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## The concept of progress as a secular counterpart of the Divine Providence – a take on the political Gnosis of Eric Voegelin

**Annotation:** Eric Voegelin is one of the key thinkers embarking upon an issue of a “political religion” who dedicated a portion of his work towards the concept of progress and claimed that it has become a permanent theme in all discussions concerning politics since the 18th century. The thesis stated in this article aims to prove that according to Voegelin’s philosophy, the concept of progress is a secularised counterpart of the Christian Divine Providence. The progress is considered as a guarantor of the betterment of the world and humanity, allowing for an optimist outlook for the future. Along with crisis of the Christian faith, there was a dire need to hold on to the hope in the meaning of life, formerly ensured by the Divine Providence. The downfall of the belief in the transcendent God resulted in a projection of the salvation hopes and “the history revealing its meaning” onto the earthly existence, simultaneously becoming an integral part of the gnostic religious approach. In the secularised world, the faith in progress replaced the Divine Providence, i.e. a merciful God watching over the world and humanity.

**Key words:** Voegelin, progress, Divine Providence, Enlightenment, Secularisation.

### Idea postępu jako zsekularyzowane pojęcie opatrności Bożej - ujęcie w ramach gnozy politycznej Erica Voegelina

**Streszczenie:** Voegelin, jako jeden z kluczowych myślicieli podejmujących kwestię *religii politycznych*, istotną część swojej pracy poświęcił badaniu idei postępu stwierdzając, że idea ta od XVIII w. stała się stałym elementem myślenia o polityce. W niniejszym artykule postawiono tezę, że w myśli Voegelina idea postępu jest zsekularyzowaną kategorią chrześcijańskiej Opatrzności Bożej. Postęp traktowany jest jako gwarant samodoskonalenia się świata i człowieka pozwalający z optymizmem patrzeć na przyszłość. Wraz z kryzysem chrześcijańskiej wiary człowiek dążył do podtrzymania nadziei w sens istnienia, którą przynosiła ufność w Bożą Opatrzność. Upadek wiary w transcendentnego Boga skutkowało przeniesieniem nadziei zbawienia i „spełnienia się historii” na płaszczyznę świata doczesnego i stał się tym samym integralnym elementem religijnej postawy gnostycznej. W zsekularyzowanym świecie

wiara w postęp stała się substytutem wiary w Bożą Opatrzność, a więc tego, że nad losem człowieka i świata czuwa troskliwy Bóg.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Voegelin, postęp, Opatrzność Boża, Oświecenie, sekularyzacja

**Идея прогресса как секуляризованная концепция Божьего провидения - подход в рамках политического гнозиса Эрика Фогелина**

**Аннотация:** Фогелин, как один из ключевых мыслителей, занимающихся проблемой «политических религий», посвятил значительную часть своей работы изучению идеи прогресса, заявив, что с XVIII века эта идея стала постоянным элементом размышлений о политике. В данной статье представлен тезис о том, что, по мнению Фогелина, идея прогресса является секуляризованной категорией христианского Божественного Провидения (средства, при помощи которого Бог управляет всем во вселенной). Прогресс рассматривается как гарант самосовершенствования мира и человека, позволяющий с оптимизмом смотреть в будущее. В условиях кризиса христианской веры человек стремился сохранить надежду в смысле существования, которую приносило доверие к Провидению Божию. Падение веры в трансцендентного Бога привело к переносу надежды на спасение и «свершение истории» на план временного мира и, таким образом, стало неотъемлемым элементом гностической религиозной установки. В секуляризованном мире вера в прогресс стала заменой веры в Божье Провидение, то есть в то, что заботливый Бог наблюдает за судьбой человека и мира.

**Ключевые слова:** Фогелин, прогресс, Божественное Провидение, Просвещение, секуляризация

The category of *progress* is one of those taking a central position in the contemporary philosophy of politics<sup>1</sup>. Regardless if the political thought concerns the concept of progress straightforwardly, as per Hegel or more recently Fukuyama, or if it is considered as a philosophical axiomata (as in liberalism), the attitude towards the concept itself determinates the further axiological assessment of the world, history and the human interference.

Eric Voegelin was a political philosopher who dedicated his life's research to the vast analysis of the history of political order and the idea of progress became a subject of his numerous intellectual inquiries. The research problem formulated in this article is the concept of progress in the context of the Divine Intervention according to Eric Voegelin. As observed by the author of "The New Science of Politics", human life among the political community cannot simply be boiled down to the secular aspect, in which the only interest would concern legal matters and those related to managing authority. "The community is also a sphere of religious order, and our knowledge of a political condition is in a decisive point incomplete and if it does not also capture the religious forces of the community and the symbols in which these are expressed - or if it captures them, but does not recognize them as such and translates them into a-religious categories instead"<sup>2</sup>. This

<sup>1</sup> R. Koselleck goes as far as to say that progress "is the first specifically modern category of historical time" R. Koselleck, *Dzieje pojęć. Studia z semantyki i pragmatyki języka społeczno-politycznego*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2009, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> E. Voegelin, *The political religions*, [in:] E. Voegelin, *Modernity without restraint. The collected works of Eric Voegelin*, Columbia-London, p. 70.

is precisely what happened to the definition of the *Divine Providence* 'translated' to the 'secular language' as *progress*, at the same time retaining its religious potential.

Main research questions attempted to be answered in this article are: what is the Divine Providence? What is, according to E. Voegelin, *the concept of progress* and how significant of an influence were the precursors of the Enlightenment era? How Voegelin combines *the concept of progress* with the political Gnosticism and its religious potential? What is behind Voegelin's statement that "the death of the spirit is the price of progress"<sup>3</sup>?

The thesis in this article is a claim that according to Voegelin, the concept of progress is a secularised category of a Christian Divine Providence. The progress is considered as a guarantor of the betterment of the world and humanity, allowing for an optimist outlook for the future. Along with the crisis of the Christian faith, there was a dire need to hold on to the hope in the meaning of life, previously ensured by the Divine Providence. The downfall of the belief in the transcendent God resulted in a projection of the salvation hopes and "the history revealing its meaning" onto the earthly existence, simultaneously becoming an integral part of the gnostic religious approach. In the secularised world, the faith in progress replaced the Divine Providence, i.e. a merciful God watching over the world and humanity. Nevertheless, the concept of progress demonstrates a substantial inter-structural changes in the comprehension of the world, so much so, that J.B. Bury claims that the idea of progress could have not occurred since the twilight of the concept of the Divine Providence<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it is not the Merciful Creation – God<sup>5</sup> – who is watching over the fate of the world, but a personified force driving the world into perfection. Another dissimilarity concerns the extent of that mercy – not only does the Christian God watch over the whole world, but also, each and every person individually, treating them all as unique, free and loved by their Creator. The perspective of the progress overlooks the individual aspect as it is the progress of all humanity and the world that is essential. While the Divine Providence leads to freedom, the progress only leads to enslavement.

### The Divine Providence

The questions of the point and meaning of existence, history and the human life have been on the minds of ancient philosophers from its very beginning. It is related to the reflection on the universe, whether it should be viewed as a structured cosmos, in which we can discern order, or maybe, chaos and coincidence are its exact nature<sup>6</sup>. Initially, ancient Greeks treated the laws of fate as inanimate forces like *necessity* (Ananke) or *fate* (Fatum). W. Jaeger highlights that even Diogenes from Apolonia regularly used the definition of the purpose *τέλος* (*telos*) to describe "strictly theological explanations for natural phenomena"<sup>7</sup> while Anaxagoras introduced the concept of the "predestined

<sup>3</sup> E. Voegelin, *Nowa nauka polityki* (eng: *The New Science of Politics*), Biblioteka Aletheia, Warszawa 1992, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origin and Growth*, Cosimo Classic, New York 2008, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> E. Brunner, *Eternal Hope*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1954, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> See more: T. Stępień, *Porządek i miłość. Koncepcja opatrności Bożej w myśli starożytnej*, Teologia Polityczna, Warszawa 2019.

<sup>7</sup> W. Jaeger, *Teologia wczesnych filozofów greckich*, Homini, Kraków 2007, p. 247.

plan of the world" through the concept of νοῦς (*Nous*)<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, the way it unfolds was strictly mechanical and automatic<sup>9</sup>.

The concept of the Divine Providence (in Greek: *pranoia*) was first used by Xenophon in his "Memoirs of Socrates"<sup>10</sup>. The context for this term allows to assume that even Socrates the gods tend to take care for people<sup>11</sup>. However the nature of this care – whether it concerns the fate of humanity or the fate of an individual – was not explicit. What was also ambiguous is the extent of the Providence's reach – for some philosophers, the Providence only covered the most general issues. Others claimed, even the tiniest part of reality is not out of reach for the Providence. Plato's thoughts<sup>12</sup>, attempted at holistically capturing the problem, in the work of *Laws*, the term *pranoia* only concerns intentional actions. Whereas, it does not include the element of divine care towards humanity<sup>13</sup>. There is also a question of how to reconcile the Divine Providence with the existence of evil and suffering to which we could not possibly find an answer corresponding to the assumption of a person's individuality. To continue on that thought of Plato, father Stępień observes that the evil only being visible while looking in detail, while it disappears looking at it through the lens of the cosmic universe<sup>14</sup>. However, such a 'solution' despite somewhat 'justifying' the existence of evil from the perspective of the demiurge, it provides no justification from an individual perspective.

Despite the definition of Providence being a product of constant evolution and philosophical expansion, there is no doubt that its culmination and final form was Christianity. As highlighted by Clement of Alexandria, one of Church's Founding Fathers, Christianity not only "states categorically that the Providence exists", but also that it is an essential element of the "path to Salvation"<sup>15</sup>. If we refute Providence, our reason to act originates "not from Christ but from the rules of the world"<sup>16</sup>. Jesus Christ is designated to be a key figure in Christian contemplations in the context of Providence. It is Him. It is His embodiment, suffering and resurrection that becomes both the guarantor and the personification of the God's love of mankind. These are not inanimate forces but a personal relationship between God and humanity, whereas the relationship of love is the foundation of the Christian hope. In this approach, Aristoteles' *unmoved mover*, taken with worry by the salvation of mankind, became a man.

The Christian perspective also relates to the matter of theodicy. The evil in the world does not stem from God, but in fact humanity's free will. Therefore, it is the free will that resulted in the mankind wandering away from God, caused the original

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<sup>8</sup> As pointed out by Diogenes Laertios, Anaxagoras was the first philosopher *who bestowed the mind onto matters* (νοῦς), idem, *Żywoty i poglądy słynnych filozofów*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1984, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> W. Jaeger, *Teologia wczesnych...*, op. cit., p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> Xenophon, *Wspomnienia o Sokratesie* (Eng: *Memoirs of Socrates*), [in:] *Pisma sokratyczne*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Biblioteka Klasyków Filozofii, Warszawa 1967, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Prawa* (Eng: *Laws*), 904B, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1960, p. 476.

<sup>13</sup> T. Stępień, *Porządek...*, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>15</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, Warszawa 1994, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

sin, and eventually is the reason for the evil in the world. God does not wish for evil but, with the respect of the freedom gifted to humanity, resigns to its existence. The self-serving character of mankind combined with the overindulgence in free will, creates evil. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Clement of Alexandria: "It is accordingly the greatest achievement of Divine Providence, not to allow the evil, which has sprung from voluntary apostasy to remain useless and for no good, and to become in all respects injurious"<sup>17</sup>. In His power, God can resort to evil and eventually, through His wisdom only, employ evil to create good.

With the aforementioned approach, the Final Judgement becomes a guarantee for a complete eradication of evil. The elimination of evil is not attainable on Earth since it is unearthly. Neither humanity in their power, nor the world on its own could immanently achieve that. The redemption could only be gained through God. The Divine Providence's objective is the sainthood of mankind.

### The concept of progress

In antiquity, the considerations on advancement referred to taking the time to reminisce about the past, and not to discover new horizons. Moreover, it had biological connotations, i.e. there was a belief that as time goes by, the world grows older and eventually enters the senile stage of life (Latin: *senectus*). In the theological language *profectus* referred to the soul salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven, and not to any earthly kingdoms<sup>18</sup>. The perfection is not a trait of a world which is tainted by the original sin. As highlighted by J. B. Bury, the assumption that humanity is burdened with the original sin and that it can never possibly overcome this irremovable obstacle for moral betterment resulted in a conclusion that the incessant moral progress is pointless and utopian<sup>19</sup>.

However, in the 18th century, biological connotations seem to fade in the concept of progress<sup>20</sup>. The element of growing old and decay itself were renounced and the interpretative vector, unburdened with the previous associations, marches onwards into the future. Moreover, the faith in the original sin is considered a relic, which in consequence, leads to a rapid expansion of the melioristic vision of mankind.

### Voegelin – political Gnosticism

The key to understand Voegelinian interpretation of the social world and its order is his perception of the essence of the presence as *the political Gnosticism*<sup>21</sup>. The analy-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> R. Koselleck R., *Dzieje pojęć...*, op. cit., p. 180-182.

<sup>19</sup> J. B. Bury, *The Idea...*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> R. Koselleck R., *Dzieje pojęć...*, op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>21</sup> Voegelin differentiates six characteristics of the Gnostic thought: (1) Discontentment of the current socio-political situation; (2) the assumption that the unfortunate situation originates from an ill-organised world. At the same time, Gnostics do not recognise the shortcomings of human nature and even more, not able to recognise their own shortcomings or blame for their own situation; (3) Gnostics are deeply convinced that the salvation of the world from evil is possible; (4) The natural order of things has to undergo change in the events of history. The world of evil has to evolve into the world of good; (5) Here Voegelin claims what is a typical Gnostic characteristic – Gnostics are convinced the change in the natural order of things could come from a human intervention, and as a consequence, salvation could originate from mankind. (6) The key to establish the new natural order of things is, until salva-

sis of the political Gnosticism begins with a claim that Christianity brought a desacralisation in the world, including the world of politics<sup>22</sup>. By proclaiming: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" – Christ drew the line through the former political order in the antiquity, which was closely related to the religious order. However, the sphere of politics, especially in the early modern period, began to consume the sphere previously reserved to religion<sup>23</sup>. Simultaneously, the essence of the political Gnosticism is a secularised promise of a salvation on Earth through embarking upon political acts. Therefore, "the essence of the Gnostic politics must be understood as a spiritual disorder"<sup>24</sup>, and as a "cancerous growth inside the Western civilisation"<sup>25</sup>.

Voegelin also remarks that the secularised idea of salvation, feasible here on Earth, could be viewed in three different ways: (1) Teleological approach which highlights the process of reaching perfection, it is a movement focused on the objective, however, the objective does not need to be clearly defined. It is a fundamental approach for all progressive ideologies and the faith in progress itself. The most prominent examples of this thought are, according to Voegelin, Condorcet's theories; (2) Axiological approach, highlighting the state of perfection. This state is the highest good. The effort focuses on a detailed description of what constitutes perfection rather than the path of reaching it. According to Voegelin, this approach is typical for creators of social utopias; (3) the final approach is a hybrid of the two previous ones (which not only depicts *the means* of reaching the objective but also the *objective* itself) and was named the *activist mysticism* and represented by Auguste Comte and Karol Marks' schools of thought<sup>26</sup>.

From the perspective of this article, it is essential to consider in particular both the teleological and activist mysticism approaches, of which the teleological approach consists of among others.

Some Christians from early centuries expected a sudden Parousia and the accession onto a thousand-year reign of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, ruled by Jesus Christ and the saints. However, this eagerly awaited Parousia did not come to fruition. It was saint Augustine, who in the 5th century intellectually solved this issue in *the City of God* saying that the spiritual order is demonstrated by the state of the Church rather than the earthly order corresponding to power and politics. The spiritual command of Christ is placed in the Church, and not in the worldly or political sphere. Any ideas or attempts to reconvert the society towards God – on the basis of Christian orthodoxy – were shattered at this point<sup>27</sup>.

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tion, knowledge. Gnostics, being adamant of their knowledge command, proclaim themselves prophets, preaching about the salvation of humanity. According to Voegelin, these characteristics occur simultaneously, and they describe the essence of political Gnosticism, therefore they are common for each Gnostic movement.

<sup>22</sup> E. Voegelin, *Nowa nauka...*, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia do Rewolucji (ENG: From Enlightenment to Revolution)*, University of Warsaw Publishing House, Warszawa 2011, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> E. Voegelin, *Gnostycka polityka (Eng: Politics and Gnosticism)*, "Człowiek w kulturze", 2004, nr 16, p. 234.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 250.

<sup>26</sup> E. Voegelin, *Namiastka religii (Eng: Ersatz religion: the Gnostic Mass Movement of Our Time, [in]: Science, Politics and Gnosticism. Two essays by Eric Voegelin (1968))*, "Człowiek w kulturze", 2005, nr 17, p. 274-276.

<sup>27</sup> J. Taubes, *Zachodnia eschatologia*, Kronos, Warszawa 2016, p. 94-100.

Nevertheless, it does not imply the pondering on the theosis of the society was not to be undertaken. As pointed out by Voegelin, the first systematic and complex attempt was made by Joachim of Fiore, a monk of the Cistercian Order, an exegete of the apostle's John Revelation and a philosopher of history<sup>28</sup>. Even though, he was never condemned by the Church, some of his works were refuted by subsequent synods and councils. It related also to his teachings about the presence of the holy Trinity in history of mankind. The assumption was that the history of mankind could be divided into three periods. The first one is the Age of the Father, the second is the Age of the Son and the third one, which according to Joachim is yet to come – will be the Age of the Holy Spirit. The Age of the Holy Spirit will guarantee complete freedom. There will be no need for laws, the Church or even sacraments since Christians, through the Holy Spirit, will achieve perfection.

In spite of not specifying a date for the beginning of the Third Age, his disciples – based on Joachim's exegesis of the apostle John's Revelation – were adamant it would begin in 1260. According to Voegelin: "in his trinitarian eschatology Joachim created the aggregate of symbols which govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day"<sup>29</sup>. The author of the *New Science of Politics* indicates four typical symbols. The first one is dividing the history into three eras, from which the third one is considered final<sup>30</sup>. This assumption would then serve as a foundation for progressive concepts.

### Voltaire – the new take on the meaning of history

The awareness of ending a certain age of history and turning a page to a new era with a new energy became more prominent in the 18th century. The belief in the sunset of former attitudes relates to, among others, reformation and "the breakdown of the Church as the universal institution of Christian mankind, the plurality of sovereign states as ultimate political units, the discovery of the New World and the more intimate acquaintance with Asiatic civilizations"<sup>31</sup>.

According to Voegelin, the best example of this turning point is Voltaire's polemics with the works of a Catholic historian and theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*. Similarly to Saint Augustine, Bossuet recognises the secular history in the context of the Divine Providence leading people "on the path of

<sup>28</sup> E. Voegelin, *Namiastka religii...*, op. cit., p. 277i n.

<sup>29</sup> E. Voegelin, *Nowa nauka...*, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>30</sup> The other symbols are: (2) symbol pertaining to leadership, the chief and a new human. There are also references such as the spiritual man, *homini novi*, and during the secular era it was the overmen (Marxism and Nazism); (3) Another symbol would be the prophet of a new era. For history to reveal its meaning, we need prophets who, either through revelations or a speculative gnosis, will obtain the necessary knowledge. The first prophet was obviously Joachim of Fiore himself, while during the secular era, the prophets will in fact be gnostic intellectualists who will explain to those uninitiated, the meaning of history and its events; (4) the final symbol is the brotherhood of autonomous persons. Thanks to the ascension of the Holy Spirit, all bonds within the Church and sacraments will disappear. Nevertheless, it would be soon replaced by the perfect community, of those who are free of institutions. The explosion of this symbol was discernible especially in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance resulting in outbreak of sects. Additionally, in the profane version, this symbol is represented e.g. in the Marxist mysticism the Kingdom of Freedom and the assumptions of systematically dying out of the state until it is completely removed.

<sup>31</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 16.

the one true religion”<sup>32</sup>. As a consequence, the history of Israel, Christ’s embodiment and His endeavours, and the subsequent Church established by Him are key events of general history. This is where the secular history could be treated only as an obstacle to the eventual triumph of the Church. Bossuet’s work was the last one where the holy history is considered the universal history including *the complete history* since we know its final act. It is in fact Parousia. It provides us the meaning of history: “Sacred history has meaning insofar as it is a spiritual drama, beginning with the creation of man and ending with the second coming of Christ. The drama is known from the first to the last act and for this reason it is a true line of universal meaning”<sup>33</sup>.

Voltaire does not approve of that statement. He believes it is an error to ‘canonise’ the history of Israel and the history of the Church since general history should also include history of foreign civilisations, and so in the previous assumption ‘the sacred history’ is merely a shred of history of mankind, rather than its central element. According to Voltaire, the secular history is, in fact, the only general history, whereas the sacred history is only one of many constituting it. So adopting this logic, Christianity becomes only one of many ‘events’ in the general history. Thanks to this approach, Voltaire transformed the order and it is *profanum* which replaces *sacrum* as the universality carrier. At this point it is essential to discern that in spite of Voltaire secularising history, “there is retained the Christian belief in a universal, meaningful order of human history”<sup>34</sup>. Here, we could pose a question, how to retain the meaning of history if we do not know how it ends (i.e. refuting Parousia)? The only viable solution is to make a ‘profane’ sense of the past from ‘the current perspective of the author’. As a result, “the partial history selected as sacred gains its preferential status”<sup>35</sup>.

Only after such an introduction, it is fair to conclude that the Voegelinian idea of progress is actually a concept assuming that: “the situation of the moment, or a situation which is envisaged as immediately impending, is superior in value to any priori historical situation of fact”<sup>36</sup>. As per its nature, the presence is legitimised *a priori* as always better than any chosen period of the past. Hereafter, we can observe the paradox of progress since in those assumptions, it concerns the future while incumbering the presence<sup>37</sup>. In order to describe this state, Voegelin introduces a term called the “authoritative present”. It allows for an escape into eschatology: the present is considered the last phase of human history”<sup>38</sup>. For Gnostics, the foreseeable future could only be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> Voegelinian highlighting of *the canonisation of the present* proved to be a significant contribution to the overall contemplation over the concept of progress. To demonstrate an example, despite Voegelin’s philosophy coinciding in many respects with the one of Berdayev in his work published in 1923: “The Meaning of History”, especially concerning the religious character of the concept of progress, nevertheless, Berdayev considers the future as the central period of that concept (Berdayev believes the concept of progress to be a *religion of death* which destroys the present in favour of the future. Idem, *The Meaning of History*, Antyk Publishing House, Kęty 2002, p. 124-137. Voegelin points out that for doctrinaires it is the present, which is crucial, whereas the mottos about the future are only a catchy buzzword allowing to make sense of the present.

<sup>38</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 122.

construed as *the present*, only *better* – but without any qualitative changes and only fixing the imperfections of the day. As a result, there is a so-called canonisation of values of the Western civilisations – as those which are the most attractive, hence considered by the Gnostics – impossible to be superseded by the values of other civilisations. This scenario causes a standstill since a Gnostic cannot take decisive actions when the moment for the end of civilisation comes. It is a direct result of a Gnostic belief of the necessity of progress which not only incapacitates their will to act but also the mind refuting *a priori* the fact that the future might bring about significant change. Contrary to popular belief, as a consequence of adopting the concept of progress, a Gnostic assumes a fixed reality – “From this static element in the idea of progress stems the reactionary, paralyzed attitude of progressives in the face of new developments [...] as well as the wrathful impotence of the progressive intellectual to answer with a positive, ordering will the disintegration of Western civilisation”<sup>39</sup>. The idea of progress is not scientific, nor does it describe the reality as it comes but only, according to Gnostics, how it should be. Hence, the concept of progress is an element of the doctrine which adequately represents *the intermundane religion* of Gnostics. Granting a special rank to the present, as a point of reference and assessment for the completeness of history, is concurrently a great instrument for intellectuals to extend this special privilege to themselves<sup>40</sup>. They take the place of the Israeli prophets and in the profane reality they reveal *inevitable rights of history* and *historical necessities*.

“The Reconstruction of meaning” was undertaken also by Voltaire by creating a pattern for subsequent efforts. The matter of interest was no longer – as in Christianity – the transcendent spirit of Christ, but an intermundane human spirit, the history of which we need discover. According to Voltaire, in order to achieve that, we cannot be distracted by numerous and detailed facts but “we rather have to see by what steps we have advanced from the barbarian rusticity [...] to the politeness of ours.”<sup>41</sup>. Voegelin highlights that when Joachim of Fiore divided sacred history into eras, Voltaire introduces sequential stages in interpreting secular history<sup>42</sup>.

### **Turgot – *masse totale* as a carrier of the meaning of history**

Another relevant step on the path to progress is Turgot’s philosophy. According to Turgot, even though history is woven with an incessant string of ups and downs, in the grand scheme of the history of mankind – it is destined to achieve betterment<sup>43</sup>. What is fascinating, is that the progress is only visible looking at humanity from afar, rather than from the perspective of individual progress. This understanding of history only does not hold significant meaning for an individual, only for the humankind. Voegelin discerns that as a result, in that approach, only the mankind is a carrier of meaning. It becomes *a new divinity* – *masse totale*, shunting the individual off the sidelines – “Man is no longer a spiritual center but a mere link in the chain of generations”<sup>44</sup>. *Masse totale*

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Even Leibniz stated the world undergoes incessant improvement, hence he was convinced we live in the best of possible worlds. R. Koselleck, *Dzieje...*, op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 138.

is considered as a complete sum of people from the past, present and future<sup>45</sup>. This approach allows for collectivism, in which a unit is forced to obey a mankind of abstract nature and furthermore become subservient and useful. Nevertheless, the fall and disintegration of individuals or even whole civilisations do not affect the progress of *masse totale*. This approach conjures the sense of dread regarding 20th century totalitarian regimes – “the victims of an upheaval (for instance to those who were cremated in Auschwitz) to be the fertilizer for the progress of mankind. But the progressivist is happy because “no upheaval has ever occurred which has not produced some advantage.”<sup>46</sup>. The individual trauma becomes an inevitable side effect of the *masse totale* progress.

Another remarkable conclusion by Voegelin regarding Turgot on the subject of progress is an observation that the result of the aforementioned approach is forgoing the consideration for *the essence*. According to Turgot, a progress takes appearance of a systematic eradicating anthropomorphisms from science, possibly demonstrated as sequential stages. However, analysing the processes for progress as per Turgot’s considerations, Voegelin highlights that between the first and third stage, there is no discernible progress of science. What could be construed however, is the eliminated research on the essence would be replaced in favour of the research on *phenomena*. Contrary to some assumptions, the third phase is less scientific since it cannot fathom the considerations of existence, while tackles only facts and phenomena<sup>47</sup>. It leads to catastrophic consequences of communities, the unity which derives from the same world view depicted as myths<sup>48</sup> and symbols. From then on, the politics would study facts and not the essence.

### Condorcet – the apostle of progress

Favouring this approach, the concept of progress was continued by A. N. Condorcet – the disciple of Turgot. He is a remarkably important figure not only from the perspective of the idea of progress itself but history after 18th century in general. His work titled *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* through its graphic and vivid language, as highlighted by Voegelin – mostly political dogmatism – led to the concept of progress being popularised. Voegelin has no doubt that this work “plays a key role in understanding of the process” which resulted in a crisis of the Western civilisation. One of the subchapters of his monumental work was dedicated to Condorcet titled *Condorcet and the gospel of progress* and refers to him as the apostle of progressivism<sup>49</sup>. He is the reason the faith in progress found its way into closed cabinets and salons of the French thinkers and then further, to the collective consciousness of the 19th century mass society.

<sup>45</sup> E. Voegelin, *The political religions*, [in:] E. Voegelin, *Modernity without restraint. The collected works of Eric Voegelin*, Columbia-London 2000, p. 148.

<sup>46</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 163.

<sup>48</sup> A myth, as understood by Voegelin, has nothing to do with a fairy tale description or tales of gods. It is a necessary step on the path of expressing spiritual reality. The subsequent, more diverse and more exhaustive symbolic expressions could replace it in the following historical periods. However it never becomes null and void. *ibidem*, p. 164 (113-114). Myths and symbolism are therefore an irreplaceable carriers of the existential truth which can never be conveyed through phenomena descriptions and facts.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 175 (122).

The dogmatism behind Condorcet is discernible on many levels. Nevertheless, it is greatly represented by his methodology, infallible faith in the inevitability of social progress as well as demonstrating the new elite of progress. Condorcet was fascinated with scientific achievements, new clarity and precision (especially publications of Descartes or Newton). Attempting to retain as much of the articulateness and scientific methodology, he arrived at a conclusion that mathematics (e.g. combinatorics and probability theory) need to be used in order to denote the sciences of humankind and “the art of social coexistence”<sup>50</sup>. He called for a universal language thanks to which the progress of each science would be as certain as in mathematics since its assumptions would have the same probability as geometric theorems. Naturally, to the level of feasibility in each science and its nature<sup>51</sup>. Thanks to the accumulation of knowledge, humanity incessantly improve, and the progress of Asian and African tribes will be “maybe even more rapid and stable than ours, since we had to discover, such as the simple truths and reliant ways, at which we arrived after long periods of error. They can obtain them simply by adopting them, fully developed and explained in our essays and books<sup>52</sup>. Hence, the only thing remaining are the unenlightened tribes to familiarise themselves with the European publications in order to quickly and efficiently ‘catch up’ the civilisation gap. Even then, it could be observed as dehumanising, the subject becomes an object of social engineering.

According to Condorcet, the objective of human activity should be accelerating progress. Even in the very beginning thesis states that “no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human faculties; the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth above the control of every power that would impede it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us”<sup>53</sup>. Therefore since the progress is inevitable, based on the previous knowledge, the course of events could be predicted. As highlighted by Voegelin, “predictability has become the staple of the progressivist creed”<sup>54</sup>. Hence, the assumption of predictability of events would open a possibility of “directing the destiny of humankind”<sup>55</sup>, which was introduced by Condorcet and later continued by Marks.

A remarkable aspect in Condorcet’s philosophy was the belief of that the human nature could improve itself until “a period must one day arrive when death will be nothing more than the effect either of extraordinary accidents, or the flow and gradual decay of the vital powers”<sup>56</sup>.

The eschatological outline is also a time of awaiting for the ultimate victory over societal evil – “Then will arrive the moment in which the sun will observe in its course

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<sup>50</sup> N. Condorcet, *Szkic obrazu postępu ducha ludzkiego poprzez dzieje* (eng: *The Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, PWN, Kraków 1957, p. 232.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 182.

<sup>55</sup> Here, it would be worth to make a reference to one of Voegelin’s statements that *man could only justly represent humanity through exemplary humanness. Moreover, his humanness could only be exemplary when it is focused on the eschatological telos* (E. Voegelin, *World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind*, [in:] *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 11: Published Essays, 1953-1965*, Ellis Sandoz (ed.), University of Missouri Press, 2000, p. 154). Therefore, no Gnostic could, by definition, represent humanity since his *telos* is strictly intermundane.

<sup>56</sup> N. Condorcet, *Szkic obrazu...*, op. cit., p. 244 i n.

free nations only, acknowledging no other master than their reason; in which tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments, will no longer exist but in history and upon the stage"<sup>57</sup>. The salvation from evil does not have the apocalyptic nature as in Christianity, but it is destined to occur in history. As a result, we achieve a kind of 'being superior than humanity (...) who has no need for salvation'<sup>58</sup>. As highlighted by Voegelin, it is a result of the intermundane hubris of a man-created salvation designed to improve on God's creations. Since there is no original sin, mankind has no need for Christ as a Redeemer – humans could redeem themselves<sup>59</sup>.

In the social understanding, Condorcet's biggest hope focused on three issues of inequality to be solved by progress, namely: economic, social and education. In those hopes, initially in the conceptual phase – future foundations of the communist ideology lumping everyone into one class along with the evil that resides in the material world and institutions<sup>60</sup>. The Christian belief in the original sin had been refuted – "wretched tenet of a downfall of mankind"<sup>61</sup> – its direct consequences present themselves as the contamination of human nature. Adopting such approach means that human nature is inherently good, whereas the immoral institutions are origins of all evil and so they should be eradicated. As noted by Voegelin, the successors of this philosophy and intellectuals will do everything in their power to succeed "in undermining the authority of institutions and in transforming bewildered individuals into a disoriented mass"<sup>62</sup>.

Here, it would be recommended to delve into the works of the *New Science of Politics'* author to find his opinion on the elites, who according to Condorcet, were destined to propagate the concept of progress. Voegelin straightforwardly refers to them as the "new type of intellectual parasite"<sup>63</sup>. What differentiates them from philosophers of the past eras is a peculiar set of responsibilities which is no longer simply discovering truth but also propagating quick fixes for various ailments of the world. According to the French philosopher, they were in charge of "pursuing prejudice through all the haunts and asylums in which the clergy, the schools, governments, and privileged corporations had placed and protected it, made it their glory rather to eradicate popular errors, than add to the stores of human knowledge"<sup>64</sup>. Hence, the intellectuals have a new responsibility – not only to build (discovering the truth) but also destroy (prejudice). Voegelin highlights that the main characteristics of *the new elite* is a megalomaniac aggressiveness<sup>65</sup> and whose zeal (is) to teach<sup>66</sup>, and their "war-cry - reason, tolerance,

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 218 i n.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>59</sup> In the context of the "dogma of the goodness of human nature" Voegelin states that Kropotkin's anarchism comes "as the extreme consequence of ideas which are to be found as a pervasive tendency in the age of enlightenment and crisis, of the anti-Christian idea of the fundamental goodness of man and of the denial of radical evil. (..) If the goodness of man is taken seriously, evil must have a source external to man and with the revolutionary removal of the external source mankind can enter the paradise of its own good nature." E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 298.

<sup>60</sup> N. Condorcet, *Szkic obrazu...*, op. cit., p. 235n.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 178 (124).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 177(123).

<sup>64</sup> N. Condorcet, *Szkic obrazu...*, op. cit., p. 167.

<sup>65</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 176n.

humanity"<sup>67</sup>. Intellectuals with all their 'love for humanity', routinely despise old prejudice, while spreading even worse; they are incredibly cautious and reasonable in some specific cases but express remarkable ignorance regarding fundamental matters; in the name of tolerance – they fanatically attack fanaticism.

It is worth mentioning that spreading the one true civilisation in practice means eradicating multiple cultures. According to the author of the Sketch, the avant-gardes of the Enlightened elite are the French, Englishmen and Americans. All other peoples, sooner or later, will reach their civilisation maturity level. It means all other civilisations should disappear to make way for the a homogenic humanity. Moreover, the intellectuals will bear the burden of taking responsibility to indicate the new, progress-accelerating directives<sup>68</sup>. Voegelin highlights that this is first systemic project in history with totalitarian appeal which assumes "the radical destruction of all civilizations of mankind, the high civilizations as well as the less differentiated native civilizations, and to transform the surface of the globe into the habitat of a standardized mankind which is formed by the ideology of a handful of megalomaniac intellectuals"<sup>69</sup>.

### Comte – The Religion of Humanity and "the organised Providence"

As much as Condorcet was a popular advocate for the conception of progress, it is the philosophy and figure of Comte which represent an apt example for the activist mysticism, since its objective is not only spreading the word but also embodying it. It is often highlighted that the first stage of his career (years 1830-1842) is when this French philosopher was endorsed as a positivist and the founder of the new science – sociology. During this period, Comte outlined the universally acclaimed concept of the progress of humanity in three stages: theological, metaphysical and positivist. The second phase of his career (1851-1854) marks the phase refuted by researchers as and considered a result of his intellectual incapacity where Comte builds the structures for a new religion in which Comte ordains himself as the High Priest of Humanity<sup>70</sup>. According to Voegelin, this division appears artificial and the religious phase of Comte is not in fact an aberration but merely a logical consequence of methodological assumptions made in the initial period<sup>71</sup>.

Moreover, in the context of this article, it is in fact Comte's second phase of his career which is more significant since during this period, he calls for introducing positivism as a new state religion. Comte and his successors were to be the priests of this new religion and Comte himself proclaimed to be the new leader of the West. According to Voegelin, these acts, seemingly absurd, should have been accurately predicted if we treated Comte's philosophy with seriousness. Realising the downfall of the Church in Europe, the French philosopher was adamant that no society could survive without a religion and its institutions. Hence, he decided to introduce a new positivist religion and a corresponding positivist Church<sup>72</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> E. Voegelin, *Namiastka religii...*, op. cit., p. 275.

<sup>69</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>70</sup> J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, Reprinted from the Westminster Review, London 1865, p. 125 (available in an electronic format free of charge): <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=HvQGAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=pl&pg=GBS.PP6> (dostęp 14.11.2019 r.).

<sup>71</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 190.

<sup>72</sup> The key figure for the launch of the last era would be Comte himself, which is interpreted by

The essence of the positivist religion is the cult of *Grand Être*, the Great Being – Divine Humanity which replaced God while Comte, as per his own words, would play the role of the *fondeur de la religion de l'humanité*<sup>73</sup>. Followers of this religion were the Servants of Humanity, capable of 'ensuring a true Providence'<sup>74</sup>. The fate of humanity does not lie in Christ but in humanity itself<sup>75</sup>. Voegelin highlights that the radical separation of mankind from transcendence and refining him to an intermundane Humanity leads to the destruction of *bios theoretikos*. Hitherto, mankind should cease all inquiries with regards to the matters of the soul and metaphysics since they lost all their meaning. What constitutes reality are social *facts* and *phenomena*. As a consequence, "Comte declares as illegitimate all questions that cannot be answered by the sciences of the phenomena. [...] If we consider this structure of the Comtean situation, we arrive at the core of his attempt: it is the murder of God"<sup>76</sup>.

As noted by Henri de Lubac, despite the debacle of Comte's religion, and the positivist Church at its final days standing with only a handful of followers, the positivist spirit made a permanent imprint in the general public opinion<sup>77</sup>. Voegelin claims that Comte's positivism "conquered universities, social sciences in particular, in America"<sup>78</sup>, however it would never amount to reaching the state authority level.

### Marx – gnostic activism and building for progress in practice

In case of Marx, gnostic activism translated into direct political actions designed to seize power as well as the attempts to create a new society which resulted in tragical consequences. The prospect of a new, communist society granted Marxism a powerful, eschatological presence. Marx's prediction (or even prophecy) of the *Kingdom of Freedom* was an intermundane imitation of the biblical *Kingdom of Heaven*, where humans having defeated alienation could feel the victory of true freedom. The key to creating a new society was a revolution and "a change of people's hearts". It is worth noting that the revolution itself was not the ultimate objective, but in fact means to a general change which could only be achieved by a *change of hearts* which, in turn, could only occur after the revolution. As highlighted by Voegelin, Marx himself until 1848 lived in a state of an eschatological anxiety waiting for the "almost materialised" revolution and the arrival of the *Kingdom of Freedom*<sup>79</sup> which will put an end to progress<sup>80</sup>. This state of eschatological anxiety was intensified by the mystic activism of Marx. Since the *Kingdom of Freedom* is the ultimate state, it is imperative to *act*, in order to accelerate its arrival. Those, who are at the forefront of this process, who anticipate in their comprehension

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Voegelin as a first attempt, in the history of the West, to overthrow Jesus Christ as the pivotal figure in the historic breakthrough of mankind. E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 222.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 220; A. Wernick (2004), *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-theistic Program of French Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 187-220.

<sup>74</sup> H. Lubac, *Dramat humanizmu ateistycznego (Eng: The drama of atheist humanism)*, WAM, Kraków 2004, p. 192.

<sup>75</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 225.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 229.

<sup>77</sup> H. de Lubac, *Dramat...*, dz. cyt, p. 153.

<sup>78</sup> E. Voegelin, *Duchowa i polityczna przyszłość Zachodu*, Człowiek w kulturze 15/2003, p. 337.

<sup>79</sup> E. Voegelin, *Od Oświecenia...*, op. cit., p. 336.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 364.

the significance of it are communists<sup>81</sup>. Its objective is not, as highlighted by Marx, the reformation of the world but merely raising awareness among proletariat of the unbiased historical process. As a consequence, raw material constituted by proletariat will become a self-aware class. According to Voegelin, this portion of Marx's philosophy, where a certain group 'has better understanding' 'of unbiased historical laws', and the idea that this group holds the privilege and the responsibility to lead "the uninformed" is coherent with the directorial concept of Condorcet. At the same time, it is a classical symptom of Gnosis, in which the authority of the few is legitimised by them being privy to "hidden knowledge" despite wearing the disguise of a scientific marvels.

What could be seen as a *heart* of Marx's philosophy, giving the appearance of science to the entire intellectual enterprise, is dialectical materialism. Voegelin states distinctly the assumptions and structure of Diamat do not represent the properties of intellect but in fact, will. According to Voegelin, despite the falseness of the entire construct, it was not due to a misunderstanding, since Marx purposely distorted the intellectual achievements of Hegle, but from a Gnostic defiance of God. The dialectic materialism is an instrument allowing Marx to eradicate philosophy since the Diamat's construction does not tolerate philosophical questions, i.e. the ones pertaining to the *essence of existence*. As observed by Voegelin, its very definition is a reference to the movement of concept, rather than matter. This, however, does not pose an issue to Marx, on the contrary, it will do splendidly in limiting the entirety of reality to its empirical aspect while disposing of everything with connections to transcendence, faith and spirit. Some terms which could relate to the essence were distorted to fit the stream of the empirical. Hence, the essence of mankind could merely amount to "the entirety of human relationships"<sup>82</sup> or "there is no such thing as true reality"<sup>83</sup>. There could be no single constant nature of mankind since that would only lead to questions of its origin. Especially in a world, which according Marx, is only a stream of existence. Therefore, Marx, similarly to Comte, forbids the abstract questions "without meaning" – it is imperative to hold on to the reality of existence and becoming.

Voegelin treats Marx endeavour as a defiance of God's creation and the World's spiritual order<sup>84</sup>. Hence, it is a result of a spiritual disorder which deprives the human of the transcendence<sup>85</sup>. As a consequence, the only possible outlet for the eschatological anxiety becomes activism and the desire to secure the salvation on one's own terms.

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Karl Rahner while referring to the term 'Divine Providence' states that "only the worshipping faith of a wise, holy and loving God and unconditional abandonment in the mystery of providence could help humanity overcome the unsettling and proud need for security which would otherwise evoke feelings to those of victims tormented by antagonist forces of the world, uninhibited to any pristine unity"<sup>86</sup>. Voegelin observes that

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 396.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 374.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 377.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 372.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 401.

<sup>86</sup> K. Rahner, H. Vorgrimler, *Mały słownik teologiczny*, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1987, p. 302.

when "this thread of faith, on which hangs all certainty regarding divine, transcendent being, is indeed very thin"<sup>87</sup> is torn, the humanity goes on a limb to find safety on their own terms. Gnostic visions ensure the confidence of the "the meaning of human existence, in a new knowledge of the future that lies before us, and in the creation of a more secure basis for action in the future. Assurances of this sort, however, are sought only if man feels uncertain on these points. [...] A complex of derivatives of the Christian idea of perfection proved to be the controlling symbolism in gnostic speculation. Clearly, an element of insecurity must be involved in this idea, which moves men to search for a firmer foundation for their existence in this world"<sup>88</sup>. Since faith in God and His Providence faded, there was a temptation to find another source for stability – progress. Even though, progress was intended to be a "scientific" and "profane" answer to the secularisation, in reality the faith in the progress of the world or history is still merely a faith. It still has distinctive characteristic for a pre-Christian perception of Providence – e.g. the fact that progress is a promise made by an unspecific inanimate force with the added elements of predictability and acceleration of the aforementioned progress through human efforts. Additionally, contrary to Christian beliefs, it has nothing to do with the sanctity of human life but the betterment of humanity and the world. Individuals cease to be a subject and become a dehumanised object of the world's progress.

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<sup>87</sup> E. Voegelin, *Namiastka...*, op. cit., p. 286.

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