"Politics, like science, like art," writes Russell Kirk in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, "arises out of belief in a transcendent religion; and when that faith decays, politics degenerates." Conservatives have long noticed the intricate link between spiritual confusion and political disorder, and many have devoted much of their writing to analyzing this important connection. One of the most important figures of our time to remind us of the importance of spiritual order has been Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose magnum opus, *The Red Wheel*, is a study of the particular Russian manifestation of the greater disruptive patterns in Western spiritual consciousness in the first couple of decades of our century. It is to our misfortune that this multi-volume work—one which the author has labored over for more than fifty years—remains generally unknown in the United States.

*The Red Wheel* deserves to be read as an important document outlining the intellectual currents of the time, and much of it is a meditation on the spread of spiritual abnormality as seen in the Russian political revolt. The subject of the work is not the nefarious nature of the Bolshevik regime; rather, the work expands Solzhenitsyn's previous meditations on the nature of moral and political disorder. Specifically, it examines the decay and degeneration of the old Russian regime which led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in February/March 1917 and the establishment of the provisional government. Solzhenitsyn's concern is to look deeper into the nature of the modern crisis as made manifest in the events of the Russian revolution. What the student of conservative thought finds in *The Red Wheel* is that Solzhenitsyn's views compare favorably with Eric Voegelin's analysis of the crisis of modernity as a regeneration of ancient gnostic myth. Like Voegelin and Kirk, Solzhenitsyn too believes that political problems are, at bottom, religious and spiritual in nature.

In his acceptance speech for the 1983 Templeton Prize, Solzhenitsyn spoke as follows of *The Red Wheel*:

I

I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our Revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat:
"Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened."

It is not, however, the growth and development of Russian atheism that provides the subject matter for The Red Wheel. Rather, the compelling historical drama is structured in terms of secularization, humanity’s usurpation of the ordering functions that had previously been the prerogatives of God, a process that eventually and inevitably directed temporal rebellion against God the creator and his creation. What Solzhenitsyn shows is the transfiguration of the Russian political realm by an increasingly secularized and deformed Christian consciousness. The rebellion of the Russian political person at the turn of the century represented a modern example of the most ancient of religious heresies: the desire of mankind to harness the creative powers of the deity.

There are distinct similarities between this point of view and the views of scholars like Voegelin who have spent years examining the political costs of modern secularization. Specifically, what jumps out at the reader in The Red Wheel is the gnostic pattern of derailed Christian consciousness developed in several characters, a point that suggests that Solzhenitsyn is philosophical and spiritual kin to Voegelin. The Russian author has never made any direct reference to Voegelin, but the Russian author was very knowledgeable of other thinkers who recognized the depths of spiritual decay in the Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the century. The interpretation of revolution as a derailed spirituality presented by Nikolai Berdiaev, Semyon Frank, and Sergei Bulgakov has clearly had a significant effect on Solzhenitsyn’s understanding of political thought.

In The New Science of Politics Eric Voegelin put forth his argument that the modern crisis is rooted in a contemporary form of gnosticism. The ancient gnostic believed that there was an unbridgeable chasm lying between the spiritual and the material realms of existence, the latter being the creation of a fallen god. Since life in the realm of matter alienated the human being from God, the gnostic grew intensely hostile to the world that divorced him from the divine and imprisoned him. Escape was the goal of the gnostic impulse and it was to be attained by acquiring secret knowledge and by retreating from the world. In his examination of modernity, however, Voegelin concluded that the modern gnostic differed from the ancient gnostic by seeking out the complete transformation of temporal existence in a final manner, and not by simply retreating. Nevertheless, the modern gnostic impulse, ran Voegelin’s argument, clearly derived from the ancient heresy because political transformation can be accomplished only through the destruction of a fallen world and, ultimately, through radical and violent revolt against the human condition itself. Hence, modern gnostic faith is most clearly represented as a form of revolt against the human condition. If the goal of gnosis is to release the inner spirit from the bonds of a corrupt world, then the means must be found to shatter those bonds which imprison it in its fallen state. A course is laid for complete disregard for traditional order and any supportive moral imperatives.

II

While composing The Red Wheel Solzhenitsyn was probably unaware of the writings of Voegelin, but the Russian author was very knowledgeable of other thinkers who recognized the depths of spiritual decay in the Russian intelligentsia at the turn of the century. The interpretation of revolution as a derailed spirituality presented by Nikolai Berdiaev, Semyon Frank, and Sergei Bulgakov has clearly had a significant effect on Solzhenitsyn’s understanding of political and social order. In Berdiaev, for example, we find the argument that “inverted religious” belief and a “lack of any
foundation or root in real life” were the characteristic features of the Russian soul throughout the nineteenth century. His contemporary, Frank, believed that the modern revolutionary was “a monk of a nihilist religion” who renounced the world of everyday life in pursuit of “a world of phantoms, dreams and pious faith.”

Bulgakov was also struck by the processes of secularization that guided the Russian revolutionary:

Alongside the anti-Christ element in the intelligentsia one can sense higher spiritual potentials as well....Although it has renounced Christ, it bears His seal on its heart and burns with an unconscious longing for Him not knowing how to slake its spiritual thirst. And this bewildering anxiety, this unearthly dream of unearthly justice, leaves its special mark on the intelligentsia and makes it strange, frenzied and unbalanced, as though possessed.

Above all, what these Russian authors shared—and what Voegelin later perceived—was that the modern intellectual yearned to escape from the contingencies of God’s creation. Yet, paradoxically, this modern secular rebellion was deeply rooted in the structures of the Christian faith for it preached salvation, a salvation to be fulfilled in the here and now without reference to the divinity.

III

Notwithstanding Solzhenitsyn’s assertion that revolution is caused by mankind’s dismissal of God, what the author brings to life in The Red Wheel is Bulgakov’s spiritually derailed activism, its frenzied pursuit of temporal salvation and the historical consequences of that pursuit. Characters in the work are profoundly affected by the contingent state of the general human condition; the quest is to seize the prerogatives of the deity and then transfigure the world and triumph in a complete and final way. This path of deformation of Christian spirituality is fundamental to understanding Solzhenitsyn’s work.

The complex process of secularization and spiritual degeneration is easily recognized in many characters of the first two volumes of The Red Wheel, titled August 1914. A family of revolutionaries, named Lenartovich, functions as a representative unit of the intelligentsia. Agnessa, the family matriarch, by forcefully arguing for temporal forms of salvation through politics, embodies the clearest signs of “pneumapathological disorientation”:

[Revolutionaries] want to bring down to earth an ideal already visible in the kingdom of God, which is within them. But what are they to do if that ideal is still beyond the grasp of the majority? The ground has to be cleared for the new world—so away with all the old garbage, beginning with autocracy!...Revolution is a new birth, the transition from arbitrary rule to a superior law and a superior justice, to a higher Truth.

In this short passage Solzhenitsyn’s revolutionary activist clearly exhibits elements of modern spiritual abnormality. The overwhelming thrust of the ideology is to achieve temporal salvation through political action. What Solzhenitsyn discloses is the historical working out of Voegelin’s thesis that the modern gnostic is driven by a tremendous desire to do the work of God himself, here and now, in history, and not to leave the transfiguration of the world to the grace of God beyond history. This desire for radical transfiguration is buttressed by the belief in an initiated elite (Agnessa refers to her rebellious brothers and sisters as “saints” and “knights-errant of the spirit”). The idea of final transformation of temporal existence so subsumes her that she supports any political action that will lead toward the final goal: “Revolutionaries are not to be judged by the yardstick of old fashioned morality....To a revolutionary everything
that contributes to the triumph of the revolution is moral, and everything that hinders it is immoral."\textsuperscript{12}

It is not life as a creation that guides the actions and thoughts of the revolutionaries, but rather the ideology of escape from a fallen world, from the disorder and uncertainty of historical movement. Sasha Lenartovich, Agnessa's nephew, looks forward to the final eschatological break from the past:

Sasha was ready to die at any moment for some great and glorious cause. He had not even been an adolescent but a small child when his heart began to beat faster in expectation of some extraordinarily important and joyful happening, \textit{something} (he knew not what) which with its sudden radiance would illuminate and transform life in his own land and throughout the whole earth.\textsuperscript{13}

By March 1917 Sasha openly denounces religious faith as a "psychosis,"\textsuperscript{14} but his rebellion is spiritually based as he dedicates his life to revolutionary eschatological fulfillment.

\textit{IV}

Spiritual abnormality in \textit{The Red Wheel} reaches its complex gnostic depths in the historical figures of Lenin and his literary double, Parvus. Although Olivier Clement believes that Parvus is the true representative of gnosticism in the work,\textsuperscript{15} the relationship between the two historical revolutionaries suggests the complex poles of gnostic morality—the libertine and the ascetic.

According to Hans Jonas, because there is an absence of a doctrine of virtue in gnostic teachings, a libertine impulse results from the dualistic belief that the material world is non-binding on the spirit. Consequently, the subject is free to act in whatever way he or she chooses without reference to a moral system of conduct. Complementing this is the ascetic belief that since the material realm is fallen, the subject should avoid contact with that realm of being.\textsuperscript{16} By showing Lenin and Parvus in terms of gnostic morality, Solzhenitsyn underscores the power of spiritual abnormality among the leaders of the Russian revolutionary movement.

Lenin's ascetic qualities are recognized in his fanatical, one-dimensional passion for revolution and are revealed in his self-imposed isolation in libraries. He is uncomfortable with social functions and is openly disturbed by Parvus' profane worldliness. In October 1916, the second part of \textit{The Red Wheel}, a Zurich library symbolizes the spiritual tension in the exiled revolutionary leader. The library building itself is a renovated church, suggesting a religious temple of a secular, modern faith. Lenin works alone in "tomblike silence." He paces the aisles before the altar, pondering final liberation from the torments of the world. The narrator's framing of the scene in a secularized structure dramatically emphasizes the significance of the deformed spirituality that has taken hold of the modern revolutionary mind.

The complementary libertine dimension of gnostic morality is represented by Parvus, the wealthy financier of Lenin's plans. The author underscores the perverse nature of Parvus by describing him as a gross elephantine and hippopotamus-like being. Although Parvus' worldliness creates a definite tension between himself and Lenin, the two nevertheless are drawn to each other and bond spiritually. In Zurich the two are shown together floating "above a world pregnant with revolution." Although they despise that fallen, flawed world, located "there, far below," they both are sure that it looks to them reverently and expectantly for deliverance and salvation.\textsuperscript{17}

In the figures of Lenin, Parvus, and the members of the Lenartovich family, Solzhenitsyn has revealed the depths of spiritual abnormality that gripped Rus-
sia at the turn of the century. These characters show how political revolt is an important manifestation of a more profound spiritual revolt as they turn away from transcendent being and the tensions of existence. Like Voegelin's modern gnostics, they are a self-sanctified elite bent on transforming their world no matter what the cost to themselves or others. The author has developed the dimension of spiritual abnormality through the presentation of ideology, secularized speech, symbols, and images. The process of secularization depicted immanentizes the revolt in politics and promises eschatological fulfillment.

The Red Wheel depicts a nation spiritually confused and incapable of supporting an harmonious representative order. Russia is a nation at war with others and increasingly with itself. The intelligentsia is held responsible for the degeneration in political discourse, but other important representatives of the various classes of society reflect the growing spiritual darkness of the time. To complement the nihilism of the intellectual class, Solzhenitsyn includes in various parts of his work Russia's foremost moral figure of the time, the writer Lev Tolstoy. But the work is highly critical of Tolstoy's "passivism" or non-resistance to evil. Tolstoy's teachings are infected with the disease of pride, which, according to the narrative, provides no adequate defense against revolutionary assault; in fact, pride, defined as a form of rebellion against God, is a foundational element of the modern revolt. The flaw with Tolstoy is that, like the left-revolutionaries, he believes in salvation without God. Appearing as a character in August 1914, the author of War and Peace states that the purpose of our life on earth is "to serve the good. And so create the Kingdom of God on earth." Salvation is not dependent on the grace of God.

In later volumes of The Red Wheel Tolstoy's moral teachings are attacked by Father Sever'ian, who insists that Tolstoy does not comprehend the heights and depths of the human soul, nor does he understand that the proper position for the human spirit lies in a balance between the divine and the temporal. By disregarding the tensions of the human condition that pull the soul simultaneously toward and away from the divine, both Tolstoy and the intelligentsia disorient the spiritual order of the human community:

This is an ancient question: to meddle in worldly affairs or to renounce worldly affairs. It's like this: Christianity does not encompass the life of society. On the other hand, it must not denounce the world as evil. No! All that is earthly is God's, permeated with the gifts of God. If we remove God to a separate region of the holy, then it is a result of our voluntary twisted policies of secularization.... We must not lock ourselves away from earthly events. To shut oneself up in the concerns of self-salvation and to renounce the struggle for the world is a terrible distortion of Christianity.

Father Sever'ian denounces Tolstoy's post-Enlightenment, Voltairean ideology of secular salvation, warning that the divinization of reason alone will give birth to the extreme violence of political rebellion. Sever'ian is aware of the significant shift in the spiritual order of the time, and by attempting to re-situate the human community in the continuum of the temporal and the divine, he, together with Prime Minister Stolypin, provides the counterweight to the frenzied and unbalanced longing of the revolutionary gnostic.
tually and civically rooted figures in modern Russian history. This event is described in great detail by the author because it allows him to explore the deep and widespread pathology of the Russian revolutionary soul. Nowhere else in modern Russian history does a single event concentrate the powers of spiritual and political abnormality like a spinning black hole absorbing all external light. The victim, a clear representative of the just moral order, is assassinated with barely an outcry from any segment of Russian society. Ironically, the assassin, Bogrov, recognizes Stolypin as the “pillar” (столп) of Russian historical truth, and it is for that very reason that the assassin is compelled to murder the Prime Minister. The disoriented soul is a destructive soul, no matter how intelligent or perceptive the forces of reason in the mind:

It was obvious from afar that Stolypin was entirely responsible for the surprising strength of a state which two years ago no one could possibly have expected to recover. Against all the odds, the regime had been lucky enough to find a man of talent—intelligent, strong, persistent, un­budging—he was the obvious target for the terrorist.

The irony of Russian history, according to Solzhenitsyn here, is that within such a spiritually disoriented order, the revolutionaries, unlike the defenders of the regime, are capable of recognizing the moral and intellectual strength of Stolypin: it is they who recognize his great deeds. Yet their perverted faith compels them to kill him. Rebelling against a transcendent God, the radical intelligentsia is incapable of using its talents to create or even to support a productive and moral citizenry. What Solzhenitsyn has fleshed out is the Bakunian roots of Russian radicalism and its ideology of the joy of destruction. In the peculiar revolutionary dialectics of the time, negation is creation, death is life.

The revolutionary impulse eventually and necessarily turns on itself. As Voegelin observed, all gnostic wars end in mutual destruction; death is a form of liberation since it frees the self from the constraints of the temporal world. As is evident in the characterizations of the Lenartovich family, death becomes the all-consuming idea because it contributes directly to the advent of the new realm, the higher truth, liberation. Death is a one-way bridge connecting the irredeemable past with the bright, glorious future. Russia must die, therefore Stolypin must die.

The assassination of Stolypin focuses the spiritual and intellectual crisis of the time as it brings to light the dreadful consequences of distorted faith. Through this event the reader becomes aware of the depths to which the revolutionary world has sunk. Stolypin represents the creative force heroically challenging the destructive force. Through his actions and his declared faith in the transcendent realm, the Prime Minister, like Father Sever’ian, symbolizes the soteriological order. As he lies dying, he affirms the God-centered cosmos:

It is as Thou has ordered it, O Lord, Thou whose designs are beyond our understanding. However much it is Thy will for each of us to do, however many times we exceed the limit of all we had thought possible, at each new horizon, even at the final horizon of death, there is still more left undone to trouble us... It is not for us, O Lord, to weigh Thy purposes. O God, our Creator!

Like Father Sever’ian, Stolypin situates his world squarely in the ordered metaxy. He does not pursue phantoms, dreams, and unearthly justice through apocalyptic frenzy. His program of eco-
omic and political reform (pereustro-
stvo), devised and implemented with
reference to God's law and Russia's his-
torical principles against the "rootless"
and "close-ended" thought of the intelli-
gentsia, created, as Solzhenitsyn argues,
the roots of a morally healthy and pro-
ductive political order. Those roots were
tragically cut down and dissolved by
forces that could not accept the existen-
tial truths of Stolypin's position, that re-
form would come gradually with hard
work and faith. But for his enemies, the
kingdom of God on earth would come
only with a sharp eschatological break
with the evil world of God's creation, and
Stolypin was the primary representative
and supporter of that fallen realm.

VIII

In The New Science of Politics Eric Voegelin
concludes that the destructive forces
unleashed in the twentieth century had
little to do with Marxist communism and
everything to do with the influence of
gnostic heresy of modern consciousnes.
In other words, Western paralysis and
self-destructive politics arose from spiri-
tual abnormality. While Solzhenitsyn is
generally looked upon as the "world's
greatest anti-communist writer," The Red
Wheel reveals that the author is far closer
to Voegelin's viewpoint, that communism
was merely one historical dimension of
the general degeneration in political dis-
course which has occurred since the
Enlightenment. By concentrating the sub-
ject matter of his major work on the pre-
Soviet era of Russian history, the author
directly challenges not only Soviet histo-
riography and Soviet communism, but
also the primary currents of modern his-
torical development that led to the tri-
umph of Leninist politics. In The Gulag
Archipelago Solzhenitsyn gave us a dev-
astating narrative of the inhumanity of
the communist state. In The Red Wheel
he anchors the particular historical
events of the Russian revolutionary pe-
riod in the perennial struggle of man for
absolute divine knowledge and the search
for certainty. Because this struggle tran-
scends the political, it cannot be ad-
dressed merely by the political. For
Solzhenitsyn—as for Voegelin—political
order and justice arise out of a proper
spiritual understanding of the cosmos.
This understanding recognizes man's
dependence upon the grace of God for
salvation. A lesser understanding pro-
pels us like a fiery wheel toward the
abyss of the horrors of existence.

1. Russell Kirk, Enemies of the Permanent Things
(New Rochelle, 1969), 253. 2. Aleksandr
Solzhenitsyn, "The Templeton Address," National
Review, 22 July 1983, 873. 3. In his superb work,
After Ideology, David Walsh examines the writings
of Solzhenitsyn and Voegelin. Although he finds
recuperative and restorative powers in
Solzhenitsyn's work, Walsh only briefly discusses
the Russian author's diagnosis of modern spiritual
abnormality with direct reference to Voegelin's
analysis of modern gnosticism. A purpose of this
article is to expand the comparison between the
two writers. See David Walsh, After Ideology (San
and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt (Baton Rouge,
1992), suggests that although Voegelin had am-
digously used the term "gnosticism" to designate
both the rejection of the world and its transforma-
tion, the fundamental point of Voegelin's thought is
that the tension of human existence inherently
creates a spiritual crisis to which the human com-
munity must address itself. Gnosticism was not the
cause, but rather a clearly defined symptom of
"pneumapathological disorientation." 5. Roger
Lundin argues that "it is not so much embodiment
that contemporary gnostics take to be the source of
evil as it is the embeddedness of the self within
the limits of nature and the constrictions of soci-
ety." See his The Culture of Interpretation (Grand
Rapids, 1993), 81. 6. See Max Hayward, "Solzhenitsyn
and the Russian Tradition," in his Writers in Russia:
1917-1978, ed. Patricia Blake (New York, 1987), 295-
308; and Donald W. Treadgold, "Solzhenitsyn's In-
tellectual Antecedents," in Solzhenitsyn in Exile, ed.
John B. Dunlop, Richard S. Haugh, and Michael
Nicholson (Stanford, 1985), 243-266. 7. Nikolai
Marshall Shatz and Judith Zimmerman, Cana-
dian Slavic Studies, 5 (1971), 349. 9. Sergei Bulgakov,
"Heroism and Asceticism," trans. Marshall Shatz and
Judith Zimmerman, Canadian Slavic Studies, 2
(1968), 462-463. 10. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, August
Relativity
Train Station, Berlin, April 1914

Black streaked with silver, the metal dragon
Uncoils with a hiss, then slithers away.
A husband watches for a final glimpse
Of his wife—former wife, who will not stay.
From the snake’s maw she peers, yet not at him:
Her weary eyes scan the night sky, asking
If stars now burning as suns far distant
Warm alien planets where love proves lasting.
He sees the same stars and constellations:
Perseus and Andromeda both run
High above the head that dares to compress
The galaxy in one tight equation.

At the bright dawning of science, Newton
Sat in his uncle’s garden near a tree,
Watching as the ripe fruit of knowledge fell
Along an arc of God’s geometry;
He partook and became one of the gods.

Newton’s divinity faded away.
Alone in the dark, his heir sees the truth:
In theory’s shadows serpents wait for prey.

—Bryce J. Christensen