

Modern democracy as a divinization of man in Nicolás Gómez Dávila*



La democracia moderna como divinización
del hombre en Nicolás Gómez Dávila

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Abstract

As a result of a research on political philosophy and political theology, this article explores the idea of Colombian thinker Nicolás Gómez Dávila according to which all politics implies theology and, specifically, modern democracy consists, fundamentally, in the divinization of a man who proclaims himself sovereign in the metaphysical, ethical, political and legal fields. Based on the interpretation of the work by Gómez Davila and the dialogue with authors specialized in political and legal theology, such as Alvear, Guardini, Jonas, Schmitt, and Voegelin, the main arguments of his theological understanding of modern democracy will be studied from the concept of religious analysis. First, this paper will present a brief biographical sketch of Gómez Dávila. Afterwards, it will explain the relation that, according to Gómez, exists between gnosis and the Enlightenment. A third moment will address the idea of democracy as an anthropotheistic creed. Finally, the main conclusions resulting from this research will be presented.

Keywords

Democracy, modern history, theology, man, political philosophy.

Resumen

Como resultado de una investigación sobre filosofía política y teología política, el presente artículo se propone explorar la idea del pensador colombiano Nicolás Gómez Dávila según la cual toda política implica una teología y, de modo específico, la democracia moderna consiste, fundamentalmente, en la divinización del hombre que se autoproclama soberano en el ámbito metafísico, ético, político y jurídico. Con base en la interpretación de su obra y el diálogo con autores dedicados a la teología política y jurídica, como Alvear, Guardini, Jonas, Schmitt y Voegelin, se analizarán los principales argumentos de Gómez en su comprensión teológica de la democracia moderna a partir de su concepto de *análisis religioso*. En primer lugar, se ofrecerá un breve esbozo biográfico de Gómez. Posteriormente, se explicará la relación que, según este pensador, existe entre *gnosis* e Ilustración. En un tercer momento se desarrollará la idea de la democracia moderna como credo antropoteísta. Finalmente, se presentarán las principales conclusiones de esta investigación.

Palabras clave

Democracia, historia moderna, teología, hombre, filosofía política.

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Introduction

The path that modern thought travels until the Nietzschean proclamation of the death of God begins with the antinomy theocentrism-anthropocentrism, which presents God and man as antagonists. However, the lack of firm metaphysical foundations for the dignity and rights of man makes evident, in full postmodernity, the need to rethink the relations between the human person and its transcendent foundation, thus questioning the opposition described above and subjecting this idea to rigorous judgment. The intellectual work of Nicolás Gómez Dávila (1913-1994), a Colombian aphorist, constitutes a piece of infinite value to undertake the task previously proposed, that is, to seek solid foundations in a time marked by nihilism, for which such project seems utopian, absurd, and useless.

By questioning the foundations of modern thought, defending metaphysical realism, and positioning himself as a radical opponent of the principle of autonomy that inspires the ideology of the Enlightenment, Gómez leads his readers along a path that, from natural reason, leads to natural theology or theodicy, according to the path traveled by the great representatives of the perennial philosophy of the School of Athens and the great authors of the medieval Christian tradition, who crown the rational effort of the Greeks with dogmatic and supernatural theology, which closely links reason and faith in the biblical book of Revelations.

Almost twenty years after his death, Gómez remains a stranger to many of his co-nationals. This fact is even more surprising when we consider the admiration that he enjoys in the European continent, where several congresses, forums and seminars dedicated to his work have been held, university courses are given on his thought, and there are already numerous scholars who are fond of his ideas, especially, of the theological character of democracy, the main subject of this article.

Who was Nicolás Gómez Dávila?

Born in Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia, into an upper-class family, Gómez traveled to Paris at the age of six, where he received a humanistic and Christian education in a Benedictine school whose name he never wanted to reveal. Serrano (2015) offers valuable data on Gómez's family circle, which is useful for understanding the context where he was

born and the profiles that defined his personality and character:

We know that he was born on May 18th, 1913, in the home of Nicolás Gómez Saiz and Rosa Dávila Ordóñez, located in Bogotá, on road 8th and 16 street. His parents had married on April 24th, 1904, in what would be the second marriage of Nicolás Gómez Saiz. From his first marriage, Gómez Saiz had two children, Hernando and Isabel Gómez Tanco. From the second, he had three children: Nicolás, his brother Ignacio—who was of notable influence for the publication of the first writings by Gómez Dávila—, and his sister Teresa. The Gómez Saiz family would settle in Paris around 1920. It is therefore plausible that after the return of religious congregations to France after First World War, Nicolás Gómez Dávila could enter a Benedictine center in Paris. He learned English after spending seasons with his brother Ignacio in England. However, Don Colacho did not like to talk about his school years; we do not know if it was due to some unpleasant experience, apart from the pneumonia that kept him at home for two years.¹ (pp. 26-27)

Due to the pneumonia referred to by Serrano, Gómez Dávila had to finish his training with private tutors at home. This is how he achieved a familiarity with the classical languages that would later allow him to access the reading of great representatives of the ancient tradition in their original language: “Without Latin or Greek it is possible to educate the gestures of intelligence, but not intelligence itself”² (2005b, p. 259). Moreover, the reading of these works became a therapy for his soul amidst the characteristic anxieties of modern era, making him always feel like in a sanctuary: “Reading only in Latin and Greek is the only thing that disinfects the soul a bit” (2005d, p. 114).

Besides his admiration for classical languages, it is evident that he recognized the greatness of the texts in which the beauty of these languages is revealed, the same ones he learned to love and within which he reveals some very particular hobby: “The morning reading of Homer, with the serenity, the deep calm feeling of moral and physical well-being, and the perfect health that it transmit us, is the best viaticum to endure the vulgarities of the day” (Gómez-Dávila, 2003, p. 210). On the other hand, he emphatically affirmed that “the Greek classics and the Bible, read slowly, with meticulous attention, are enough to teach us what humanity knows about itself” (2003, p. 237).

Aware that the commonplaces of Western tradition are a guideline that does not deceive, he drinks from the source in which they are born:

The commonplaces are the sanity of intelligence, but to resign ourselves to them is to collaborate in our brutalization. That is why the reading of the Greek and Latin classics is so necessary, since there we find the common place exposed with serene calmness and with the delicious awareness of a fresh discovery. (Gómez-Dávila, 2003, p. 355)

His nightly readings until dawn, the incessant dialectic, and the habit of “writing short, to finish before getting fed-up” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005a, p. 42) are an act of resistance to the accelerated debasement of modern societies and a wake-up call for those, like him, groping for the vestiges of transcendence in a culture that has wanted to cement itself based on the dogma of human autonomy in front of God, since this trait, which has been called the secularization process, seems to be the defining note of Modernity (Guardini, 1995).

As a complement to this section on the life of Gómez, it would be worth referring to the publication of his works, which took place almost entirely during the author’s lifetime, something that occurred not because of his decision and personal interest, but rather because of the value found in his work by those who had the privilege of keeping in close contact and witnessing the configuration of a thought that, today, is an important key for understanding the history of Western civilization.

Gómez’s first work was published in Mexico, with the simple title of “*Notas. Tomo I,*” at the initiative of Ignacio Gómez Dávila, his brother. “It is a very particular work: An experimental text made up of notes, maxims, observations, sentences, and judgments”³ (Volpi, 2005, p. 21). Issue number 4 of *Mito* magazine included a selection of unpublished fragments of *Notas*. This is how Téllez (1955) presents this selection:

MITO has the privilege of publishing in this edition some unpublished fragments of the second volume of “*Notas*”, the work of Colombian writer Nicolás Gómez Dávila, of which a first volume was printed in Mexico recently in a private edition.

The very discreet and almost clandestine presence of such a great writer among us was thus revealed through this confidential message. The book by Gómez Dávila discovered, among its few readers, an unexpected and splendid succession of the royal family of XVII and XVIII century French moralists,

in Spanish. The finding was worth being told publicly, even violating the obvious slogan of silence that came from the private nature of the edition and the attitude of simple reserve kept by the author. From the literary pages of *El Tiempo* [newspaper], one of the readers of Gómez Dávila dared to spread the good news: Spanish literature acquired a writer whose depth and richness of thought and style placed him on a first-rate extranational level. (p. 209)

With the time, *Textos I* (Bogotá, Editorial Voluntad, 1959), *Escolios a un texto implícito* (Bogotá, Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1977, 2 volumes), *Nuevos escolios a un texto implícito* (Bogotá, Procultura, Presidencia de la República, Nueva Biblioteca Colombiana de Cultura, 1986, 2 volumes), and *Sucesivos escolios a un texto implícito* (Bogotá, Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1992) were also published.

In 1988, *Revista del Colegio Mayor Nuestra Señora del Rosario* (LXXXI, 1988, No. 542, pp. 67-85) published the article “*De iure*”, written by Gómez Dávila in 1970, whose central theme are the notions of law, justice and state. The essay “*El reaccionario auténtico*” was published by *Revista de la Universidad de Antioquia* (1995, No. 240, pp. 16-33) the year after the author’s death, although issue 205 of the journal *Eco* had already published, in november 1978, an article by Ernesto Volkening titled “*Anotado al margen del reaccionario de Nicolás Gómez Dávila,*” which seems to indicate the antiquity of “*El reaccionario auténtico*” or, at least, of the reflections that led to its writing, as shown by Serrano (2015):

The article is probably a final draft of works that he had been outlining since the 1950s and that did not have the opportunity to be published in *Textos I*. Proof of this would be the column by Hernando Téllez “*Boceto del reaccionario,*” published in the newspaper *El Tiempo* of Bogotá on August 3rd, 1960. (p. 86)

On Tuesday, May 17th, 1994, the day before his 81st birthday, Nicolás Gómez Dávila died in a bed that, according to his daughter Rosa Emilia, was transferred to his library, where he spent a good part of his life in a colloquium with the dead, who were present in the more than 30,000 volumes that he managed to acquire over the years, and that today rest in the Nicolás Gómez Dávila room at Luis Ángel Arango Library, in Bogotá. In an interview published by the newspaper *El Tiempo*, Rosa Emilia comments:

We would arrive after school, throw our suitcases on the floor and do our homework. As long as I remember, the walls were covered with books. And when the shelves were filled with two or three rows of books and superimposed books, my father invaded other spaces of the house. First a room, then the attic. His library was his world. He lived, read, wrote, and met with his friends there. When he got sick we took his bed down to the library. He died among his books.⁴

His inner life, finely lived —apart from industrial Modernity and the Death of God—, which was built with discipline and method, like someone who is polishing a work of art, had, possibly, the ultimate objective of preserving the nobility of a freshman’s soul with deep longings to reach the eternal heights, since “an entire existence is one that delivers to the grave —after long years— an adolescent to whom life has not been able to degrade” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005b, p. 119).

Gnosis and Illustration in Nicolás Gómez Dávila

Concept of Gnosticism

Although many already speak of “postmodernity” indicating with this expression, among other things, that the period marked by modern rationality has been surpassed, and that enlightened ideals have lost their validity, the truth is that the so-called postmodernity is nothing more than the other side of modernity and also has its roots in the Enlightenment, although looking much more at the particular, the individual, the concrete, the diverse, the circumstantial.

At the root of modern and post-modern thought is the principle of autonomy, grounded in the self-sufficiency of humanity to understand and justify itself in moral and political terms, without the need for God. In such a claim, Gómez found the reissue of old gnostic ideas in which the divinization of man and the modern ideology that emerges from this consideration have their source.

In its different versions, which are impossible to reduce to a corpus of thought, Gnosticism is characterized by giving priority to rational knowledge with respect to faith. Some chosen individuals, a spiritual elite of enlightened men, would access a special knowledge (*gnosis*) against which Christianity would appear as a second-hand religion for the simple people (Ratzinger, 2004). Gradually, the importance of Revelations and the salvific role

of Christ would be reduced as a consequence of a rationalization of belief. We do not speak here of a faith-reason dialogue, which would be perfectly valid for traditional Christianity, but of an attempt to dispose of faith, which would then be displaced by rational knowledge.

Gnosticism was a general movement divided into many schools, or sects, whose members it would not always be correct to call “heretics” because most of them did not pretend to be Christians. True enough, they knew Christianity, and some of them have even attempted to integrate with their own doctrines elements borrowed from Christian faith, but instead of starting from faith in order to achieve some understanding of its object, the Gnostics openly aimed to turn faith into a “knowledge” or wisdom, accessible to reason alone. The substitution of knowledge (*gnosis*) for faith (*Pistis*) is, so to speak, the hallmark of Gnosticism. Still less than Deism, its soberer seventeenth-century counterpart, Gnosticism belongs in the history of Christianity. (Gilson, 1955, p. 21)

As the studies by Jonas (1963) have indicated, regarding ancient Gnosticism, that knowledge is not only accumulated theory about certain aspects of reality, but it is also the means of human salvation. Knowledge (*gnosis*) thus acquires a mystical and salvific character, since it allows to reach God, which implies becoming one with God, sharing his existence and essence, and becoming divine. Regarding the Valentinians —the gnostic sect referred to in the Gómez’s scholia—, Jonas (1963) states the following:

Thus in the more radical systems such as the Valentinian the “knowledge” is not only an instrument of salvation but itself the very form in which the goal of salvation —i.e., ultimate perfection, is possessed. In these cases knowledge and the attainment of the known by the soul are claimed to coincide— the claim of all true mysticism. (p. 35)

Basíledes, Marción, Valentín, and Saturnilo, among others, were the founders of the gnostic sects, whose ideas have reached the present, paradoxically, through those who used to be their critics, namely the Church Fathers and, among them, in a special way, Saint Irenaeus, in his work *Adversus Haereses*. Along with the salvific character of knowledge that leads to a divinization of man, it is worth highlighting, in the theology proper of Gnosticism, a certain dualism between God and the world, which brings the world closer to certain deist currents of modernity, according to Jonas (1963):

The cardinal feature of gnostic thought is the radical dualism that governs the relation of God and world, and, correspondingly that of man and world. The deity is absolutely transmundane, its nature alien to that of the universe, which neither created nor governs and to which it is the complete anti-thesis: to the divine realm of light, self-contained and remote, the cosmos is opposed as the realm of darkness. The world is the work of lowly powers which though they may mediately be descended from Him do not know the true God and obstruct the knowledge of Him in the cosmos over which they rule. (p. 42)

The gnostic character of the Enlightenment

A brief tour of some central ideas of ancient gnosis allows us to find important relations between the ideology of this current and the intellectual, cultural and political movement known in the Western world as *Aufklärung*, or Enlightenment. Gómez pointedly stated that “*Aufklärung* is the circum-spect translation of Gnosis” (2005c, p. 193), since it identifies, at the base of both approaches, a radical confidence in the possibilities of man, in his knowledge, his freedom and his autonomy, to the point of reaching a divinization of the human:

The identification of a relation between *gnosis* and modernity must be understood in Gómez Dávila as a metaphor that suggests the possible coincidences between ancient Gnostic claims and modern yearnings that the author equally dismisses. These claims are based on a definitive idea that unequivocally relates both movements: trust in man.⁵ (Abad-Torres, 2010, p. 136)

First, we must mention the salvific and redemptive character that knowledge acquires in both traditions. Although the ancient gnosis starts from a sacred revelation, it is displaced by the salvific knowledge reserved for an aristocracy of spiritual initiates. Besides, the salvific role of Christ is reduced to that of a messenger transmitting a knowledge that, properly, is what saves:

Gnosis is an introverted mystique. It is mystical rationalism. The only true knowledge is that of the mind discovering itself. It is the one who can discover the identification of the human subject with the divine object. Man, rediscovering himself, can identify with God. Self-knowledge is an achievement by the spirit of his divine origin. Through his “self,” the gnostic sees God. This is Greek or Eastern immanentism, it is no longer biblical creationism.⁶ (Trevijano, 2011, p. 227)

Guerra-Gómez (2006), an expert in Gnosticism and freemasonry, explains this issue as follows:

Gnosticism is a mystique and an ideology of introversion. In this way, man discovers that his “spirit” (*pneûma*) comes not from the lower or material world, but from the pleromatic or divine world, and that it must return to him. If the believer says, “I believe,” the gnostic affirms “I know.”⁷ (p. 81)

For its part, modernity is based on the idea that the union between science and praxis will grant the human being the ability to recover the “lost paradise” due to original sin. With knowledge, men could overcome all the adversities offered by nature and, through technique, they would succeed in conquering a world that, in many respects, is still hostile to him.

Until the dawn of the modern era, the recovery of that primal reality of perfection known as the earthly paradise was expected by the faith in Jesus Christ; this is what redemption is about. Modernity awaits for redemption, that is, the reestablishment of the “lost paradise,” no longer of faith, but of the correlation between science and praxis. Faith and hope in God are replaced by faith in progress, a progress that can be achieved through human knowledge. That is why Gómez sentences: “*Regnum hominis*, with whose preaching Bacon inaugurates the modern world, is not a parody of *regnum Dei*, but its gnostic version” (2005c, p. 193).

In each and every one of the stages of spiritual development in the West, gnosis springs up whenever the human being, tired of faith, tries to seize this value and place the self-redemption of man by knowledge in the place that corresponds to the redemption through the God who descends into the everyday and who has a supernatural character. In Gnosticism, then, the Christian *eschaton* becomes immanent, and salvation takes place in a merely horizontal dimension of existence, without reference to God or eternal life (Voegelin, 2006):

Gnostic speculation overcame the uncertainty of faith by departing from transcendence and endowing man and his intramundane radius of action with the meaning of eschatological realization. To the extent that this immanentization advanced in an experiential way, civilizational activity became a mystical task of self-salvation. The spiritual force of the soul that in Christianity was dedicated to the sanctification of life could now be turned to the most attractive, tangible and, above all, much easier creation of the earthly Paradise.

Civilizational action became a *divertissement*, in Pascal's sense, but a *divertissement* that demonically absorbed man's eternal destiny and substituted for the life of the spirit. Nietzsche was the one who best expressed the nature of this demonic deviation by raising the question of why someone should live in the uncomfortable condition of a being in need of God's love and grace. His solution was: "Love yourselves by grace; then you will no longer need your God and all the drama of the fall and redemption will be consummated in you."⁸ (p. 158)

Second, it is necessary must refer to the divinization of man. Thus, if ancient Gnosticism states that man is a fragment of divinity—since his soul, different from matter, is a "spark" that has detached itself from God—, modernity starts from an atheism that Gómez will call gnostic, since it not only denies the existence of God but also replaces him with a new god: man. "The Übermensch is the resource of a dissatisfied atheism. Nietzsche invents a human consolation for the death of God; gnostic atheism, on the other hand, proclaims the divinity of man" (Gómez-Dávila, 2005d, p. 182).

Consequently, while ancient Gnosticism tries to identify the divine creator with the human creature, in what Ratzinger has called the "mystique of identity"⁹ (2003, p. 41), the Enlightenment proposes to worship the human being as a new divinity, from there results, for example, the deification of human reason during the French Revolution, which, according to the Colombian thinker, "has been the highest wave of the Gnostic tide" (2005c, p. 191).

Fichte's work is a magnificent example of the Gnosticism that underlies the modern proposal of reality, since by combining the expulsion of God, understood as a personal being with the autonomy of the moral law, this author opens the way for the divinization of man, at least in the sense of conceiving men as self-subsistent beings for their reason and self-referent for freedom, an infinite aspect of man's finitude. In his *Atheism Dispute*, Fichte (2004) affirms:

It is an eternal, human and divine truth, that there are inalienable human rights, and that freedom of thought is one of them [...] Freedom of thought, without obstacles or restrictions, only finds and consolidates the prosperity of States [...] The only happiness on this earth, if it is to be happiness, is one's own free and unhindered spontaneity, acting by one's own strength according to one's own aims.¹⁰ (p. 10)

Commenting on this passage, Alvear-Téllez (2013) points out:

The use of the adjectives *eternal* and *divine* in the last quote from Fichte, applied to freedom of thought and the notion that the fullness of man is found in "acting by his own force according to his own aims," well show the gnostic horizon in which freedom of conscience and religion has been conceived. Because the "absolute Self" of this notion gathers, as Estermann observes, *many characteristics (self-determination, creativity) of the God of theism*. 'My absolute self' whose identification—reabsorption— can only be achieved by those who are pure and follow the path indicated by Fichte, as a secular model of [the statement] 'you will be like gods,' within the categories of idealist philosophy.¹¹ (p. 137)

Finally, it should be mentioned that within Gnosticism there is a radical dualism between matter and spirit. By denying any link between God and the material world, Gnostics devalue matter, which for them is nothing more than an error, since what is really important is the spirit. For modernity, on the other hand, matter lacks a teleological direction, a *nomos* that indicates what its purpose is. Therefore, matter is presented as a simple *res extensa* without any orientation, subject to the whims of man (Spaemann, 2017). Gómez was lapidary against this modern *forma mentis* when he affirmed that "to excuse his attacks against the world, man resolved that matter is inert" (Gómez-Dávila, 2005a, p. 42), and that "for anthropotheism, the universe is a hindrance or tool of the human god" (2002, p. 63).

If we look at the definition of Gnosticism provided by Puech (1978, cited in Forment, 1988, p. 487), "it is called or can be called Gnosticism, and also gnosis, any doctrine or religious attitude based on the theory or in the experience of obtaining salvation through knowledge,"¹² it is evident that the Enlightenment is a form of Gnosticism in which knowledge allows access to a higher level, no longer that of salvation in eternal life, but one of the human progress and redemption in its immanent sense. The religious content required by the definition is satisfied if it is taken into account that, for Gómez, man never leaves religion. Modern atheism also establishes in man his own divinity: "In the end there are only two religions: that of God and that of Man, and an infinity of theologies" (Gómez-Dávila, 2005c, p. 182).

The century's response to God's silence was the recourse to a new, entirely secular, worldly, immanentist religion, and to the scientific spirit, whose mission is precisely to explore the immanent. An artificial, constructivist, allegedly atheological religion, origin of the sacralizations, which has raised and still raises the contemporary *atheologies* that legitimize politics. Ideologies as religions of politics rest on this religion.¹³ (Negro, 2010, p. 197)

The religion described by Negro is manifested in various political and ideological movements throughout modernity, such as Marxism, positivism, scientism, and the different forms of fascism, to which a gnostic and messianic character can be attributed in their intention to redeem man from mere immanence and dispose of the transcendent god. All these movements have their origin in the Enlightenment and are heirs to the autonomist claim of modernity.

It could be said that one of the implicit texts to which Gómez's scholia refers, as Rabier (2020) has shown, is the work of Voegelin, to which Gómez, very surely, dedicated a careful reading. The relation between Gnosticism and modernity in the work of the Colombian thinker has the famous German Professor, according to whom the various Gnosticisms spread throughout the world in contemporary times, as a privileged interlocutor (Voegelin, 1952):

Modern gnosticism has by far not spent its drive. On the contrary, in the variant of Marxism it is expanding its area of influence prodigiously in Asia, while other variants of gnosticism, such as progressivism, positivism, and scientism, are penetrating into other areas under the title of "Westernization" and development of backward countries. And one may say that in Western society itself the drive is not spent but that our own "Westernization" is still on the increase. (pp. 164-165)

Faced with gnosis and the Enlightenment, which are identified by their faith in the natural goodness and the capabilities of men, Gómez's skepticism discredited the autonomist claim of modernity through a rigorous reading of history. In his peculiar vision of believer and skeptic, he was always immunized against the poison of Gnostic ambitions: "Against gnostic pride, only skepticism and faith could immunize. He who does not believe in God can have the decency not to believe in himself" (Gómez-Dávila, 2005c, p. 194).

Democracy as an anthropotheistic creed

Democracy and Gnostic atheism. Commentary to *Textos I*

Although the bourgeois revolutions that gave start to modern democracies are filled with an anti-religious and secular coloring, Gómez was able to see further and identify a very high content of religious elements in the same revolutionary movements. As Garzón-Vallejo (2006) points out: "The Revolution undoubtedly constituted, in essence, the manifest fulfillment of a 'sacred transfer' that, before its emergence, had stealthily transferred to new family, civic and patriotic values the affective and emotional burdens previously linked to Christian representations"¹⁴ (p. 39).

Many are those who think that modern democracies are based, together with the end of monarchies, on a social death of religions—at least from their intervention in the public sphere—, supported by neutrality with respect to beliefs.

However, other observers of his critical moments, or of his extreme forms, have repeatedly pointed out his religious coloration. The dogmatism of its doctrines, its infectious spread, the fanatical consecration it inspires, the feverish confidence it arouses, have suggested disturbing parallels. The sociology of democratic revolutions resurrects categories elaborated by the history of religions: prophet, mission, sect. Curiously necessary metaphors. (Gómez-Dávila, 2002, p. 59)

Gómez, using what he calls "religious analysis" (2002, p. 62), aspired to understand the authentic meaning of democratic regimes and the theological failure that structures them, convinced that all political proposals depend on a position about God previously assumed. Taking into account this religious analysis, it is possible to state that, at the base of the democratic doctrine, Gómez found a patent atheism that displaces the authority and sovereignty of the Christian God in order to grant both of these to man and, in a much more precise way—at least in theory—to the people, to majorities. If the existence of God puts a limit to the autonomist efforts of man, modern democracy solves this problem by eliminating God from the horizon and attributing to the creature the characteristics that were once projected in the transcendent God: autonomy, omnipotence, sovereignty, and unlimited freedom.

Atheism does not turn out to be, then, an exact verification that precedes the divinization of man,

but the necessary condition to be able to treat man as God: “If God existed, man could not feel his presumed divinity. The transcendent God nullifies our useless rebellion. Democratic atheism is theology for an immanent god” (Gómez-Dávila, 2002, p. 66).

Gómez, a keen reader of Tocqueville, stressed that, in modernity, divine sovereignty is replaced by the sovereignty of the people. The death of God is witnessed, but his place is now occupied by man:

When describing American democracy, Tocqueville said that in democratic thought people rule over the entire sphere of political life in the way that God rises over the world, as the cause and aim of all things, from whom all things are born, and to whom all things return.¹⁵ (Schmitt, 2009, p. 46)

Considering the above, before any understanding of democracy as an electoral procedure, political regime, social structure or economic organization, Gómez understood democracy as an “anthropotheistic religion” (2002, p. 62). Such is the metaphysical failure that is implicit in all its doctrine and in its most practical applications. In this way, by attributing to man the sovereignty previously granted to God, the secular State frees itself from all axiological interference that may hinder the whims of the sovereign will over human beings (Gómez-Dávila, 2002):

Who tolerates that a religious objection disturbs the prosperity of a business, that an ethical argument suppresses a technical advance, that an aesthetic motive modifies a political project, hurts the bourgeois sensibility and betrays the democratic enterprise.

The popular sovereignty thesis gives each man the sovereign determination of his destiny. The sovereign man depends only on his capricious will. Totally free, the sole purpose of his acts is the unequivocal expression of his being. (p. 83)

For modern democracy, man is pure and unlimited will. After establishing such an anthropological definition, the democratic doctrine elaborates “the four ideological theses of its apologetics” (Gómez-Dávila, 2002, p. 65). In addition to the aforementioned, namely, atheism as a *sine qua non* condition to deify man, democracy postulates an idea of progress, a theory of values and a universal determinism.

Regarding the idea of progress, it is necessary to emphasize that Gómez was totally skeptical, since he conceived the perspective of endless historical progress as the consolation invented by a man who

has abandoned divinity and rushes rapidly towards nihilism: “To avoid a virile confrontation with nothingness, men raise shrines to honor progress” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005a, p. 238).

For the Colombian author, progress is usually the opium of foolish men: “For intelligent man, faith is the only remedy for anguish. The fool is cured by ‘reason’, ‘progress’, alcohol, and work” (2005e, p. 77). The democratic idea of progress gives man the false assurance of not needing God and being able to fully satisfy himself. Since the democratic man puts the redemptive function on himself and on his own efforts, he finally hopes that progress will save him and “redeem him from sin, misfortune, boredom and death” (Gómez-Dávila, 2002, p. 73). For this reason, Gómez concludes that “technique is the verb of the man-god” (2002, p. 73).

The next thesis of democratic apologetics is the theory of values, which presents values as the creation of the human will, attributing them a subjective and temporary character. For Gómez’s reactionary gaze, such a democratic theory of values is inadmissible: “Value is what the will affirms, if this will states God’s will. Values are subjective for God and objective for man” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005a, p. 309).

The axiology proper to democracy is relativistic, as it considers that the only real values are those that man perceives and at the moment that he perceives them, while, in Gómez’s thought, values have their ultimate foundation in the unbreakable will of God, which makes him an axiological objectivist and, therefore, a reactionary who resists the democratic thesis, whose theoretical foundation is perpetual mutation, indefinite change, non-stability (Gómez-Dávila, 2002):

If pleasure and pain already show a disturbing independence; What remains of our proclaimed divinity, if truth binds us to a nature of things, if good compels as an irresistible appeal, if beauty exists in the pulp of the object? If man is not the supreme maker of values, man is a taciturn traveler among mysteries, man crosses the domain of an incognito monarch. (p. 68)

To end, democracy poses a universal determinism and requires a universe governed by a blind necessity in order to fulfill its promises, since in this way this construction can manipulate and lead such universe at will, imposing its sovereignty over reality. “The total freedom of man calls for an enslaved uni-

verse. The sovereignty of the human will only manage corpses of things” (Gómez-Dávila, 2002, p. 69).

Essential characteristics of secularism

A freewill without *telos*

Once God has disappeared from the horizon of human life and man proclaims himself as god, his freedom seems to extend without limits because nothing can set limits. Neither the natural moral law nor religion are presented as obstacles to the claims of modern man, who dominates the world through science and technology, heading, by leaps and bounds, along the paths of progress.

However, this lack of limits to freewill is identified with the absence of meaning, since it is no longer the means to achieve human greatness, but an end in itself. One is absolutely free, but without knowing what for. Gómez deeply distrusted this unlimited freedom lacking a transcendent sense, a purpose: “We must not get tired of repeating that freedom is not a good itself, but a good as a condition of all greatness, and that therefore it is bad when its provisions authorize the relaxation of the soul” (Gómez-Dávila, 2003, p. 121).

Consistent with what has already been indicated, Gómez did not conceive freedom as a supreme value. On the contrary, he thought that freedom is subordinated and subjected to values that surpass its own nature: “When freedom ceases to be submission to the highest values of current times to become the right to express our insignificant individuality, the discipline of the socialist barracks is better” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005b, p. 119). Therefore, he believes that freedom should be guided and oriented, and even limited, when it goes against values that are hierarchically superior: “When it is necessary to limit freedom to save other values, one should not proceed hypocritically in the name of a ‘true freedom’. Illiberal measures can be taken with a clear conscience, since freedom is not the supreme value” (2005e, p. 59) Based on this, considering freedom as the ultimate goal is the first step towards absolute nihilism.

Clarifying this important and complex issue, Alvear-Téllez makes a distinction between freedom *of the* consciousness and freedom *of* consciousness, something that —without being so— could seem trivial, pointing out that while the former has the objective moral law inscribed in the human consciousness as its rule, the latter, on the other

hand, has its own subjective moral autonomy and would be a conquest of modernity, considering that this approach emancipates man from any authority superior to that of his own will.

In other words, modern freedom of conscience is, as SCIACCA notes, an *uncontrolled subjectivism*, a *faculty for license, for whim, for discretion*, because if there is neither truth nor objective moral law, there cannot be, strictly speaking, *the practical judgment* of moral consciousness. The (modern) moral conscience is, in reality, an expression of *the naturalism proper to the ideology of philosophical liberalism*, for which freedom of consciousness manifests the freedom of anti-Christian thought, conceived as the right to think what you want regardless of the truth, because the “truth” is made by man. (Alvear-Téllez, 2013, p. 31)

The Colombian thinker saw in this freedom without a final cause one of the characteristic features of secularized society, since the true autonomy of man lies in “depending only on the will of God” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005a, p. 58), while the modern autonomy ignores all ontological data prior to man. Paradoxically, as Plato taught in Republic, absolute freedom becomes a discourse by means of which, in a subtle way, man can be led to certain modes of conduct that favor the tyranny of the moment: “Freedom is the metal in which fetters are forged” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005d, p. 154).

If in the old regime people were forced through physical torture, modern democratic regimes manipulate men by making them believe they are free, thus leading humans, more effectively, through previously determined channels, manipulating their conscience, and intoxicating them with entertainment and pleasures that cloud their judgment. For this reason, for Gómez (2003):

The only effective tyranny is that exercised in the name of freedom. Without affirmation of destiny, that is, without religious theory of man, there is no way to explain the obvious errors, the harmful options, the situations that man clearly chooses and that clearly destroy him. (p. 453)

Progress as a scourge of God

It is known that one of the main flags of modernity is progress, to the point of becoming an entire ideology, according to which history always follows the course of the unlimited development of the human being, showing a rather optimistic face of humanity and of technical-scientific advances. However, Gómez always suspected about the faith

of men in themselves and in the configuration of a world according to their ambitions of dominance and control. For this reason, he did not hesitate to state that “progress is the scourge that God chose for us” (2005a, p. 171).

The absurd technification and bureaucratization of human life are very precise manifestations that the ideology of progress has contributed to a greater extent to the dehumanization and alienation of men, rather than to their authentic dignification:

Social conformism, ethics transformed into competition, the morbidity of progressive ideology, the triumph of technique, and the commodification of art, literature and ideas: almost nothing is saved, in the withering criticisms of Dávila towards the modern world, and reacting to such ignominy is not so much a matter of proposing a cold and critical analysis of what Heidegger called the *Ruinanz des Lebens*, but the only possible form of dignity. Through the cruel and corrosive images, Gómez Dávila leaves no room for any consoling perspective.¹⁶ (Lavina, 2012, p. 267)

The practical realization of autonomism proclaimed by the fundamental principle of modern democracy requires a frenzied use of technology and a relentless industrial exploitation of the planet. For this reason, for Gómez (2002), technique is also one of the tools used by democratic religion:

Technique is not a democratic product, but the cult of technique. The veneration of technique’s works, the faith in its eschatological triumph, are necessary consequences of democratic religion. Technique is the tool of man’s deep ambition, act of possession over the subject universe. (p. 73)

Thus, the harsh reactionary voice of Gómez denounced the messianic face of the ideology of progress, which seeks to redeem men from the mere efforts of their immanence, manifested, in a paradigmatic way, in technical-scientific advances. Hence, this author denounces, for example, that “the technique is the verb of the god man” (Gómez-Dávila, 2002, p. 73) and explains with theological depth and acute critical sense that “progress is the name of the process in which the savior-salvandus restores his fallen divinity” (2005c, p. 193).

The presumed death of God and the disappearance of the supernatural order cause that man puts all his hopes in immanence and in the transformation of the world guided by the technical advances that are rapidly happening. Gómez Dávila did not stop contemplating this new immanentist eschatology

with sardonic laughter: “If transcendence did not exist, the industrialization of the earth would be the laughable culmination of history” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005e, p. 29). In short, the ideology of progress appears in his work as one of the characteristic features of society that secularizes and denies its link with divinity, pretending to redeem itself through knowledge, whose achievements are expressed in a paradigmatic way in science and technology.

A humanism without God

In secularized society, the cult of the transcendent God is replaced by a cult of humanity. “Every modern man is a candidate for the empty throne of divinity” (Gómez-Dávila, 2003, p. 450). Gómez always viewed modern philanthropic enthusiasm with suspicion, as it is sustained by an implicit denial of divinity and is often the path to barbarism and excess. Converted into a god, man knows no limits or accepts his fragile condition: “Humanizing humanity again will not be easy after this long drunkenness of divinity” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005d, p. 191).

It could be said that the theological-philosophical foundation of freedom of consciousness and religion in modernity is the mystification of man, that is, the human being pretends to be God through freedom, renouncing the ontological condition of his creature:

The perception that modern men want about themselves is that of an absolute being. Man represents himself detached from a previous order that he must respect and love, whether in the physical, moral or religious fields. He claims to be the owner of nature through science and technology; owner of society through a policy understood as *poiesis* and artifice; owner of himself through freedom of conscience as moral independence; owner of God’s way through religious freedom. His metaphysics is that of a creature that renounces living as such, that of a contingent being that is believed to be necessary with ontological necessity. (Alvear-Téllez, 2013, p. 180)

However, the absence of the transcendent foundation prevents a solid justification of the rights and dignity of man. Gómez Dávila recognized that only ontological transcendence can provide a firm explanation to the value of the human being. Without this foundation, man ends up reifying himself: “To placidly exploit man, it is first of all convenient to reduce him to sociological abstractions” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005a, p. 120).

The great paradox of atheistic humanism is that this notion ends up leading to disrespect for the human condition itself. Denying his nature and his metaphysical dependence, man ends up reducing himself to beasts: “In times when God dies, man is animalized” (Gómez-Dávila, 2003, p. 450). Gómez defined himself as a “Christian humanist” (2005b, p. 150), who contrasts his religious anthropology—in which the sense of ontological dependence is accentuated—with the immanence anthropology typical of modern secularization and grounded in a clearly established atheism, which, as Guarini (1997) stated, is very favorable to tyrannies and totalitarianisms of an intramundane base:

Note that every denial of freedom, every reduction of man to a mere factor, to a calculable magnitude, every form of enslavement of man must logically deny revelation. Every type of dictatorship deprives man of the relationship that sends him beyond the intramundane sphere and confines him to the world. Attention has been called—this has been done, for example, by Erik Peterson—to the fact that all political theory has its ultimate foundation in a theology, a decision about the relationship with God. The absolute State, which claims man entirely, reaffirms the closure of the world, and leads to an atheism full of strange myths. Hence the inexorable character of the atheistic thesis in all dictatorships. (p. 440)

Conclusions

In the understanding of democratic religion by Gómez Dávila, the study of Gnosticism is essentially characterized by an overvaluation of knowledge, which would acquire a redemptive meaning. Ancient gnosticism “atheizes” the world in the name of transcendence, building on a radical Neo-Platonist dualism, while modern gnosticism “atheizes” reality in the name of radical immanentism (Serrano, 2015). Finally, in both cases, the world would remain at the disposal of man and his knowledge, since God is either infinitely transcendent to him or simply does not exist.

Gnosis and Enlightenment share essential notes. Both give knowledge salvific character, divinize the human being, and sustain a matter-spirit dualism that, in the first case, has a Neo-Platonist and heretical matrix and, in the second, refers to the Cartesian denial of a *telos* in nature that implies understanding the matter as mere *res extensa*, lacking teleological orientation, with which the concept of natural law is rejected by denying its metaphysical foundations (MacIntyre, 2002; Spaemann, 2002, 2017). The end

of the teleological thought with which the modern era begins is indebted to gnostic theses that refer to dissident doctrines of the Christian faith, as early as the second century AD. Today, gnosticism manifests itself, above all, in what Voegelin has called “the new political religions”.

For Gómez, above all, democracy is a religion in which man is god, taking values, practices, rites and traditions from Christianity, which are secularized to grant them an atheistic and immanentist meaning. Only by analyzing a political phenomenon from religion can it be fully understood. This religious analysis, summoned by the Colombian author, allows us to discover that the secular State does not overcome religion, as it had promised, but is also based on an idea about God, whether atheist, agnostic, deist or pantheistic.

In secularized society freedom lacks meaning and purpose, since the natural moral law that previously limited freedom and teleologically guided this concept has disappeared. In modern democracy, freedom appears as the aim and goal of human existence, an idea that Gómez continually criticized, as he understood that it can only serve as a means to virtue and excellence. On the other hand, he lucidly perceived that, in the name of freedom, the cruelest tyrannies can be forged. “Freedom in the hands of the democrat is nothing more than a pick to break until the last lock” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005c, p. 183).

Technical-scientific progress is one of the tools used by democratic religion to impose the will of man on matter and nature. Gómez did not hesitate to affirm that “progress is the scourge that God chose for us” (Gómez-Dávila, 2005a, p. 171), as it leads to an alienation and dehumanization of man with the pretext of redemption and bringing him to achieve better conditions. In this way, the human being puts all his hopes in immanence, in what is within his reach, ignoring that through this same path he is heading, by leaps and bounds, to self-destruction.

The secularization process is only understandable as a religious phenomenon in which—although the sacred is immanentized and it is about erasing the horizon of the supernatural—the human is sacred, thus erecting man and his rationality as new divinities to be worshiped. Modern atheistic humanism is framed within what Gómez called a “gnostic atheism” (2005d, p. 182) that replaces the personal and transcendent God of monotheistic religions

and, in particular, of Christianity with a simple man, autonomous, sovereign and independent, who projects the properties previously attributed to the metaphysical absolute.

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Footnotes

- ¹ All the quotes by Serrano were translated into English by the author.
- ² All quotes by Gomez were translated into English by the author of the article.
- ³ Author's translation.
- ⁴ Author's translation.
- ⁵ *Idem*.
- ⁶ *Idem*.
- ⁷ *Idem*.
- ⁸ *Idem*.
- ⁹ *Idem*.
- ¹⁰ *Idem*.
- ¹¹ All quotes by Alvear were translated into English by the author.
- ¹² Author's translation.
- ¹³ *Idem*.
- ¹⁴ *Idem*.
- ¹⁵ *Idem*.
- ¹⁶ *Idem*.