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From "Political Theology" to "Political Religion": Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt[1]

Thierry Gontier

In his work *Politics as Religion*, Emilio Gentile credits Eric Voegelin with having invented, if not the expression itself, then at least the concept of "political religion" which the latter would use consistently throughout the 1960s to describe totalitarian regimes.[2] In his *Autobiographical Reflections*, drawn from an interview recorded in 1973, Voegelin revisits the use of this expression[3] and gives an indication of the sources that inspired him to adopt it:

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[1]All references to the works of Voegelin are taken from the *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Paul Caringella, Jürgen Gebhardt, Thomas A. Hollweck, and Ellis Sandoz, 34 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press and Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990–2009) (henceforward CW).

[2]On the use of the term "political religion" before Voegelin, see Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. G. Staunton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 2, which cites Condorcet, Abraham Lincoln, Luigi Settembrini, Karl Polanyi, and Reinhold Niebuhr. In fact, Voegelin rarely uses this term (only twice, excluding the title, in the 1938 work), and it barely makes an appearance after 1938.

[3]On the causes of Voegelin's abandonment of the term (although not necessarily the idea), see Thierry Gontier, "Totalitarisme, religions politiques et modernité chez Eric Voegelin," in *Naissances du totalitarisme*, ed. Philippe de Lara (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 157–81. In summary, we can say that the reasons for this abandonment are twofold. (1) Totalitarianisms are false religions, since religion implies a relationship with a pole

> When I spoke of the *politischen Religionen*, I conformed to the usage of a literature that interpreted ideological movements as a variety of religions. Representative of this literature was Louis Rougier's successful volume on *Les Mystiques politiques*.[4]

Besides the work by Louis Rougier, it is highly likely that Voegelin is thinking of the French Catholic "personalist" philosophers, such as Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac, and Joseph Vialatoux,[5] who also interpreted the emerging totalitarian movements less in terms of social and political phenomena than as a profound spiritual disorder. These readings are also enriched by Bergson's work (which proved decisive for Voegelin) *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. It may appear surprising that Voegelin does not refer to the emblematic work by Carl Schmitt, the *Political Theology* of 1922. Schmitt had also invented, if not a term, then at least a concept destined for a productive career.[6] Moreover, *Political Theology* and Voegelin's *Political Religions* (1938) have similar objectives, namely, to show that all political doctrines involve a relationship between mankind and the sacred in one form or another—even (and perhaps especially) those that claim to have eliminated the religious element entirely.

How do we explain this omission, when Voegelin even cites Schmitt several times in his earlier works? The first answer that comes to mind is that in 1938

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of transcendence, which is immanentized in totalitarian regimes. (2) The term "religion" is ambiguous, in that it designates both a fundamental experience of human existence and an institution based on a body of doctrine ("I would no longer use the term *religions* because it is too vague and already deforms the real problem of experiences by mixing them with the further problem of dogma or doctrine" [*Autobiographical Reflexions*, in CW, 34:78]). However, the main issue within this subject is religious experience (regardless of whether it is corrupt or not). It would therefore be better to speak of religiosity or spiritual experience than of religion. Even though the terms might change, Voegelin's fundamental idea (that all politics involve a relationship with the sacred, and that the forms of totalitarianism themselves involve a spiritual act) thus remains unchanged after the 1930s.

[4]CW, 34:78.

[5]Although it is highly improbable that Voegelin might somehow have known of the work of Simone Weil, the affinities between the two authors are striking, as Sylvie Courtine-Denamy shows in her recent monograph *Simone Weil: La quête des racines célestes* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), as well as in her two articles "La chasse aux démons: Eric Voegelin et Simone Weil; points communs et divergences," in *Politique, religion et histoire chez Eric Voegelin*, ed. Thierry Gontier (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 67–87, and "The Revival of Religion: A Device against Totalitarianism? A Philosophical Debate between Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt," *Voegeliniana: Occasional Papers*, no. 88 (2011): 7–29.

[6]The expression "political theology" was already being used by Varro (see Augustine, *The City of God* VI.5), who had himself retrieved it from the Stoic tradition. It is still in use in a pamphlet by Bakunin against Mazzini (*The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International*) of 1871, which is probably Schmitt's immediate source.

Carl Schmitt was considered one of the major figures of Nazism. Strangely, when he published his work *The Authoritarian State* in 1936 (when Schmitt was at the very height of his career within the institutions of the Third Reich), Voegelin appeared to be unaware of this development, or else failed to take it into consideration,[7] by referring only to those works by Schmitt that date from the early 1930s. While the authoritarian solutions advocated by Schmitt at that time against the suicidal legalism of parliamentary democracy and the takeover of politics by radical parties were irrelevant in Germany after 1933, they were still significant in the Austria of 1936. We can assume that in 1938 Voegelin was more keenly aware of Schmitt's intellectual project, which is undoubtedly one of the main reasons why Voegelin cites him so rarely in his later works.[8]

Moreover, even if Voegelin frequently compares his thought to that of Carl Schmitt in the years 1930–1936, it is significant that he undertook no such comparison in relation to the religious question. The texts by Schmitt to which he refers belong to the period 1928–1932. *Constitutional Theory* (1928) forms the subject of a long review published in 1931.[9] And in the first chapter of his 1936 work *The Authoritarian State,* [10] Voegelin summarizes—in order to then critique for its incompleteness—the genealogy of the total state, laid bare by Schmitt in *The Guardian of the Constitution* (1931). In *The Authoritarian State,* [11] Voegelin also summarizes the analysis of the development of parliamentary democracy that Schmitt gives in *Legality and*

[7]A simple footnote in the first chapter refers—without comment—to "new categories" in Schmitt's thought (*Authoritarian State,* in CW, 4:62n).

[8]We will not dwell here on the personal relations between the two thinkers. Judging from the letter written by Voegelin to Schmitt in 1955 (CW, 30:249–50), those relations appear more courteous than truly warm. In the two volumes of the *Collected Works* devoted to a selection of Voegelin's correspondence (CW, vols. 29–30), we find only two letters addressed to Carl Schmitt; but the four letters by Schmitt located in the archives of the Hoover Institute (file 33-5) indicate clearly that there were more (although I have been unable to find the name of Schmitt in the various lists of the addressees to whom Voegelin sent his books and articles). A letter by Schmitt dated 1931, relating to the review made by Voegelin of *Constitutional Theory,* shows that the two authors knew each other before the Nazi period (see also CW, 30:249–50). This file also contains a typed manuscript of *Ex captivitate salus* sent by Carl Schmitt, although it appears that Voegelin failed to respond to this communication (see Voegelin's letter to Carl Schmitt of May 1951, in CW, 30:90n1). This correspondence between Schmitt and Voegelin is not mentioned in Claus Heimes, *Politik und Transzendenz: Ordnungsdenken bei Carl Schmitt und Eric Voegelin* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009).

[9]CW, 13:42–66. The same work is discussed at the lectures held in Geneva at the beginning of the 1930s, recorded in the *Collected Works* under the title "National types of mind" (CW, 32:470–71).

[10]CW, 4:58–63.

[11]CW, 4:218–21.

Legitimacy (1932) in order to draw comparisons with those of Max Weber and Maurice Hauriou. Finally, in various texts and lectures from the early 1930s, Voegelin discusses a number of the fundamental ideas of *The Concept of the Political* (1932), in particular the theory of hostility.[12] In these texts, which constitute the core of the corpus devoted to Carl Schmitt (and which, it should be noted, all date from before 1935—after which Voegelin no longer shows any direct interest in Schmitt's thought), Voegelin is focused almost entirely upon politico-legal questions, especially those dealing with constitutional law—not on theological questions. As far as can be ascertained, Voegelin never cites the emblematic *Political Theology* of 1922 in his works. He rarely uses the phrase reinvented by Schmitt,[13] and if he occasionally uses expressions such as "civil theology" (*theologia civilis*) or "state theology," this is less in order to describe a structural and symbolic relationship between two fields in which normative rationality is confronted with its limits, than a direct, institutionalized means of instrumentalizing theological discourse through the political.[14]

Thus, in relation to this question, we are led to construct for ourselves a dialogue that never directly (or only infrequently) took place,[15] but that emerges

[12]See especially the unfinished work of 1930–1932, the *Theory of Governance* (CW, 32:360–66). In 1937, Voegelin also wrote a brief critical review of a text by Hans Krupa on the political theory of Schmitt (CW, 13:109).

[13]One of the rare instances of this is to be found in *New Science of Politics*, chap. 3, §8 (CW, 4:170–74), where Voegelin summarizes the thesis developed in the 1935 work by Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem: Ein Betrag zur Geschichte der politischen Theologie in Imperium Romanum*, on the impossibility of a Christian political theology. Admittedly, the work does not question the general premise that it might be possible to model political power in theological terms (for example, in Jewish or Roman Pagan theology), but only the legitimacy of drawing such parallels in relation to Christian theology. Following Peterson, Voegelin speaks of the "end of political theology in orthodox Christianity" (174). This reference by Voegelin to Peterson is interesting insofar as the latter, in a scholarly study of the various theologies of the earliest centuries of the Roman Empire, and in particular Eusebius of Caesarea and Augustine, openly contests the notion of "political theology" developed by Carl Schmitt—even if, for other reasons which will become clearer in the remainder of this study, the general concept of an "apolitical" Christianity appears inadequate to both Voegelin and Schmitt.

[14]In addition to the *Political Religions* of 1938, see especially the letter to John Hallowell of 28 January 1953, in CW, 30:140.

[15]The rare references Carl Schmitt makes to the works of Voegelin are also quite superficial. The few that I have found relate to (1) analysis of the historical context of normativism in Austria, especially during the interwar period, in *The Authoritarian State*. (See Carl Schmitt, *Die Wendung zum diskrimierenden Kriegsbegriff* [Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003], 6n8. The same work is cited in passing in a letter by Schmitt to Sander in 1975, in Carl Schmitt and Hans-Dietrich Sander, *Werkstatt-Discorsi: Briefwechsel 1967 bis 1981*, ed. Erik Lehnert and Günter Maschke [Schnellroda: Antaios, 2008], 363.) (2) Analysis of Goethe's worship of the force of

clearly from the opposing views of the respective authors. Our objective here is, as it were, to demonstrate the existence of an implicit dialogue between them, a dialogue that should help to clarify the terms of a fundamentally different way of understanding the question of how the political relates to the religious in our secular age. I will first consider the relationship between the two thinkers during the 1930s, in relation to what in my opinion constitutes a false proximity, namely, their common desire to move beyond the reduction of politics to a rationalistic and normative legal theory. I will then undertake a theoretical investigation of the more fundamental differences, although they may not have led directly to confrontation, within the framework of the doctrinal and anthropological issues raised by the relationship between the theological and the political as conceived by the two authors.

Beyond Normativism

Let us return to the Voegelinian writings of the 1930s, in which the author refers to slightly earlier texts by Carl Schmitt. We may appreciate the points of congruity between the two authors, particularly their common criticism of the vulnerability of parliamentary democracy when confronted with the rise of antidemocratic parties, whether Nazi or Communist. The political differences would become clearer in subsequent years, not only in the opposing attitudes of the two thinkers in the face of Nazism, but also after the war; for example, in the adherence of Voegelin to the American democratic model, which according to Schmitt had always opposed his conception of the political. They would also emerge at the theological level, in the sympathy displayed consistently by Voegelin for the intellectual movement initiated by Vatican II, to which Schmitt, for his part, was fundamentally hostile. In fact, however, even during the 1930s, the similarities between the two authors remain highly superficial since even then they disagreed profoundly over metaphysical and theological questions. Even support for authoritarian politics (from Brüning, von Papen, and von Schleicher in Germany, and from Dollfuss and his successors in Austria) does not hold the same meaning for the two authors; for Carl Schmitt, it rests upon an ethic of authority and obedience, which finds its extension at the metaphysical and theological level. This kind of metaphysics is entirely absent in Voegelin, for whom the question

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the soul in German Romantic thought, which is found in *The History of the Race Idea: From Ray to Carus* (Schmitt, in common with Voegelin, sees in the Goethean concept of the demonic the intellectual origin of the modern political idea of race), a result perhaps of a reading made in the 1930s, to which two passing references are made in the *Glossarium*. See Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947–1951*, ed. Eberhard Freiherr von Medem (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 65, 240.

of authoritarianism is not of the very essence of politics, but falls more pragmatically within the scope of techniques of governance subordinated to political ends, which vary according to the particular circumstances (social, economic, cultural, and so on). Or, to put it another way, Voegelin considers dictatorship to be an extralegal means to which recourse must be had in exceptional circumstances for the safety of the state; it does not in the least represent the underlying structure of the "normal" political order.[16]

Another point of consensus, which is in our view misleading, may be found in both authors' opposition to the theory of legal norms of Hans Kelsen. From his earliest writings onward, Voegelin critiques the Kelsenian reduction of political science to legal science.[17] He considered himself to belong to a school of thought that attempted to overcome the separation of sociology and law by reviving classical political science—a school of thought to which Carl Schmitt also belongs (as well as others such as Max Weber, Rudolf Smend, and Fritz Sander, to name a few).[18] This superficial agreement nevertheless masks highly significant differences regarding the general orientation of the political thought of the two thinkers.[19]

The problem as stated by Schmitt is that of the actual effectiveness of legal norms. Owing to its purely ideal and formal character, Kelsen's system may be reduced to a tautology, which Schmitt, in his *Constitutional Theory* of 1928, summarizes in this way: "something is valid when it is valid and because it is valid."[20] However, what Schmitt critiques is not strictly speaking the positivism of Kelsen, the fact that a thing is only valid if it is, in the last resort, *presented* as being valid—a formulation in which we might be tempted to see a form of tautology. It is not this tautology that Schmitt attacks. Rather, what Schmitt means is that for Kelsen, a norm is valid only insofar as it is founded upon another valid norm, and so on down to the fundamental norm (*Grundnorm*). We thus find ourselves enclosed within the realm of a purely ideal legal rationality, and consequently incapable of confronting actual political reality. The logic of norms, whatever its degree of technorational perfection, cannot resolve the problem of the state, which is

[16]On the authoritarianism found in both authors, see also Heimes, *Politik und Transcendenz*, 40.

[17]See my article "Le 'fétichisme de la norme': Voegelin critique de Kelsen," *Dissensus*, no. 1 (December 2008): 125–47, http://popups.ulg.ac.be/dissensus/document.php?id=368.

[18]See especially Voegelin's review of *Die Moderne Nation*, by Heinz O. Ziegler (1932), in CW, 13:68, as well as his review of *Politische und soziologische Staatlehre*, by Max Rumpf (1934), in CW, 13:84.

[19]Heimes, *Politik und Transcendenz*, chap. 2 is about this same topic, although viewed from a different perspective (which, in my opinion, has a tendency to interpret Voegelin using Schmittian categories).

[20]Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, ed. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 64.

that of actual authority. For Schmitt it is really a question of defining the conditions under which the legal norm is valid; not, however, like Kelsen, from the purely formal perspective of normative ideality (as simple "should be"), but from the perspective of political effectiveness—whence the reply by Schmitt: "The fact is a constitution is valid because it derives from a constitution-making capacity (power or authority) and is established by the will of this constitution-making power."[21] The issue here is not one of knowing how a constituting power is legitimized, but indeed of knowing by which act a legal norm may be brought into existence; existence in this case refers to visibility within the social sphere, as opposed to the pure ideality of the Kelsenian norm. The condition of its existence is that the norm must be based upon a prescriptive act that itself exists, namely, the will of one or several actual persons: "In contrast to mere norms, the word 'will' denotes an actually existing power as the origin of a command. The will is existentially present." The legal norm, continues Schmitt, possesses value not because it is "correct," but only "because it is positively established, in other words, by virtue of an existing *will*."[22]

For Voegelin, it is not the ideal character of the Kelsenian norm and its deficiency in terms of positive existence that constitutes a problem. From this point of view, Schmitt still remains a prisoner of the Kelsenian (and also, more generally, neo-Kantian) opposition between natural reality and normative ideality—of the *Sein* and the *Sollen*[23]—which he succeeds in overcoming only by referring to the quasi-miraculous nature of the decision. Voegelin has, for his part, succeeded in extricating himself from this realist schema under the combined influence of Husserlian phenomenology and American pragmatism. Let us cite an extract from his review of the work by Hans Krupa dedicated to Schmitt's political theory: "The theory of the decision is incapable of overcoming the aporia of pure normativism. ... An authentic 'dialectic' and 'synthetic' theory should surmount the 'separative' thought of Schmitt and recognize that norms are components of reality in the same way as decisions."[24] If "norms are components of reality in the same way as decisions," the opposition between nonreal idealities, on the one hand, and "natural" realities, on the other, appears illusory. Ideas are never pure abstract beings: they are the object of real experience and are, as such, realities. The term "reality" (as also "existence") does not, in Voegelin, refer back to reality as understood by a positivist empiricist (a

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid. Thus, for example, "The Weimar Constitution is valid because the German people 'gave itself this constitution'" (ibid., 65).

[23]Thus, in the *Constitutional Theory*, we read that "the concept of legal order contains two entirely different elements: the normative element of justice and the actually existing element of concrete order" (ibid., 65).

[24]Voegelin, review of *Carl Schmitts Theorie des "Politischen,"* by Hans Krupa (1937), in CW, 13:109–10. Unless otherwise stated, translations of Voegelin are my own.

visible reality—and we know how often this question of visibility recurs in Schmitt), but to the "actual experience" of the human mind. When referring to this experience, it becomes impossible, if only for purely methodological reasons, to dissociate the norm in its pure normative ideality from its representation within the human mind, by which we recognize it as a motive for action, or a "value" in the Weberian sense of the term.

Voegelin's principal criticism of Kelsen thus belongs to a very different register from that of Schmitt. Voegelin lays stress on the fact that legal science is not an autonomous science but a subordinate science, dependent upon an architectonic science of the significance-contents of legal norms and the contexts of their elaboration. This criticism is to be found in the critical survey of the *Constitutional Theory*:

> The application of the principle of methodological purity to the sphere of a human science [*Geisteswissenschaft*] such as political theory is in my opinion not feasible, because the field that ought to serve as the subject matter of scientific research constitutes itself outside the context established by the science. Thus the scientific account of the subject matter cannot be executed independently and solely according to its own principles, but rather has to follow the contours of source material.[25]

Pure legal science must therefore be supplemented by a hermeneutic of the significance-contents, which lies not within the positive law itself, but within the domain of existential anthropology—and it is that which forms the purpose of political science. The critique made by Voegelin therefore concerns not the inability of the norm to make itself politically effective, but rather the inability of the positive law to pose the question of the norms, as understood in their very normative ideality. Pure legal theory does not embody a deficit of reality (in the realist sense of the term), but a deficit of meaning. What Voegelin disputes in Kelsen is therefore not normativism, but positivism. Political science analyses *that from which* the (positive) legal norm is assumed, that is to say, its horizon of ethical meaning: "In my opinion, neither a theory of the state nor a more narrow theory of constitutional law may neglect the normative element of the law, if only because moral convictions are indispensable as principles of interpretation of norms (including constitutional norms)."[26]

These remarks would be summarized by Voegelin in the introduction to *Race and State* in 1933:

> An essential problem, as yet posed only inadequately in *Staatslehre*, is the justification of the phenomenon of law [*Rechtserscheinung*]. The phenomenon of law is to be traced to its origins, one of which is to be found in the moral experience of the individual, while the other resides in the experience of the community. From the moral experience of the individual

[25]Voegelin, review of *Die Verfassungslehre*, by Carl Schmitt (1931), in CW, 13:44.
[26]Ibid., 49.

> future real states of affairs (actions and their consequences in the environment) receive the index of "what should be done," from communal experience, it seems to me, emerges that universality of the norm that renders it obligatory for a majority of persons. Individual and community are the fundamental human experiences from which the "norm" in the sense of an anticipatory design for the future actions of people as members of a community arises.[27]

In this text we may note: (1) that normative ideality is the subject of actual experience—it is therefore in that sense (and most certainly not in the realist positivist sense) an existential "reality"; (2) that the phenomenon of law does not require realization at the actual/positive level, but must be "justified" by returning "to the origins of the phenomenon of law," that is to say, in the fundamental experience of the human community within which normative ideality is formed.

The Kelsenian system of norms thus exhibits a lack of positivity when viewed from a Schmittian perspective, the reference to the *Grundnorm* being insufficient to confer upon it a visible existence in the public sphere, while in Voegelin it is seen as demonstrating a lack of normativity. For Schmitt, the resolution of this problem involves reference to a positive prenormative foundation, whereas for Voegelin it entails reference to a prepositive horizon of normativity.

Decision and Belief

This shifting of the problem, from the condition of the positive existence of the legal norms to their normative condition, assists greatly in explaining the critiques Voegelin levels at the decisionism of Schmitt. Voegelin is aware that Schmitt's doctrine is not restricted to decisionism.[28] He nevertheless tends to view that decisionism not merely as a specific moment in Schmitt's doctrinal evolution, but as a permanent structure of Schmittian thought, which translates into the absence of a spiritual foundation and explains his political reversals of opinion—particularly his adherence to Nazism. In short, even though he had not always defended decisionism as a doctrine, Schmitt remains a decisionist for Voegelin in the sense of being "an agnostic and an unprincipled existentialist like Sartre," in other words, essentially a sort of nihilist.[29] The critique of decisionism is thus subsumed within the more

[27]CW, 2:2–3.

[28]The "Catholic" moment in Schmitt's thought is mentioned in the letter to Theo Morse of 18 November 1953 (CW, 30:184). The "institutionalist" phase is vaguely alluded to in *The Authoritarian State* (CW, 4:53) and in more precise fashion in the review of Krupa's *Theorie des "Politischen"* (CW, 13:109).

[29]Voegelin, letter to Theo Morse, 18 November 1953, in CW, 30:184.

general critique of a form of pneumopathology implying a corrupted relationship with the theological—to which we will return later.

One of the most explicit texts by Voegelin on Schmittian decisionism is to be found in a series of lectures given at Geneva at the beginning of the 1930s:

> [Carl Schmitt] conceives the problem [of the existence of the state] in terms of his theory of decision; he does not go into the matter of beliefs because he himself lives so perfectly and unreflected in his own type of belief that he does not see it at all. The state for him is given by its decision on its own existence. ... I cannot accept Schmitt's decision. For who decides? Schmitt does not tell us; he says the state bears the decision within itself, thus avoiding naming the subject. ... The essence of the nation-state, as of any part of political existence, is belief, not ... decision.[30]

"Who decides?"—the question appears to evoke that of Hobbes, *Quis judicavit? Quis interpretabitur?* The question also recurs in Carl Schmitt: Who decides, that is to say, who is the actual authorized person who embodies the legal norm, which is itself abstract, in order to ensure its visibility in the public sphere? The legal norm is incapable of being established by anything other than a simultaneously prescriptive and creative act, existing antecedently to the norms: "From a normative perspective, the decision, contained in the law, is born out of nothingness [*aus einem Nichts geboren*]. Out of conceptual necessity, it is 'dictated' [*diktiert*]."[31] The question has an entirely different meaning for Voegelin. The issue is not one of knowing *who* embodies authority and gives him "visibility" within the public sphere. The question enunciated is rather that of the *nature of the will* that takes decisions. For the decision is not an irrational act, bringing political order to existence out of the normative *nihil;* it is the act of a rational will, animated by a representation of the good. As the medieval Aristotelians put it, *quidquid appetitur, appetitur sub ratione boni*—we only desire something insofar as we are able to conceive it as participating in the good. We must therefore proceed from the will to the representation that governs it. Whence the conclusion drawn by Voegelin: "the essence of the nation-state is belief, not ... decision." No decision can be made without the representation of a motive for action, understood in its relation to the good. Any decision therefore presupposes a normative objective and a prior orientation of the will toward the good. This openness of the human mind toward the good is, for Voegelin, simultaneously the fundamental experience that man makes for himself out of his existence and the substantial center of political order.[32]

[30]Voegelin, "National Types of Mind and the Limits to Interstate Relations," in CW, 32:477–78.

[31]Carl Schmitt, *Die Diktatur: Von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf,* 4th ed. (Berlin: Duncker & Homblot, 1978), 23.

[32]A similar criticism of Schmitt's occasionalism, although from another point of view, can be found in Karl Löwith (who is close on this point to German jurists

Thus, for both authors, political order revolves around a pole of transcendence. However, transcendence does not carry the same meaning for Schmitt and for Voegelin. For the former, it means essentially the radical heteronomy of a decision with regard to any form of legal rationality. For Voegelin, it refers back to the subsuming of the legal order to a higher ethical and metaphysical order in which its original meaning is to be found. The two political models are dependent upon radically different theological models. The decisionist political model of Schmitt analogically corresponds to the theology of the *potentia absoluta Dei,* the model for which may be found in late medieval Scotist and Occamist theologies. Voegelin, for his part, refers to a theology of Platonic inspiration in which the divine is understood not as radical otherness but as the transcendent good to which the human soul remains naturally open.

These opposing theological models are both extended into the political sphere. For Schmitt, the sovereign decision creates political order only because it prescribes the simple (and unconditional) obedience of the subject; that obedience does not exist by virtue of the correctness of the norm but arises solely from the recognition of the competence of the sovereign that decreed it—political analogue of an unquestioned and unquestionable faith.[33] We know that Voegelin would always refuse, and especially in his dialogue with Leo Strauss (who on this issue positions himself as the heir of Carl Schmitt), to interpret religious faith as a blind adhesion to irrational

such as Hermann Heller and Erich Kaufmann). See his article "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," first published, in German, in 1935: "Hence it will remain to be asked: by faith in what is Schmitt's 'demanding moral decision' sustained, if he clearly has faith in neither the theology of the sixteenth century nor the metaphysics of the seventeenth century and least of all in the humanitarian morality of the eighteenth century, but instead has faith only in the power of decision?" (Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism,* ed. R. Wolin, trans. Gary Steiner [New York: Columbia University Press, 1995], 140). Löwith underlines the fact that, paradoxically, Schmitt's hostility toward romantic occasionalism (i.e., a way of seing the whole world as an occasion for spiritual expression) turns into a new type of occasionalism (everything being an occasion for the *diktat* of decision). Heimes tends to miss this point, by defending Schmitt (and, he thinks, also Voegelin) for using "ideas of order" (*Ordnungsideen*) from a strictly normative perspective, and independently of any actual content (*Politik und Transzendenz,* 52). On this point, see also Hans-Jörg Sidgwart, *Das Politische und die Wissenschaft: Intellektuell-biographische Studien zum Frühwerk Eric Voegelins* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 161–76: Sidgwart speaks of an "existential formalism" (162) in Schmitt, who, according to Voegelin, fails to rise above an immanentist position about the law, and so to reach a position of transcendence (within a theory of the individual and his motives).

[33]On this point, see Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy,* trans. Marcus Brainard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 10–25.

dogma;[34] faith, understood in the same sense as the Greek *pistis*, denotes the erotic and continually questioning dynamic of the foundation. This theology is also extended into the political domain. Voegelin cannot express himself sufficiently harshly, particularly in his course *Hitler and the Germans*, against the irresponsible obedience of the state functionaries,[35] one of the causes of which is to be found in legal positivism—a positivism that Schmitt's decisionism only serves to intensify in reality. Voegelin's defense of the American model of a plurality of institutional sources of legality in the recognition of a transcendent ethical horizon of legitimacy is for him transformed into a defense of the responsibilization of subjects. The norm cannot be represented, except through mental abstraction, outside of its ethical context: public-spiritedness does not consist of unconditional obedience to positive laws, but of openness to the universal good, via communal symbols.

Anthropological Continuations

The radicalization of the transcendent character of political power in Schmitt and its interpretation within a fundamentally irrationalist schema leads paradoxically to an absolutization of the political as intramundane realization of the divine, in other words, to the formation of precisely that which Voegelin in 1938 calls a "political religion." This shifting of the radical theologies of the *potentia absoluta Dei* to a position of self-affirmation of mankind has been studied thoroughly, in a different context (the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance), by Hans Blumenberg, for whom "the provocation of the *transcendent* absolute passes over at the point of its most extreme radicalization into the uncovering of the immanent absolute."[36] The radicalization of transcendence by Schmitt is overturned in the same way, thus moving into a position of absolute immanence, which leaves man without *eros* in either an otherworldly existence or political society.

It is clear that Schmitt is severely critical of the Promethean thoughts of the *autopoiesis* of mankind and of their political equivalent in the spontaneous constitution of the state by civil society. Against this liberal optimism, he offers the Christian theology of original sin. The problem arises in the meaning that he gives to that notion of original sin. Let us mention the fourth chapter of the *Political Theology* of 1922: "Every political idea in one way or another takes a position on the 'nature' of man and presupposes

[34]See Thierry Gontier, *Voegelin: Symboles du politique* (Paris: Michalon, 2008), 71–82.

[35]CW, 31:219–21. See also the humorous barbs directed against the "functionaries of mankind" in Voegelin's letter to Alfred Schütz concerning Edmund Husserl, 17 September 1943, in CW, 6:49 and CW, 29:367.

[36]Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. R. W. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 178.

that he is either 'by nature good' or 'by nature evil.'"[37] Against the "atheist anarchists," who believe that "man is manifestly good," Schmitt sets Joseph de Maistre, Louis de Bonald, and Donoso Cortès, all three of whom are proponents of the "natural wickedness of mankind." This radicalism, Schmitt explains, is opposed to Tridentine dogma, which "asserts no absolute worthlessness, but only distortion, opacity, or injury, and leaves open the possibility of the natural good."[38] In addition to the opposition between natural goodness and original sin, another—also fundamental—exists between an original sin that does not suppress the desire for good and an original sin that does suppress it. What is the position adopted by Schmitt himself? By placing the provocative portrait of Donoso Cortès at the end of the *Political Theology,* has he not given the latter conclusive value? In the *Concept of the Political,* Schmitt speaks on his own behalf: "One could test all the theories of state and political ideas according to their anthropology and thereby classify these as to whether they consciously or unconsciously presuppose man to be by nature evil or by nature good. ... All genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil, i.e. by no means an unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being."[39] Among these "authentic" political theories (which exclude liberal political theories as being "false" political theories), Schmitt cites—in addition to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bossuet, Fichte, Taine, and Hegel—the names of Joseph de Maistre and Donoso Cortès. Schmitt's political anthropology draws here upon the radical and heterodox version of original sin, which suppresses even the desire for God in mankind.

What does this mean for Voegelin? The negation of the dogma of original sin for him constitutes a specific feature of the secularization process. Let us refer to the article of 1940 in which Voegelin synthesizes his 1933 works on race: "In the Christian anthropology man is an essentially imperfect being, burdened with original sin, and leading his life under the categories of grace and repentance, damnation and salvation. Such evil as there is in the world is intimately connected with the status of man in general, and every single human being in particular. Nobody can escape his personal share of responsibility for the sinfulness of mankind and the resulting imperfection of society."[40] The modern phenomenon of secularization indeed succeeds in turning the internal structural problem of mankind into an external problem to which a "technical" response may be applied. Voegelin does not offer a consistent interpretation from the systematic perspective of the "dogma" of original sin. He discusses it in a quite general manner, in order to denote the finite condition of mankind. This condition may hold

[37]Schmitt, *Political Theology I,* 65.

[38]Ibid., 57.

[39]Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political,* ed. G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 58, 61.

[40]Voegelin, "The Growth of the Race Idea" (1940), in CW, 10:50.

two quite different meanings, referring sometimes to the inherent inability of human nature to reach the transcendent good by itself (although not to strive toward it), and sometimes to the permanent possibility he possesses of deviating from the quest for this essentially inaccessible good in favor of another object which he believes himself capable of possessing—something akin to the *allotriosis* of the Stoics. Borrowing from Augustinian vocabulary, Voegelin frequently calls the cause of this apostasy *superbia, amor sui,* or *libido dominandi.* The decisive factor remains the fact that this apostasy is not the inevitable destiny of mankind and always remains in its power. In short, for Voegelin, man never ceases to strive toward the transcendent good; even though the latter can never possibly be appropriated in this world, it is no less significant in structuring the totality of human, speculative, moral and political actions.

Nothing is more revealing than Schmitt's indulgence toward this postlapsarian state.[41] Indeed, the paradox is that however great the fault may have been, it nonetheless remains fortunate for mankind. *Felix culpa,* it might be said, since with it hostility is preserved as the foundation of political identity, an identity founded not only upon a community of economic or cultural interests, but, to return to the formula of Leo Strauss in his highly lucid survey of *The Concept of the Political,* upon the "seriousness of human life."[42] Supposing we were to abolish sin, and with it hostility: we would have, as Strauss indicates, what amounts to an economic and cultural society, a society of entertainment, but without the possibility of sacrifice and therefore devoid of an ethical dimension. Schmitt, also according to Strauss, is not content with saying that this pacified world—terrestrial substitute for the kingdom of God—is unachievable in this world (a statement with which Voegelin would concur); he expresses his profound disgust for this depoliticized world devoid of any ethical dimension, and condemns in advance any project that might seek to establish it, if only as the outcome of an underlying tendency. Thus, hostility is less the punishing of a fault than grace given by God to mankind to save it from the inauguration of the chaos represented by the kind of world in which political institutions were no longer necessary. This apparently "dark" vision of original sin[43] therefore has the paradoxical

[41]This remark can also be found in the analysis of Schmitt's political theory by Löwith in 1935: "So little does Schmitt return to 'unscathed, uncorrupted nature' that on the contrary he leaves human affairs in their corrupt condition" ("The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," 144).

[42]See Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue,* trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 112.

[43]However, is it really as "dark" as all that? Although it is true that we find highly "pessimistic" formulations of hostility ("The sufferings inflicted by men upon each other are terrible [*furchtbar*]," *Ex captivitate salus: Erfahrungen der Zeit 1945–1947,* 2nd ed. [Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002], 60), we nevertheless find others which are undeniably "optimistic." Thus, in the same work, while continuing to refer to

effect of opening up a world of immanence—closed to transcendence—for mankind.

Hostility does not in the least constitute the substance of the political for Voegelin. In his abortive writing project of the early 1930s *Theory of Governance*, he accuses Schmitt of having confused the essence of the political with what is only in fact a peripheral phenomenon.[44] If it is true that the unity of men ready to sacrifice their lives in combat demonstrates the consciousness of a political community, the *agon* is however of itself not in the least constitutive of that identity. It is, rather, composed of the community of beliefs and symbolic representations, themselves based on the openness of the members to "the same transcendent content, each according to his capacity to receive the objective spirit."[45] However diverse these beliefs and representations may be, they refer back to the same ineffable human experience derived from participation in transcendent reality. A consequence of this is that the fundamental political framework is not for Voegelin limited to the nation-state. The latter is merely a stopgap solution, as are interstate alliances (for example, leagues and military agreements) which Schmitt defends against universalist and pacifist ideologies. Hostility is an identity category used by a closed society, in the Bergsonian sense; in other words, of a society which is not only closed in on itself, but closed to experiencing the opening of the soul to the transcendent good. Voegelin, for his part, always presents himself as the defender of the open society in a twofold, mystical and cosmopolitan, sense. The figure of the ruler of the *Imperium sacrum* is the ecumenical equivalent of the Platonic *archon*; in some sense, he constitutes a Voegelinian foil to the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoyevsky who so fascinated Schmitt, and who condemns Christ to death for the sake of protecting an earthly theologico-political order.[46] In this cosmopolitico-ecumenical context, the

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Hegel, Schmitt also adopts a Rosenzweigian, pre-Levinasian tone: "Who should I, in fact, recognize as my enemy? Quite obviously, only that person who calls me into question. By recognizing him as an enemy, I recognize that he is able to call me into question. Who then is truly able to call me into question? Myself alone. Or, indeed, my brother. There it is: the other person is my brother. ... Remember the great words of the philosopher: the relation to the other in oneself, that is the truly infinite" (ibid., 168). Schmitt also cites a verse by Theodor Däubler: "The enemy is our own question as figure" (*Der Feind ist unsere eigene Frage als Gestalt*). If hostility, as a pure form of otherness, constitutes the "truly infinite," is not the world of the political, however stained it may be by the abjection of sin, more than sufficient for the desire of the human soul?

[44]Voegelin, *Theory of Governance*, in CW, 32:364.

[45]Ibid., 367.

[46]On the Schmittian figure of the Grand Inquisitor, see Théodore Paléologue, *Sous l'œil du Grand Inquisiteur: Carl Schmitt et l'héritage de la théologie politique* (Paris: Cerf, 2004). On this figure in Voegelin, see *Theory of Governance*, in CW, 32:326–32, and

friend-enemy relation is constitutive not of an authentic political identity, but of a pathological identity.[47]

In depriving mankind of its dynamic toward the divine, the Schmittian conception corresponds, at least functionally, to that of secularized liberalism in its most extreme form—to that of the atheist anarchism of Bakunin.[48] Voegelin analyzes this phenomenon on several occasions in his studies on Hobbes—and in particular in the development in *Political Religions* of 1938 of his thought on the *Leviathan*. In thus severing *homo politicus* from his spiritual life and his striving toward a sovereign good (substituted by fear of the supreme evil which is a physical evil), Hobbes had created a substitute for a politics based upon desire for the good—foundation of the *philia politike* of the ancients—in the form of an ethics and a politics built solely upon the mechanical interaction of the passions, whose most incisive expression is to be

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also Hans-Jörg Sigwart, "Modes of Experience—On Eric Voegelin's *Theory of Governance*," *Review of Politics* 68, no. 2 (2006): 259–86. For a more general approach, see Ellis Sandoz, *Political Apocalypse: A Study of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor*, 2nd ed. (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2000).

[47]The analysis carried out by Voegelin on the political concept of race in the 1930s may help to clarify this point. The self-representation of society as a racial community is only meaningful for Voegelin when correlated with the representation of a "counter-race." In this sense, race has no political reality of itself; it is only, as it were, "counter counter-race." The idea of race understood in this way is a product of the phenomenon of secularization, of which one of the fundamental properties is what Voegelin calls the "exteriorization of evil," namely, the projection of an inherent evil in man onto a demonized enemy (the Jew being the image of Nazi totalitarianism) that must be eliminated. In his 1933 works, Voegelin does not cite Schmitt, who would only begin to publish openly anti-Semitic texts after his acceptance of Nazism. That anti-Semitism would nevertheless become the target of indirect critiques by Voegelin—see, for example, the remarks made by Voegelin concerning the Jewishness of Bodin in his letter to Carl Schmitt of May 1951 (CW, 30:89). In his *Autobiographical Reflections*, Voegelin confronts Schmitt ironically with the Semitic roots of the Arab thinkers to whom certain Nazi authors elected to refer (CW, 34:80, 85–86).

[48]Moreover, on occasion, does Schmitt himself not reveal a secret fascination with these Promethean thoughts? See, for instance, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*, ed. M. Hoelz and G. Ward (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 128–30, where Schmitt pushes the Blumenbergian idea of modernity as epoch of the self-affirmation of mankind to its logical conclusion. Jan-Werner Müller views this text merely as a satire and caricature of Blumenbergian thought (Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* [New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2003], 162). In common with Donoso Cortès, who spoke of his "contempt for liberals and his respect for his mortal enemy, anarchistic and atheistic socialism, to which he imparted a diabolic dimension" (*Political Theology I*, 71), Carl Schmitt never hides his admiration for the courage of the great radical nihilists, such as Bakunin or Lenin, nor his disdain for the compromises of bourgeois liberal thought.

found in the metaphor of life as a race.[49] The distortion of the meaning of transcendence into a radical heteronomy, and its corollary which is the eradication of the human desire for God, serves in the same way to transform the worldly political institution into an absolute immanence.

Conclusion: The Finiteness of the Political

Carl Schmitt and Eric Voegelin therefore represent two rival figures in the contemporary (post-Hegelian) theologico-political order, which has abandoned the notion of the state as a historical and worldly incarnation of the eternal kingdom. This scission of the eschatological and historical occurs in both Schmitt and Voegelin. However, it leads to divergent ethical conceptions. For Schmitt, the fundamental political virtue is the virtue of patience; against the figure of the Antichrist, who in Schmitt represents the impatience of the liberal to establish the hereafter on earth, there stands that of the *katechon*, keeping political society at a distance from the eschatological which will always remain unattainable for mankind. In short, the bliss of the elect is not the concern of politics—which must be refocused on the reality of mankind in this world. At this point, the profession of Christian faith works in tandem with the defense of *Realpolitik*.[50] For Voegelin, on the other hand, the virtue of man (and of the citizen) remains structured by the *eros* for the principle. It is certain that this *eros* cannot be achieved on the earth; the principle is experienced as existing beyond the world and history, while remaining the ultimate objective of all human will. The antagonist of this ethic is also a form of impatience. During the 1950s, Voegelin (preceded in this respect by Karl Löwith and Jacob Taubes) would typify this impatience using the figure

[49]See Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. F. Tönnies, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1969), 47–48. This idea, which is found in substantial form in chapter 1 of *De cive* (Hobbes, *De Cive*, ed. H. Warrender [Oxford: Clarendon, 1983], 41–46, 89–95), is however substantially modified in chapter 11 of the *Leviathan* (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. E. Curley [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994], esp. 58). On this point, see F. S. McNeilly, *The Anatomy of Leviathan* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 144–55, and Luc Foisneau, "Que reste-t-il de l'état de nature de Hobbes derrière le voile d'ignorance de Rawls?," in "Hobbes et les néocontractualismes contemporain," special issue, *Études philosophiques*, no. 4 (2006): 439–60.

[50]It is important not to confuse this "Realpolitik" with the political pragmatism that Voegelin adopts, and for which political authority must maintain an awareness of socio-historical circumstances. As I have written above, Voegelin does not possess a *doctrine* of authoritarianism, rooted in a theological concept of authority: the former remains a last resort, reprehensible in itself, although sometimes necessary in order to escape even greater disorder—as was the case, for example, in the Germany or Austria of the 1930s. The model adopted by Voegelin is not, as for Schmitt, the Roman dictator, but rather the Platonic *archon* who maintains order in society using the means of persuasion at his disposal.

of the Gnostic, who, incapable of bearing the extreme tension of existence, immanentizes the *eschaton*, thereby reducing it to the outcome of human activity in history.[51] The Gnostic identifies the meaning of history within history itself. Although Voegelin and Schmitt might still appear to be somewhat in agreement at this point (in viewing modern politics as the immanentization of a promise for the next life), it nevertheless remains the case that this superficial agreement hides a deeper disagreement, and that Schmitt's political theology leads, by an undoubtedly paradoxical route (that of a simple and lucid disenchantment with the means and ends of politics), to the same result as the liberal politics that it claims to critique.

This is where the meaning of the condemnation issued by Voegelin is to be found. In a letter to Alfred Schütz of 1950, Voegelin interprets Schmitt's adherence to Nazism not as the consequence of deep conviction, but as a decision motivated principally by opportunism. Moreover, Voegelin questions the notion "that we might resolve the problems raised by Carl Schmitt simply by calling him a Nazi." This opportunism is itself nevertheless revealing of the conception Schmitt has constructed of human life deprived of its dynamic of conversion toward the good: "I now firmly believe that his [sc. Heidegger's] N. S. [National Socialism] has similar reasons as that of Carl Schmitt, or like Laski's racism: an intellectual anticipating of the political at the level of the innerworldly-historical—more intelligent than the 'decency' of many others whose stubbornness keeps them safe from dangerous adventures—but [of] insufficient spiritual stature to be able to escape the mischief of the world-immanent seduction—it is never enough for the 'periagoge' in the Platonic sense."[52] In common with Heidegger, Schmitt has undermined the meaning of transcendence that Plato understood to be the purpose of the *periagoge*. In both writers, the position of radical transcendence (radical to the extent of no longer providing a horizon of meaning for mankind) is reversed, thereby becoming the affirmation of an absolute immanence. As Voegelin writes in *Political Religions*, "When God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods."[53] When viewed from this perspective, Schmitt's apparently opportunistic participation in Nazism from 1933 does not, intellectually speaking, stand in contradiction to the positions he adopted in 1920–1932 (even despite the fact that Schmitt is undoubtedly, insofar as this distinction makes sense, more a thinker of authoritarianism than of totalitarianism, of the separation of civil society and state than of their convergence).

[51]Although Voegelin abandoned the symbolization of the immanentization of eschatology, via the figure of the Gnostic, after the 1950s, the actual concept of a disorder of the soul and society that takes hold owing to an impatience when confronted with existential questions that are insoluble in this world, remains a constant feature of his work.

[52]Voegelin, letter to Alfred Schütz, 20 May 1950, in CW, 30:56.

[53]CW, 5:60.

By destroying order in the soul, Schmitt has also destroyed that of the city, which is man writ large. It is impossible, in reality, to speak of a "political theology" in Voegelin in the sense that Schmitt uses this term, namely, in the sense of a structural analogy between two rationalities confronted with their limits, but both remaining autonomous within their respective orders. Such autonomy does not exist for Voegelin. The question of the relations between theology and politics is never for him stated in terms of a structural analogy between two types of mutually independent rationality; it is always posed in terms of a direct relation—whether that relation be authentic or corrupt. The civic man is the same individual who aspires after a transcendent end.[54] Moreover, the state cannot of itself be accorded the status of an authentic *societas perfecta*. The "religious politics," if we may use that phrase, of Voegelin possesses a different meaning. It designates a type of attraction of the political to a pole of transcendence, structured by the experience of transcendence present at the heart of the rational activity of mankind, and in particular of its communal activity. This experience preserves the finiteness of the political, preempts its self-constitution as a mundane theology (irrespective, moreover, of the precise institutional form), while conserving the fundamental restlessness of mankind and its openness to the question of foundational transcendence. For Voegelin, the religious thus functions primarily as a radical critical authority and guarantor of a zetetic of the political.

[54]One of the consequences of this is that the churches cannot withdraw from the life of the city for the sake of an "apolitical" ideal—this is a major point that Voegelin emphasizes in his lectures on Hitler and the Germans. "If we speak in clichés of church and state, it then looks as if two different societies are opposed to one another here, and we forget that the personnel of these societies is indeed identical, that they are thus the same societies, only with different representations, temporal and spiritual. ... That is not a situation where first there are churches and second a political people: rather, the people are the same in both cases" (*Hitler and the Germans*, in CW, 31:156, 175).