in him the inexhaustible beauty of God and all the energy of the governors, conjoined to the form of God, she smiled with love for she had seen the features of that marvelous, beautiful form of Man reflected in the water and his shadow on the earth. And he, having seen this form like unto himself in Nature reflected in the water, loved her and wished he could go with her. The moment he wished this he accomplished it and came to inhabit the form of matter. And Nature, having received her loved one, embraced him and they were united for they burned with love. And that is why Man, unlike all other creatures upon earth, is twofold, mortal through the body; immortal through the essential Man.⁷

7. *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 13–15. See Hans Jonas, *Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2nd edition, 1963), 151, for a discussion of the problems with the translations of this passage. My references will be to the *Corpus* and not to any one translation. Interested readers are advised to compare the various translations which are available, e.g., Festugiere's, Scott's, and Jonas'. In examining the commentaries on the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the reader will note that such

It is important to distinguish this "Egyptian Genesis" from the Gnostic dualistic account of creation. The Gnostic antagonism between the divine Father and the Demiurge is not in evidence here. Primal man is loved by the Demiurge because of his reflection of the Father. It is also important to note that man does not find the created order hostile or foreign to his divine nature. On the contrary, he participates in its creation—with the Father's permission. True, the union with Nature invests Man with a mortal body; but in essence man remains immortal. It is true that the *Pimander*, like Gnosticism, regards the present as a period of ignorance. But the revelation to Hermes Trismegistus provides the means of restoring men and nature to their proper conditions. And this is a *restitution* of the cosmos not an escape from it.

Other segments of the *Corpus Hermeticum* display an even more immanent, anti-Gnostic view of God and the world.⁸ In the following passage, for example, there is no mention of a Demiurge. God is portrayed as the Creator of the world who is incarnate in it. Pimander admonishes Hermes to:

say no longer that God is invisible. Do not speak thus, for what is more manifest than God. He has created all only that you may see it through the beings. For that is the miraculous power of God, to show himself through all beings. For nothing is invisible, even the incorporeals. The intellect [nous or mens] makes itself visible in the act of thinking, God in the act of creating.⁹

In a dialogue between Hermes and Tat, Hermes tells his son "The cosmos too is a god, image of a greater God. United to him

prominent scholars as Festugiere and Yates refer to the *Corpus* as Gnostic. Both have a very broad definition of Gnostic. To qualify as Gnostic, a document must have at its core a concern with salvation through knowledge and must see *nous* or *mens* as the essence of divine and human nature. Attention is not given to the basic character of the myth.

8. The *Pimander* is a composite text containing a wide range of ideas—some quite contradictory.
9. *Ibid.*, XI, 22a.

and conserving the order and the will of the Father it is the totality of life."¹⁰ Tat, upon learning that the world is divine, asks if there is not corruption and disintegration in the material world. Hermes Trismegistus answers that there is not. "Living beings do not die, but being composite bodies they are dissolved; this is not death but a dissolution of a mixture. If they are dissolved, it is not to be destroyed but to be renewed."¹¹ In this segment, then, the division between God and world, infinite and finite, has disappeared.

The *Asclepius*, the second "divine book of Hermes Trismegistus," repeats the *Pimander's* exalted view of man and augments its description of man's creative powers, within the world.

*What we have said about man is already marvelous, but most marvelous of all is that he has been able to discover the nature of the gods and to reproduce it. The magi mingled a virtue drawn from material nature, to the substance of the statues and evoked the souls of demons or angels into these idols.*¹²

Through the possession of these magical powers, man is able to participate in the maintenance of cosmic and social order. But the *Asclepius* laments the fact that Primal Man's god-like existence and knowledge are destined to fade (the reason is not explained). Because the union of nature, man, and God had been ruptured, knowledge of the gods has been lost; and man dwells in ignorance. Strangers fill the country and institute false religions. But God promises to bring the world back to its first beauty so that it may again be worthy of reverence and admiration. That is what the rebirth of the world will be—a renewal of all good things, a holy and most solemn restoration of nature herself, imposed by force in the course of time by the will of God.¹³ This Hermetic apocalypse is

not Gnostic. The disorder that strikes the cosmos is a temporary break in the harmonious union with God. Man will be allowed to reclaim his divine position, and nature will recover her beauty and holiness. This is in striking contrast to the Gnostic lament of the world and the consequent yearning to escape it in order to return to the divine, transcendent realm.

To these texts, translated by Ficino, must be added one further hermetic writing which had extensive circulation and was surely known to Ficino and his successors. The work is the *Picatrix*, a textbook of hermetic magic which began to circulate in Europe when the Thrice-great Hermes rose to such high esteem in the Church.¹⁴ The treatise is divided into four books. The first two books deal with talismans and their manufacture. The third book lists the stones, plants, and animals which go with the different signs and planets. These lists detail what parts of the body go with the signs, the colors of the planets, how to invoke the spirits of the planets by calling on their names and their powers, and so on. The fourth book deals with similar patterns and with fumigations and ends with invocations to the planets. This fourth book also contains the account of the marvelous city of Adocentyn which was founded and governed by the supreme magus Hermes Trismegistus.

There are among the Chaldeans very perfect masters in this art [making magic images] and they affirm that Hermes was the first who constructed images by means of which he knew how to regulate the Nile against the motion of the moon. This man also built a temple to the Sun.... It was he, too, who in the east of Egypt constructed a city ... within which he constructed a castle which had four gates in each of its four parts.... He

10. *Ibid.*, XII, 15b-16.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Asclepius*, I, 6.

13. Cf. Yates, *Bruno*, 39f; and *Asclepius*, I, 2. Yates reminds us that Augustine and the Church regarded this passage as a prophecy of the ascendance of

Christianity over pagan darkness. Ironically, the Neoplatonic reading of the same forecast equates Christianity with the dark age of disorder and the renewal of true hermetic religion as the only source of illumination and regeneration.

14. Cf. Yates, 32 ff.

introduced spirits [into the images guarding each gate] which spoke with voices, nor could anyone enter the gates of the city except by their permission. There he planted trees in the midst of which was a great tree which bore the fruit of all generation.... Near the city was an abundance of waters in which dwelt many kinds of fish. Around the circumference of the city he placed engraved images and ordered them in such a manner that by their virtue the inhabitants were made virtuous and withdrawn from all wickedness and harm.¹⁵ (emphasis added)

The emphasis on the magus as priest and legislator is reminiscent of passages in the *Asclepius*.

Here are the man-made gods, statues of the animal and bird-shaped gods of Egypt, which Hermes Trismegistus has animated by introducing spirits into them.... The law-giver of the Egyptians is giving laws which must perforce be obeyed, for he constrains the inhabitants of the city to be virtuous, and keeps them healthy and wise, by his powerful manipulation of astral magic. The tree of generation in the city may perhaps also mean that he controls the generative powers, so that only the good, the wise, the virtuous and the healthy are born.¹⁶

This utopian city ordered and controlled by the magus offers a striking parallel to modern messianic attempts to install the kingdom of God on earth. The management of behavior and the eugenic program are particularly striking corollaries. Also note that man's humanity is dispensed through the priest-king. All humanity is capable of divinity, but only the magus attains it. Through his achievement, the mimetic majority participates in the human good.

The use the Neoplatonists make of these hermetic texts is as important as the texts

themselves. And as D. P. Walker has shown, the shaking of the foundation of the classical and Christian view of man and nature is initiated by the priest, Ficino.¹⁷ In this context Ficino's most influential work is *De vita coelitus comparanda*, which may be translated "On drawing life from the heavens." This is the third book of his medical text, *Libri de Vita*, and it is aimed at improvement of the duration and quality of the life of the scholar. Ficino is convinced that he has discovered the means of managing and balancing the influence of the celestial powers through talismanic and theurgic practices.¹⁸ He is also aware that he is moving dangerously close to heresy. Ficino defends his practices by arguing that they are a part of "natural" magic and such "natural" magical practices are permitted by the Church. Moreover, he argues his magic is drawn from the teachings and practices of the *prisci theologi*, particularly Hermes, who possessed a deep understanding of the organic interrelatedness of the cosmos and of the sources of divine presence in the world.

Whether or not Ficino's magic is orthodox, it leads unquestionably to an unorthodox view of human nature and human destiny. Ficino shares the conviction of the *Asclepius* and *Picatrix* that the wise man (Magus) is able to escape his astrologically determined fate and shape his own destiny. An enlightened man need not be bound and determined in the way other beings are because man has a divine soul capable of ascending from the finite world to the immortal realm of God. In words reflecting the injection of hermetic ideas into Christian language, Ficino claims that God became man in order that man might become God. "Therefore because God

17. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*.

18. Ficino's medical prescriptions seem to draw heavily upon the astrological magic of the *Picatrix* and share with it a stoic or neoplatonic cosmology in which the *Spiritus Mundi* functions as the link between the earth and the heavens. This *world spirit*, according to the *Picatrix*, is the medium through which talismanic attraction of the *spiritus* of a beneficent planet is invested in susceptible animals, plants, food, scents, etc. And this cosmic spirit is enough like ours to allow us to nourish and purify our own.

15. *Ibid.*, 54.

16. *Ibid.*, 55.

has joined himself unto man without intermediary, it behooves us to remember that our felicity consists in being turned to him, so that without intermediary we may cleave to God.”¹⁹ And in so doing, we achieve our essential, i.e., god-like, humanity.

Ficino’s unorthodox views, however, are mild in comparison to Pico’s. Pico views the natural magic of Ficino as the highest form of natural philosophy. But such natural philosophy is limited. It draws upon the effective power of natural virtues only. Pico, on the other hand, proposes to unleash the spiritual magic of the Hermetic texts and augment it with Cabalistic magic. In his view, the potency of Cabalistic magic is even more extraordinary than hermetic magic. Through the recovery of the secret knowledge of ancient Hebrew, it became possible to draw upon the power of the angels and archangels and even invoke God himself.²⁰

Pico’s integration of Cabalistic magic with the Hermetic spiritual magic carries the immanentization of the cosmos far beyond Ficino’s natural magic. Ficino’s magic was accomplished through the medium of the *spiritus mundi*, which mediated between the transcendent and mundane spheres. But Pico has no need of such an intermediary because he regards the spiritual as the source and true reality of the physical world.

Nature itself is not composed of parts, and does not fall into different classes of entities, that are distinct in substance from each other. It forms a single great interconnected life; this life is of such a kind that the whole is to be detected in each part. There is here not only a

*continuous chain of effects continuing from one point to the next; there rules an original and thoroughgoing “sympathy” by virtue of which each individual occurrence is bound up with the whole system of occurrences.*²¹

The view of Pico and his successors is, then, unorthodox—even heretical, but not in the direction of dualistic Gnosticism.

Arising concurrently with this spiritual or pantheistic view of nature is a cynicism toward classical and scholastic reason. The truth of nature cannot be known by reason. Paracelsus—with characteristic flamboyance—described scholastic thought as “mere speculation” and accused Aquinas of “blasphemy” for giving allegiance to “bestial reason” instead of the wisdom of “true philosophers (Magi).”²² Only the occult seer, the initiate magician, may learn nature’s mysteries through his absorption of secret traditional knowledge. For all other “speculators” the true nature of the world is lost and the design of God remains incomprehensible.

In the “counter-renaissance” movement’s rejection of the classical definition of man as the *animal rationale* we find another important parallel with modern political ideologies. As Eric Voegelin has shown, the discrediting of noetic consciousness and the dislocation of man from the platonic “metaxy” are essential to the secular messiah’s installation of a Second Reality. Moreover, Pico, like the modern magician, strives to move beyond the contemplative life of the philosopher to the active, manipulative life of the sorcerer. Pico longs for the power to shape human destiny. Through the “wedding of earth and heaven” he endeavors to compel the lower order to obey the higher and thereby “govern nature and change it according to his wishes.” As his famous *Oration on Human Dignity* attests, Pico was well aware that he was introducing

19. Ficino quoted in Nesca Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance* (London: n.p., 1935), 87.

20. On the Cabala see G. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941). On the Cabala and Jewish Gnosticism see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and the Talmudic Tradition* (New York: n.p., 1960). On Pico’s Christian interpretation see J. L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944) and G. G. Scholem, “Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der Christlichen Kabbala,” *Essays Presented to L. Baeck* (London: n.p., 1954).

21. Ernst Cassirer, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola” (II), *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 338.

22. For discussion see Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance*, p. 185.

a new anthropology to substitute for the orthodox concepts. And in a skillful maneuver he uses the unimpeachable authority of God himself to sanctify man's newly revealed status.

*Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we [God] given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other living beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by us. Thou constrained by no limits in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand we have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.*²³

As Hiram Haydn notes, "The limiting principle of the Christian humanist's concept of the only true liberty, meaning the liberty to do good, which is both God's will and man's distinctive good, is broken down and replaced by a really autonomous conception of the will and unlimited freedom of choice."²⁴ Pico has in effect reversed the traditional relationship between being and acting. In the classical and Judaeo-Christian conception, the Creator confers upon his creatures both a definite, limited being, and a definite, prescribed sphere of willing and of acting. But as Cassirer points out, Pico argues that

the dignity of man cannot reside in his being, i.e., in the place allotted man once and for all in the cosmic order. The hierarchical system subdivides the world into different levels and places each being in one of these levels as its rightful place in the universe. But such a view does not grasp the meaning and the problem of human freedom. For this meaning lies in

*the reversal of the relationship we are accustomed to accepting between being and acting.... We may ascend the hierarchical ladder of being as high as we like, we may climb to the celestial intelligences, even to the divine source of all being: so long as we remain standing at any rung of this ladder, we shall not be able to find there the specific value of freedom. In the rigid hierarchical system, the value of freedom must always seem something foreign, something incommensurable and "irrational" because the order of mere being does not capture the meaning and the movement of pure becoming.*²⁵

Expressed in mythic rather than philosophical terms, the Neoplatonic magus and his successors are the descendants of Prometheus, not Adam. The wise man becomes his own creator and master; he acquires and possesses himself whereas the unenlightened man always belongs to a foreign power and remains the eternal debtor. Man attains his purpose as a man only when he gives it to himself.²⁶ This description of the Promethean magus, taken from Cassirer, has a striking similarity to Marxist doctrine. Marx argues that man will remain alienated from his essential nature as long as he derives his existence from any other being—including God. Man must become his own creator.²⁷

If Pico appears bold and daring in relation to the cautious Ficino, he seems quite mild in relation to the messianic dreamers, Agrippa and Campanella. Agrippa contends that there is no single source of truth, not even Christianity. The most complete revelation is found in a combination of all the ancient teaching. His work does carry diluted statements about the need to know "the one true God," but his practices are directed toward the "secondary divinities" of the Hermetic, Cabalist, and Orphic traditions. And Agrippa

23. Pico, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristeller, and J. H. Randall Jr. (eds.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 224f.

24. Haydn, 349.

25. Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, (New York: Harper, 1944) 84.

26. *Ibid.*, 97.

27. Cf. Eric Voegelin, "The Marxian Revolutionary Idea," *Review of Politics*, XII (1950), 293.

pa, following his teacher Trithemius, develops a comprehensive philosophy of history in which the rise and fall of nations and religions, including Christianity, are shown to be astrologically determined.²⁹ But such monumental events are not absolutely determined. The magus, who knows the hidden secrets of the operating forces, is capable of shaping human destiny on a universal scale.

In the utopian city of the *Picatrix*, Hermes Trismegistus served as a spiritual leader and legislator. Agrippa also dreams of establishing a cosmion governed by a magus, who knows the secrets of a magical religion which will hold the whole society together. A great magus, like Christ, or Hermes Trismegistus, can set in motion an institutionalization of power that can endure even though the inhabitants of the utopia do not possess a clear understanding of the truth upon which the order rests. All that is required is that they have faith in the magus and his teachings. The key to maintaining a perfect order inhabited by imperfect beings is credulity and a proper program of education.

Agrippa was a major influence on Bruno as Yates has demonstrated. Bruno's heresy lies in his conviction that the secret teaching of Hermes and related *prisca theologi* are the source of recovery from the spiritual derailment which is orthodox Christianity. But Campanella, as a magus in the mold of Agrippa, is even more important to the development of an immanentized political apocalypticism. Campanella had "colossal confidence in himself as in touch with the cosmos and destined to lead a universal magic-religious reform"³⁰ which would re-

alize Christianity and usher in the City of the Sun. His first effort at reform was his Calabrian revolt against Spain. This rebellion was disastrous, and Campanella was imprisoned for 27 years. When Spain did not crumble to his feet, he decided he had made a slight miscalculation and offered his services to the Spanish Monarchy and the Papacy. His *Monarchia di Spagna* prophesies that the Spanish Monarchy will become a universal world monarchy, "in which One alone will reign and thus universal peace and justice will be secured." In other works Campanella made a similar prognostication for the Papacy. When neither Spain nor the Papacy seem able to attain their destiny, Campanella transfers his allegiance to France and the Sun King, Louis XIV. In France, Campanella achieved his longed for apotheosis as prophet of the French monarchy which was to accomplish a universal reform.

His tenacity, if not his loyalty, stemmed from his conviction that he was "the Messiah of the new age, designated both by astrological prediction and by religious prophecy to lead the world into another era."³¹ *Citta del Sole* or *City of the Sun*, probably written during his imprisonment, outlines his ideal state. The City of the Sun, situated on a hill surrounded by a vast plain, was divided into seven circular divisions after the seven planets. Four walls traversed the City, marking the points of the compass and running towards the center. In the center, and on the summit of the hill, was a temple that served as a cosmic omphalos and as a detailed reproduction of the world. The walls of the seven planetary divisions had images on both sides. The outside of the first was a map of the entire earth. Inscribed were descriptions of the rites, customs, and laws of each province along with the alphabets of their languages, coordinated with the alphabet of the Solarians. The inner wall described all the known mathematical figures. The next two walls represented all minerals and liquids; the third, the vegetable and animal worlds and their celestial significances. On

28. For a condensation and commentary on Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia*, see Schumaker, *Occult Science*, 134-59. For a discussion of Agrippa, "a Renaissance name to conjure by," see C. G. Nauert, Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1965).

29. This is an interesting version of the "modern" reduction of religious events and experiences to immanent, material causes. Christ in this view, is not Lord of the Cosmos; the Cosmos is the Father of Christ.

30. Yates, 36. Part of his "empirical" evidence of his special election was the seven bumps on his head which he held to represent the seven planets.

31. *Ibid.*, 364.

the outermost wall was displayed all the mechanical arts and their inventors. On the outer side were images of the inventors of sciences and laws, including Moses, Osiris, Jupiter, Mercury, and Mohamet. In a place of honor were stationed Christ and the apostles.

Under the rule of the Sun Priest, the people of the city lived in brotherly love, having all things in common; they were intelligent and well-educated, the children beginning at an early age to learn all about the world and all arts and sciences from the pictures on the walls.... They were healthy and well skilled in medicine. And they were virtuous.... Among the Solarians there was no robbing, murder, incest, adultery, no malignity or malevolence of any kind.³²

This city closely resembles the utopias of the *Asclepius* and the *Picatrix*. It is a cosmion, a little world, governed by astrological and spiritual magic. Its heroes are the *prisci magi*, including Christ, who possess an understanding of the mysteries of nature and use its powers to protect and maintain order.

Campanella's cultic practices are obviously aimed at participation and, if necessary, correction of the actual heavens by the manipulations of the pseudo-heavens which have been incorporated into the temple. As Walker notes, the correction of the actual heavens by the prophylactic manipulation of the pseudo-heavens, is an essential feature of Campanella's magic.

In the sealed rooms the torches and candles represented an undisturbed normal celestial world which was to counteract the effect of the dislocated reality outside.... Ficino's magic, both spiritual and demonic, aimed at subjective effects; practiced within a small, aristocratic circle, it was meant to purify and elevate the spirit of the soul. Campanella's attention was directed to practical ends of the vastest scope. By his religious writings he

hoped to transform Catholicism, and convert and unite all the religions and the nations of the world. By his magic he hoped to gain the power to enforce this conversion by gaining the confidence and support of those who then possessed this power—the Pope, the King of France, or Richelieu. And with Urban VIII, he came very near success.³³

AT the beginning of the seventeenth century (actually, during Campanella's zenith), the foundations of the hermetic tradition were shaken by the philological studies of Isaac Casaubon; and belief in Neoplatonic astrological magic is undermined by Kepler and Newton's mechanistic physics. But the dream of the Neoplatonic magus does not perish. The scientific revolution did anything but diminish man's conviction that he possessed Godlike knowledge of the workings of the macro- and microcosms. The governing power of hermetic spirits and cabalistic archangels is simply transferred to the new divinities of mechanistic physics. In fact, the Neoplatonic re-divinization of the cosmos and the seemingly antithetical emergence of the "hand in the wound" school of empirical science are closely connected.³⁴ For example, Pompanazzi and Telesio, who are celebrated as the first to develop a "modern" psychological view of human nature, draw directly from Neoplatonic thought.³⁵ It must be said, then, that the Neoplatonic view of the world and humanity, which begins with Ficino's translation of the hermetic wisdom and culminates in the magical operations of Agrippa and Campanella, shows clear parallels with modern immanentist apocalypti-

33. Walker, *Spiritual Magic*, 236.

34. Cf. Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance*.

35. See on Pompanazzi, P. O. Kristeller, "Ficino and Pompanazzi on the Place of Man in the Universe," *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome: n.p., 1956), 279-286, and A. H. Douglas, *The Philosophy and Psychology of Pietro Pompanazzi*. On Telesio, see Walker, *Spiritual Magic*, 189-202; Neil Van Dusen, "The Place of Telesio in the History of Philosophy," *Philosophical Review*, XLIV (1935), and Dusen, *Telesio the First of the Moderns* (New York: n.p., 1932).

32. *Ibid.*, 369.

cism. More so than does Gnosticism. While modernity shares the Gnostic experience of alienation, the yearning for saving knowledge, and the dream of a transformed utopian society, its characteristically modern feature is that the apocalyptic dream has been immanentized. The home man longs for is a secular home, the fulfillment of history occurs within history; and man is his own deliverer. The sense of alienation and the dream of deliverance are shared by Gnosticism, but the modern deliverance occurs through a transformation or restitution of the world, not its annihilation. Moreover, Gnosticism is not an apocalyptic religion. Because nature is corrupt, the Gnostic does not care to operate on the world. The Renaissance Magus, on the other hand, is convinced of the transforming power of the truth he possesses and dreams of employing his knowledge to restore

nature and reinstitute the marvelous utopian city of the Thrice-great Hermes. We should, therefore, be extremely cautious of throwing a Gnostic blanket over modern consciousness. If we use the term Gnosticism in a very loose way and regard any system as Gnostic which shares one or two of the main traits of the ancient world-feeling, then a multitude of modern *isms* can qualify. If, on the other hand, we require that modern systems conform to the essential Gnostic myth in order to be designated as a modern version of Gnosticism, then the number will diminish greatly—especially if we require clear demonstrable connections between ancient Gnosticism and its modern progeny. If such care is exercised I am sure we are going to find that modernity and its ancient sources are far more complex than we presently imagine.