

[This is a critical referee's report on this earlier version of my paper on Voegelin's development: https://eckhartarnold.de/papers/2011_political_theology/Voegelins_Authoritarian_Political_Theology_V2011.pdf (There are no substantial differences to the version from 2012 that I linked from my website.). Eckhart Arnold, December 2017.]

An appraisal of: **"The Smooth Transition from Authoritarianism to Political Theology: The Case of Eric Voegelin"** for the journal *The History of Political Thought*.

1. **Concerning the presentation:** I do not know exactly what falls within the scope of HPT, though I presume that a well structured argument and a good writing style do at all times. With that in mind, I unfortunately have to say, first, the paper lacks an introductory statement in which the author situates his or her research in relation to other studies in the field, which in this case would be studies that relate to **Eric Voegelin, political theology and the National Socialist era**;¹ second, there is no strong direction to the unfolding of the argument made in the body of the paper in the sense that the thesis tends to wander about aimlessly contributing a bit here and a bit there, but also conveying the impression that the author is not certain about where this is leading and is maybe not focussing on the essentials, which may in part be owing to the fact that the author does not have a very powerful case; and, third, the quality of the written English is poor. Many of the sentences would need to be amended or reconstructed, and in a number of cases the wrong English word is chosen to communicate a point. Hence, the overall impression that is conveyed—whether that be true or false makes no difference—is that English is not the native language of the author, or, alternatively, the author spent little time editing the paper. So, on these counts alone, I would recommend against publishing this paper, for the paper is not at present in a publishable state.

2. **Concerning substantial matters:** i.e., the expressions **"civil theology," "political religion," "immanent religion," "immanent theology," versus "transcendent theology"**: The first four expressions are used in an almost interchangeable manner by contemporary scholars who are interested in exploring the phenomenon that is an entirely immanently oriented and ordered progressive society, although it is true that there was a time in the past when one or other of these expression seemed to be dominant.² On the other hand a transcendent theology is something that is completely different, and it is not to be confused with any of the first four expressions. So what is it that distinguishes the first four expressions from the fifth? What it is is this. A civil theology is an immanently focussed belief system that is fostered by a community or state with the aim of achieving political and social solidarity in order to realize an ultimate dénouement either in the proximate or long-term future of that society, and this dénouement is usually understood to have either a declared or tacit utopian character, i.e., a "heaven on earth" quality which will end the need for change, i.e., history itself will come to an end. In fact, it is this "heaven on earth" quality that justified one in characterising this belief system as a civil theology or political religion, etc. For instances, this means that communism (of the primitive sort or of the Marxist sort, it makes little difference), democratic socialism, liberalism, conservatism, fascism, Nazism, some forms of anarchism, etc., are civil theologies inasmuch as their advocates pursue explicitly or tacitly an immanent final goal in history and disseminate a set of moral precepts that serve to bring about the realisation of that goal. In connection with the latter point, think of why certain actions in our liberal democracies are defined as progressive, and, hence, worthy of emulation and other actions are seen as reactionary, and, hence,

condemnable, and note that it depends upon whether they serve or fail to serve the realisation of liberal democracy's final goal, as ill-defined as that goal may be. This applies *mutatis mutandis* to Marxism, Nazism, etc., although the moral precepts of Marxism, etc., undergo a change for the worse when compared to liberalism moral precepts, thought it has to be said that there was a time when liberalism's moral precepts were hardly worthy of praise. Christianity, on the other hand, is a "transcendent theology" because it contends that there is no final goal or utopian order, either in the proximate or distant worldly future of mankind. And so, human actions in this world are neither progressive nor reactionary. Rather they are moral or immoral by transcendent standards, and they most assuredly lead to no earthly redemption, i.e., redemption in the future of the here and now, i.e., in the future of this world. Rather, they lead to a modicum of peace and harmony for a brief or not so brief period of time, at which point confusion, criminality and disorder set in, and warfare and disharmony take over for a spell. And so, history is nothing more than an unending succession of provisional ups and downs, having no particular pattern or discernible meaning, culminating in an end that is totally meaningless *from a strictly human and immanentist point of view*. In other words, history has no meaning as far as man is concerned and only faith is capable of lending it some sort of significance.

I could go on here, but I have said enough to enable me to make the point that I want to make. The author of the paper that I am assessing does not appear to understand the meaning of the expressions "civil theology" or "political theology" in the history of ideas. The author writes: "The idea of political theology, i.e. the interpretation, both descriptive and normative, of politics in theological terms, has always been regarded with suspicion by liberal democrats."³ I would have thought that exactly the opposite is the case. Liberal democrats are most definitely not opposed to political theology. In fact, if anyone is opposed to political theology, it is Voegelin. Voegelin objects most strenuously to political theology because he sees it as capable of being thoroughly destructive of human peace and civility. And, as regards liberal democrats viewing civil theologies with suspicion, the argument has been made repeatedly by numerous scholars that this is simply not so.⁴ In fact, it is quite the contrary. While liberalism does not pursue a highly explicit utopian goal—although there was a time when it did—the fact of the matter is that it certainly does pursue a tacit one, otherwise the whole idea of progress means absolutely nothing for the liberal. But I've yet to hear of a liberal denying or questioning the merits of the idea of progress.⁵ So the question is: progress towards what? Many would suggest that it is progress towards some currently ill-defined utopian order, i.e., "heaven on earth," in the immanent future of mankind. It may not be for tomorrow, but "heaven on earth" will come, according to the liberal thinker.

Now, what this means is that the author of this paper a) needs to rethink his or her understand of what a political theology is, and, b) in the process, discover that political theology is not "regarded with suspicion by liberal democrats," but very much is regarded with deep suspicion by Voegelin. As for defining "political theology" as having something to do with "interpreting . . . politics in theological terms," "yes" if he or she means what I mean by the expression "political theology," and "no" if he or she does not mean what I mean.

3. Concerning other substantial matters: It seems to me that one cannot speak or write intelligently about a person and a period in history unless one has a deep understanding of the era and the problems faced by people living during that era. Now, unfortunately, it is

my understanding that the author of this piece is not as familiar with the reality of the German-speaking European world in the early part of the 20th Century as he or she ought to be in order to write knowingly about what it was that Germans and others confronted during these trying times.⁶ The best evidence in support of this claim is the accusation that the author makes to the effect that Voegelin overlooked liberal thinking as a possible direction in which to move in order to advance the case in support of liberal democracy in Germany in the 1930s. In fact, we are told that Voegelin overlooked liberal thinking because he favoured authoritarian and possible National Socialist or fascist-style solutions to the problems confronting greater Germany. It is sad to say, but this makes no sense whatsoever. It makes no sense because it is a statement that is founded on the belief that while the German people were experiencing difficult times, *their recent history had not severed them from European and occidental culture, and, hence, they were still open to rational appeals and invitations to reform.* But that belief is certainly questionable. The fact is that Germany, and the German-speaking world of the 1930s, was rapidly abandoning its allegiances to its past—indeed, some would suggest that it began severing itself from its past in the 19th Century—and therefore would simply not have been receptive to any solution that characterised itself as liberal, even if one had been proposed. Furthermore, the author seems not to appreciate that German society, and to a lesser extent Austrian society, in the 1930s were not well-intentioned societies which were genuinely in quest of what we today might characterise as a reasonable solution to their problems. They were countries that were in various stages of moral and psychic decomposition and both were heading for disaster. It is naïve to think otherwise. There was no desire on the part of anyone to explore the benefits of a liberal approach to the resolution of their problems, and if there had been a minority that demonstrated such a desire it would have been completely ignored, and, as time passed, likely liquidated. On the other hand, there were pathological criminals in abundance on the scene on both sides of the ideological divide, and the very great majority of the population sided with these thugs because it did not know in which direction the right way resided, or, if, in fact, there were anything like a “right way” to go. The population was totally lost, and was maintained in that state by raving madmen. The point here is that Greater Germany of the 1930s was not a place in which one might speak of experimenting with liberal solutions to the problems at hand, and Voegelin knew and understood this very well. In addition, Voegelin also understood that the time to support constitutionalism had long since passed. Constitutionalism was dead and common sense had totally abandoned the scene. It was in this context that Voegelin grudgingly speculated that a well-intentioned strong leader might succeed in re-establishing sanity by ridding Germany of the madman who was at the helm after January 30th, 1933. By the way, he was not the only one who thought like this, and one did not have to be an authoritarian fascist to come to this conclusion. Descent and outstanding citizens of both Germany and Austria felt the same way. (Hermann Rauschning, a one-time supporter of the National Socialist Party, in the mid 1930s, wrote to the former chancellor Franz von Papen and suggested that if it was within von Papen’s power, he should see to it that Hitler be retired from the scene, and not necessarily by constitutional means.) But all of them understood that they were not supported by the community, and so, they did nothing to stave off the worst. So, yes, maybe Voegelin would have tolerated an authoritarian regime of some sort for a brief period of time, following the removal of the National Socialists from power. But this does not make Voegelin a National Socialist or a fascist, or even an anti-democratic person, as the author would have us believe. It makes him out to be someone who was opposed to the terrible threat posed by extremism of the sort that was present on the continent at the time. It makes him out to be a person who would have endured things that he would not

normally have recommended that anyone endured in normal times. But these were not normal times. These were times when madness was taking over the continental European world. My contention here is that it is imperative that one understand the unique character of the times, and that rather than criticise Voegelin, Voegelin should be commended for his insight into the limits of liberal democratic politics, for what he teaches those amongst us who are capable of understanding him is a lesson that gets taught only on very rare occasions and under very unusual circumstances.⁷

As for Voegelin having National Socialist or broadly fascist sympathies, I have to say that I do not believe this for a second, and I think that the evidence against making this argument is overwhelming. This sort of charge stems from a complete de-contextualised reading of what was and what was not possible during the period in question. Let me pose the question very starkly: What does one do when one's homeland is falling victim to lunatics and pathological criminals? Does one attempt to discuss the merits of a more sane approach to government and politics with these people? Does one try to convince them of the desirability of being rational? I suspect that such an approach would quickly result in disaster, and the instigator of this monologue on rationality would not need to ponder his future interminably. He simply would not have one.

My point here is that it is crucial that things be placed in context, if one means to understand Voegelin's views. If contemporary liberals are going to charge Voegelin with being a National Socialist sympathiser on account of his not advocating a liberal solution to the problems of the 1930s in Germany, then it behoves the one making the charges to demonstrate that he or she sees a way in which liberal ideas, had they been advanced under the conditions at hand, could have had a very different fate from the fate they actually had.⁸ Sadly, I see no evidence that the author of this paper has taken up this challenge, or that he or she understands its pertinence. In short, Voegelin knew that there are times when drastic action is called for, and this he argued was one of those times. I think that history has proven him to be right. When dealing with Voegelin, we are dealing with one of the very few major non-Jewish German-speaking intellectuals of the 20th Century who never succumbed to the appeal of fascism and National Socialism. We are also dealing with a person who was on the Nazi hit-list of people that the Gestapo was to "pick-up" on entering Austria, and one did not make that list for being a National Socialist party supporter. In fact, Voegelin escaped capture by the Gestapo by the proverbial "skin-of-teeth." And so, if the charge that Voegelin was a National Socialist sympathiser is going to be made, it had better be based on more than impressions and speculations. See the author's account that Voegelin was supposed to have made a statement to the effect that he was "of Aryan origin." This was said, apparently, while Voegelin was seeking a job from a Nazi official in the 1930s. The author here is saying that Voegelin was trading on the quality of his genetics. The evidence for this, we are told, is found in a letter that Voegelin penned in 1933 and is currently located in the *Eric Voegelin Library*, Erlangen, Box 4.24. I do not know what to make of this, and I have never read or heard this stated prior to reading it in the paper I have been asked to assess. However, I do think that the very least that the author of the paper should have done here was translate in English the entire passage, and preferably the entire letter, in which he found this statement so that we too might see the context in which this statement was made. I have to say that knowing what I know of Voegelin's attitude towards Nazism—not to mention the fact that Voegelin severed all connections with his parents for the remainder of his life (and this included his sister who sought to smooth out

his relations with their parents) on account of his father's National Socialist sympathies during the war—I am very suspicious of the author's interpretation of this statement.

There are many other things that could be said here but I believe that I have said enough to point the writer in what is generally the proper direction, or in a direction that will allow him or her to elaborate a counter-argument.

In summation, this is a grammatically, structurally and ideationally very weak paper. I cannot recommend the publication of this paper *as is*.

¹ See Michael Henry, "Civil Theology in the Gnostic Age: Progress and Regress," *Modern Age*, no. Winter (2005): 37-47. This work can be obtained at the ISI site on the Internet.

² See John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2007), and Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: Harper/Collins Publishers, 2005), and by the same author *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: Harper/Collins Publishers, 2007).

³ "The Smooth Transition from Authoritarianism to Political Theology: The Case of Eric Voegelin," Abstract, p. 1.

⁴ See the recent two volume study by the historian Michael Burleigh on the subject referenced above.

In this instance, as a quick read, I would recommend that the author review J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Growth and Origin* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1932). There are other more recent works on this topic as well, but all of them refer back to Bury's work. See also Henry, "Civil Theology in the Gnostic Age: Progress and Regress." cited above.

⁶ I hasten to add here that the dominant approach to the way politics is studied today does not aid in one's acquiring the sort of understanding and insight that I see as essential.

⁷ Apart from the excellent contemporary works on the National Socialist era, I would suggest that in order to get a sense of the spirit of the times in Germany in the 1930s the author read two works. The first work is Konrad Heiden, *Der Fuehrer: Hitler's Rise to Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1944). Unfortunately, it only covers the period up to 1938, but it does an excellent job of conveying how some Germans were reading the times. The second work is Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West* (New York: Alliance Book Corporation, Longman, Green and Co., 1939). Rauschning himself has been criticised for one of his other works, but I think that this piece is fairly reliable because it deals with ideas and trends more than with factual information, and this allows the reader to begin to experience the sorts of changes that were taking place in Germany in the 1930s.

⁸ It is true that at no point in later life did Voegelin show compassion for lunatics and pathological criminals, or even for weak thinkers who were inclined to coddle those with whom they disagreed. The National Socialist years in Germany had made it indisputably clear, as far as he was concerned, that coddling such people was stupidity of the most dangerous sort. But, again, that does not make him a tyrant of some kind or even an authoritarian person. It shows only that he had good judgement and common sense (*phronesis*). It is also true that Voegelin knew what he thought, and was formidable in defending his views, particularly when he was dealing with people who were careless or sloppy in their assessments of ideas and plans of action. Again, that does not make him a fascist or a Nazi, though it may not make him a "nice" person from the perspective of some people. However, in the competition between truth and niceness, I do not think that Voegelin cared very much about being "nice."