

[Someone kindly sent me some critical comments on my paper. Unfortunately, the comments only reached me after the deadline, so I was unable to incorporate them. While the majority of the comments are more related to a fundamentally different assessment of Voegelin, there are also points that I myself find worthy of consideration. I have therefore uploaded them now (December 2017) after they fell into my hands again while going through my Voegelin texts. If I find the email again, I'll also be happy to add the name the full name of my friendly critic. Until then, I would simply like to thank "Manu" once again for his or her careful reading and detailed review. Eckhart Arnold, Munich 2017]

This is an automated translation of the German paper made with deepl.com that I have proofread and revised by hand in 2024.

The German original of this paper (without Manu's comments) has been published in: Clemens Jabloner and Thomas Olechowski and Klaus Zeleny (Hrsg.): *Secular Religion. Rezeption und Kritik von Hans Kelsens Auseinandersetzung mit Religion und Wissenschaft*, Manzsche Verlags- und Universitätsbuchhandlung Wien 2013, 19-42

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Does the political order need a spiritual foundation?

Kelsen's criticism of Voegelin's authoritarian political theology

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1. Introduction

It is not a very common occurrence for an author to withdraw a book on which he has spent several years of intensive work immediately before publication, as Hans Kelsen did in 1962 with his work "Secular Religion". Even more unusual, however, is the explanation given by one of the authors criticized in the work, the political scientist and philosopher Eric Voegelin. Voegelin suspects that Kelsen refrained from publishing the work because he, Voegelin, had let him know in a cautious form in a letter and, after that, more clearly through mutual friends that Kelsen's understanding of the historical and political problems in this context was inadequate and that he

It's only the subtitle. But I fear that this already points in a certain direction of interpretation, which I think is somewhat one-sided. Political theology does not have to be authoritarian per se. With Voegelin, I would rather criticize the ambivalence and openness of the form of rule. Voegelin defended both the authoritarian corporative state (for rather pragmatic reasons) and democracy. One can speak here of a change of heart (to which his emigration to the USA may have contributed), but the affirmation of two such opposing concepts of rule can most likely be traced back to the fact that Voegelin's political theory focuses on the distinction between the (worldly) sphere of rule and transcendent redemption - and with the interest in this boundary, the ability to distinguish between the different forms of rule may diminish as long as they remain related only to an otherworldly God.
Manu
20.01.2013 16:40

would damage his own prestige rather than Voegelin's by publishing it.¹ Even if this explanation, which is sometimes taken up uncritically in the secondary literature,² is certainly wrong,³ it nevertheless conveys an impression of the intransigence and sharpness with which the ideological debates that are the subject of Kelsen's "Secular Religion" were conducted in the middle of the 20th century. The debate with Voegelin is of particular importance, because the criticism of Voegelin's religiously tinged political philosophy provided an impetus for Kelsen's book. One of the most important preparatory works for the book was an approximately 120 typewritten pages long critique of Voegelin's "New Science of Politics",⁴ large passages of which can be found unchanged in the final work.

In order to be able to adequately appreciate the debate with Voegelin contained in Kelsen's "Secular Religion", we will first briefly discuss Voegelin's intellectual development and his relationship with Hans Kelsen. Kelsen's criticism of Voegelin will then be examined. The key question that divides the minds of Kelsen and Voegelin is whether politics requires a spiritual foundation.

2. Voegelin's intellectual development and his relationship with Hans Kelsen

Eric Voegelin was born in 1901 and was therefore a generation younger than Hans Kelsen. He studied political science in Vienna in the 1920s with Kelsen being one of his academic teachers. However, Voegelin's intellectual interests were very wide-ranging and included literature and philosophy as well as science. Voegelin benefited not only from his academic education, but also from the private scholarly circles that were characteristic of Vienna at the time.⁵

The subject didn't exist back then. It was probably constitutional law or public law. This may not be entirely irrelevant, because it was precisely on the basis of a more juridical education that he may have realized that the phenomenon of the state and, more generally, that of politics cannot be reduced to the legal dimension alone, nor can it be reduced to the setting of a valid basic norm. Voegelin therefore set out in search of something other than law and initially found it - reflecting the internal structure of Voegelin's initial theory of the state - in rule and in questions of political myth (the question of the pre-rational foundations of political cohesion). And it was only by examining various theories of rule from Weber to Wolters (a member of the George circle) that he also came across the relationship of the phenomenon of rule to what could be called "spirit" and, more specifically, "God".
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¹ Cf. Eric Voegelin: *Autobiographical Reflections*. Revised Edition. The collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 34, ed. Ellis Sandoz, Columbia and London 2006 (first 1973), hereafter cited as Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 81 - What the warning by mutual friends consisted of is not known. As far as the reference in the letter is concerned, Voegelin is presumably referring to the objections he raised in his letters against Kelsen's critique of the *New Science of Politics*. However, these objections hardly justify Voegelin's assertion that Kelsen's understanding of the historical and philosophical problems in this context was "inadequate" (*ibid.*). Voegelin's interpretation is implausible simply because Kelsen did not leave his critique completely unpublished, but rather incorporated his comments on Voegelin's theory of representation into his treatise "Foundations of Democracy", published in 1955. Cf. Hans Kelsen: *Foundations of Democracy*, hereafter cited as Kelsen, *Foundations of Democracy*, in: Hans Kelsen: *Verteidigung der Demokratie. Abhandlungen zur Demokratietheorie*, ed. Matthias Jestaedt and Oliver Lepsius, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2006, pp. 248-385 (pp. 258-268, in the first publication: pp. 6-15).

² For example, in Günter Winkler's foreword, in: Voegelin, Eric: *Der autoritäre Staat. Ein Versuch über das österreichische Staatsproblem*, ed. Günther Winkler, 2nd edition, Vienna / New York 1997 (first Vienna 1936), pp. V-XXXII (p. XXV).

³ According to the reasons given by Rudolf A. Métall, Kelsen had doubts that his criticism of the comparison of political and religious movements also applied to the secularist variants of this view, such as those of Bertrand Russell or Julien Huxely. This seems plausible because Kelsen's criticism of the interpretation of political ideologies as religious movements is actually unconvincing in the case of Russell, Huxely and also Raymond Aron. Cf. Rudolf Aladár Métall: *Hans Kelsen. Life and Work*, Vienna 1969, p. 91.

⁴ Hans Kelsen: *A New Science of Politics*. Hans Kelsen's Reply to Eric Voegelin's *New Science of Politics*. A Contribution to the Critique of Ideology (ed. Eckhart Arnold), ontos Verlag Heusenstamm 2004, hereafter cited as Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics*.

Not untypically for a young academic of his generation, Voegelin was drawn into the maelstrom of irrationalist world views and right-wing ideologies from the end of the 1920s. In Voegelin's case, this was possibly mediated by the George Circle, a kind of intellectual sect around the poet Stephan George, whose influence is clearly noticeable in Voegelin's books on race (1933) and in his speech on Max Weber (1930).⁶ Voegelin's two books on "Race and State" and "The History of Race Theory from Ray to Carus", both published in 1933, can be seen as Voegelin's attempt to position himself within the race discourse, which was becoming increasingly popular in academia at the time with the rise of National Socialism. These books are by no means to be understood⁷ as directed against Hitler or National Socialism, as it was later claimed.⁸ Rather, Voegelin takes the side of a more spiritually-based racism and merely takes a stand against a naturalistic-biological racism. There is no other way to understand the highly laudatory discussion of the racial theories of Kurt Hildebrand, Ferdinand Claus, Othmar Spann and Carl Gustav Carus and the repeated emphasis on the objective importance of both scientific racial theory and political racial ideas.⁹ At least, Voegelin criticizes anti-Semitism reasonably clearly in "Race and State".¹⁰

In the context of Voegelin's later developed political theology, it is interesting to note that in his book "Race and State", Voegelin interprets racial ideas as a modern manifestation of the idea of the body – underlying every state, according to Voegelin's conviction – which in this function replaces the previously dominant idea of the kingdom and body of Christ.¹¹ However, this appears in the race books as an expression of a natural, not to say overdue, process of development in the history of ideas and by no means - as in Voegelin's later writings - as an apostasy from the

A somewhat too sweeping formulation. What exactly does "irrationalist" mean here? I interpret Voegelin as being torn between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, personified by his doctoral supervisors, the neo-Kantian legal scholar Hans Kelsen and the neo-Platonist Othmar Spann himself. Voegelin himself is not someone who rages against reason as such, but against its Enlightenment conception. One indication of this is that Voegelin tries to save reason from its alleged modern hubris by tracing it back to a Platonic-Aristotelian and mystical 'origin'... But of course, Voegelin was anti-liberal and anti-Marxist at the time.
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I would see it differently. I would rather deny that a discussion is reprehensible per se.
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⁵ Cf. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, op. cit. p. 31ff. - Cf. Johannes Feichtinger: *Wissenschaft zwischen den Kulturen. Osterreichische Hochschullehrer in der Emigration 1933-1945*, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 35.

⁶ Cf. Eric Voegelin: *Die Größe Max Webers*, (ed. by Peter J. Opitz), Munich 1995, hereafter cited as Voegelin, *Die Größe Max Webers*; Eric Voegelin: *Rasse und Staat*, J.C.B. Mohr Verlag Tübingen, 1933; Eric Voegelin: *Die Geschichte der Rassenidee von Ray bis Carus*, Juncker und Dünhaupt Verlag, Berlin 1933. Cf. Wiliam Petropoulos: *Stefan George und Eric Voegelin*, Munich 2005.

⁷ For example by Ellis Sandoz in his introduction, in: Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 16.

⁸ Of over a dozen reviewers, only one found the work incompatible with National Socialism: N. Gürke, review of Eric Voegelin: *Rasse und Staat*, J.C.B. Mohr Tübingen 1993, in: *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, Heft 46, November 12, 1933, pp. 2197-2198 (p. 2198). - Voegelin only clearly distanced himself from racism in "The Growth of the Race-Idea", which he wrote in exile in 1940. Cf. Eric Voegelin: *The Growth of the Race-Idea*, in: *Review of Politics*, Vol. 2, No 3 (1940), pp. 283-317. Unfortunately, Voegelin research has so far hardly dealt satisfactorily with the delicate subject of Voegelin's race books. A laudable exception, however: Matthias Hütter: *Eric Voegelin's works 'Rasse und Staat' and 'Der autoritäre Staat' und deren Rezeption in den 1930er Jahren*, Vienna 2010, URL: othes.univie.ac.at/10648/ (as of January 6, 2012).

⁹ My earlier, more reserved interpretation of Voegelin's race books (see Eckhart Arnold: *Eric Voegelin (als Schüler Hans Kelsens)*, in: Robert Walter, Clemens Jabloner, Klaus Zeleny (eds.): *Der Kreis um Hans Kelsen. Die Anfangsjahre der Reinen Rechtslehre*, Manzsche Verlags- und Universitätsbuchhandlung Wien 2007, pp. 513-552, hereafter cited as Arnold, *Voegelin als Schüler Kelsens*, p. 515) no longer seems tenable to me in view of many quite clear text passages. I am very grateful to Matthias Hütter for valuable advice, criticism and source material. I would also like to thank Michael Weingarten for discussions on this topic.

¹⁰ Cf. Voegelin, *Rasse und Staat*, op. cit. p. 181ff.

¹¹ Voegelin assumes as a prerequisite "that the ideas of the body can in principle always contribute to the construction of the community and have in fact contributed in a significant way to the formation of our occidental communities". (Voegelin, *Race and State*, op. cit., p. 127.)

Christian religion and thus an expression of a spiritual-intellectual decline of Western civilization in general.

As Voegelin did not develop his own racial theory, it remains unclear whether and to what extent Voegelin adopted the racial theories of Hildebrand, Claus, Spann or Carus. In Voegelin's subsequent work, the racial theory project no longer has any significance.¹² Instead, Voegelin now swung towards the line of the Austrian corporative state. Previously, in 1933 and 1934, Voegelin had made efforts to establish professional contacts with Germany.¹³ The pinnacle of these efforts was a letter written in the style of an initiative application (as Sigwart interprets it¹⁴) to the nationalist pedagogue Ernst Krieck, in which Voegelin distanced himself from Hans Kelsen and emphasized his Aryan descent, albeit clearly out of purely opportunistic motives.¹⁵ Conversely, Kelsen also distanced himself from Voegelin from the end of the 1920s.¹⁶

Voegelin's authoritarian political viewpoint is expressed very clearly in his 1936 book on the "Authoritarian State". In this book Kelsen's *Reine Rechtslehre* is also sharply attacked for the first time, after Voegelin had already often discussed it critically but mostly favorably.¹⁷ The impression arises that Voegelin not only wanted to hit the positivist philosopher, but also the avowed democrat Kelsen.¹⁸ On the basis of the Pure Theory of Law, the interpretation of the Austrian coup d'état as a legal and legitimate constitutional transition, as Voegelin does, would hardly have been possible.¹⁹

Voegelin began to perceive National Socialism as an acute danger rather late, probably only shortly before the forced "Anschluss" of Austria to the German Reich. This was accompanied by a shift in Voegelin's political philosophy towards a political theology. The change first became apparent in Voegelin's 1938 essay "Political Religions". It suggests, albeit somewhat vaguely,²⁰ that totalitarian forms of rule are spiritually based on the "decapitation" of transcendence, i.e. the separation of the divine ground of order from human existence, as a result of which

¹² Voegelin did not take up the subject again until he emigrated. This time, Voegelin is clearly critical of any kind of racial idea and he also clearly addresses the exclusionary function of racial ideas, which is largely ignored in his books on race. Cf. Eric Voegelin, *The Growth of the Race Idea*, in: *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3, July 1940, pp. 283-317.

¹³ Cf. Wiliam Petropulos: Stefan George and Eric Voegelin, Munich 2005, p. 35.

¹⁴ Cf. Sigwart, Hans-Jörg: *Das Politische und die Wissenschaft. Intellektuell-biographische Studien zum Frühwerk Eric Voegelins*, Würzburg 2005, p. 227, footnote 162.

¹⁵ Cf. Eric Voegelin's letter to Ernst Krieck dated December 15, 1933 (Eric Voegelin Library Erlangen, Box 4.24).

¹⁶ Cf. Arnold, Voegelins als Schüler Kelsens, op. cit. pp. 542-544.

¹⁷ Cf. Arnold, Voegelin als Schüler Kelsens, pp. 526ff.

¹⁸ For example, when Voegelin accuses Kelsen of granting the state little more "dignity than a stamp-collecting club". Cf. Eric Voegelin, *Der Autoritäre Staat. Versuch über das österreichische Staatsproblem*, Vienna 1936, hereafter cited as: Voegelin, *Autoritärer Staat*, p. 127.

¹⁹ Cf. Arnold, Voegelin als Schüler Kelsens, op. cit. p. 537ff. - Cf. Voegelin, *Autoritärer Staat*, op. cit. p. 180.

²⁰ At least Thomas Mann, to whom Voegelin had sent his book, which owed much to Mann's Joseph novels in its interpretation of the figure of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, did not find the anti-national socialist message clear enough - much to Voegelin's annoyance. Even today's readers would probably feel the same way without Voegelin's clarification in the preface to the 2nd edition. Cf. Voegelin, *Eric: Die politischen Religionen*, Fink Verlag Munich 1993 (first published in 1938).

transcendence in the religious soul of the governed is replaced by a content that is immanent to the world, such as the ruler of a country.

If one characterizes the type of political philosophy that emerges in Voegelin's work, beginning with his writing on the "Political Religions", as a "political theology", then one must clarify in what sense this is to be understood. The term is ambiguous and is used in different contexts, each with a different meaning. In the context of the "theology of liberation", for example, it is simply understood as a politically committed theology. However, the term is most strongly connoted by Carl Schmitt, who understood it as the transfer of theological models to politics, whereby, as is well known, the sovereign as the supposedly unrestricted ruler is substituted in the political realm for God in the theological realm. This corresponds exactly to what Voegelin criticized as "political religion" in his 1938 essay.²¹ With Voegelin, however, one can speak of a "political theology" insofar as the political order must be anchored in the experience of transcendent being and thus theologially. Voegelin's ideas of political order after 1938 could also be broadly understood as theocratic. However, after the 1936 book on the authoritarian state Voegelin never again commented on concrete constitutional designs, and he does not necessarily envisage the rule of a priestly caste as long as the political leadership is sufficiently clearly animated by an undisguised experience of transcendent being.²² On the other hand, despite the difference just mentioned, Voegelin's thinking is in many respects intellectually related to that of Carl Schmitt (as well as that of Leo Strauss, who is also often mentioned in connection with the topic of political theology) so that the characterization of Voegelin's political thinking as a "political theology" does not appear misleading.

3. The bone of contention: Voegelin's "New Science of Politics"

If we have gotten to know Voegelin up to this point as an authoritarian political thinker, the question arises: What changes with the transition to a political theology that biographically goes hand in hand with the flight to the American exile? The answer is: almost nothing. This becomes clear when one considers the "New Science of Politics", written in 1952, against the background of Voegelin's political thinking in the 1930s. Virtually all of Voegelin's basic philosophical and political positions remain intact. These include: 1. A pronounced *elitism*: only a few people have the necessary mental and intellectual qualities for political leadership. The spiritual decline that Voegelin believes has taken place since the Middle Ages is also explained by the fact that too many "unbidden" people have come into contact with the full truth of Christianity. 2 Voegelin

As an external description, this is fine if the term is characterized a little more precisely. In his self-description, Voegelin emphasizes the distinction between political theology and civil theology! For Voegelin, political theology here means that political community and God coincide to a certain extent, either by the gods becoming political deities or by the divine being incorporated into the political formation almost without replacement. Voegelin's civil theology rather emphasizes the boundary that remains between God and concrete political community, indeed generally between the world as a 'temporal' and 'secular' sphere on the one hand and the divine-timeless-eternal sphere on the other. Voegelin's point, however, is that despite the preservation of this boundary, both spheres cannot completely close themselves off from each other, but remain necessarily related to each other - for example, through precisely such a civil theology, which emphasizes the independence of the temporal sphere of power ("the emperor's what is the emperor's"), but at the same time remains involved in a relationship of interaction with a transcendent power.

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²¹ To my knowledge, however, Voegelin never made any accusations against Carl Schmitt for this.

²² Exactly how Voegelin means this is a somewhat complicated story and probably cannot be clearly determined. Cf. Eckhart Arnold: Religious Consciousness and Political Order. Eine Kritik von Eric Voegelins Bewusstseinsphilosophie, Grin Verlag Norderstedt, 2007, hereafter cited as Arnold, Religiöses Bewusstsein und Politische Ordnung, op. cit. pp. 89-96 and pp. 127-133.

explains this with another popular ideology of the 1920s and 1930s, *panromanticism* with its rejection of the big city and big city life. For Voegelin, it was precisely urbanization and the accompanying expansion of education that led to the first-mentioned "problem". The topos of the daring life, which Voegelin presumably takes from the existential philosophy of his time,²³ and - not too logically²⁴ - transfers to Christianity, also plays a role here. For Voegelin, the essence of Christianity is that it imposes an existential uncertainty on people that only a few can bear unattenuated.²⁵

3. *Cultural and historical pessimism*, culminating in the idea that the present in particular is a time of decadence, is also a popular theme in the thinking of the 1920s and 1930s, which can already be found in the early Voegelin²⁶ and becomes almost notorious for the late Voegelin.²⁷

4 On a philosophical level, panromanticism is associated with a pronounced *anti-positivism*, which became even more pronounced after Voegelin went into exile.

5) It is almost self-evident that *anti-democratic resentments* continue to have an effect on Voegelin. Voegelin describes the democratic electoral process rather derisively; the principle of representative government is at most of subordinate importance to Voegelin. On the other hand, Voegelin was able to make friends with American democracy, albeit mainly because it was Christian in character for him and because Voegelin greatly appreciated the spiritual atmosphere of the McCarthy era.²⁸

6 Another striking trait is what Kelsen aptly describes as Voegelin's *militarism*.²⁹ For Voegelin, the breaking through of peoples to historical existence ("in form for action in history"³⁰) has primarily to do with power-political and not least military enforcement, which is much more decisive for Voegelin as an evaluation standard for the political order than, for example, the justice of the constitution or the freedom of its citizens.³¹ Voegelin was able to carry over his militarism seamlessly into the Cold War. For Voegelin, this aspect remains subordinate only to the level of spiritual consciousness of a political order.

7 Most important, however, is Voegelin's belief in the necessity of a *mythical basis for political order*. As late as 1943, Voegelin speaks of the will to order, "which can only be active where it has its meaning in the order of the community myth".³² This is also the (only) point at which a decisive shift occurs in Voegelin's

Correct, Voegelin is close to Romanticism, especially in the idea that the gateway to the universal can be found in the depths of the individual soul. Voegelin criticizes Romanticism, as it were, for its pantheism, which is displaced into nature and which does not recognize the unity of soul and universe.

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I don't know exactly what is being referred to here in Voegelin's writings. Voegelin was always a city dweller (Cologne, Vienna, Munich...) who, as far as I know, would never have idealized country life and ordinary people like Heidegger, for example. I rather doubt whether this is behind his sensitivity to the dangers that Christianity would pose. To name the danger precisely: Christianity imposes on people the realization that salvation is not to be found in the world, it induces a tension that only the weakest are able to endure. Those who are unable to bear this shift of salvation into transcendence would turn all the more excessively to the activist creation of an inner-worldly salvation...

So, I don't read any general criticism of modern urbanization (i.e. anonymity, loneliness, etc.) into this, but rather the problem of Christianity itself; the most that can be heard is a scepticism about the spiritual capacities of the masses.

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²³ However, Voegelin may also have taken it from Ernst Jünger's literature glorifying war.

²⁴ Cf. Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 87ff.

²⁵ "The more people are drawn or pressured into the Christian orbit, the greater will be the number among them who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity; ... it will be sufficient to refer summarily to the growing town societies with their intense spiritual culture as the primary centers from which the danger radiated into Western society at large." (Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit., p. 123.)

²⁶ Cf. the opening passages from Voegelin's Max Weber speech, Voegelin, *Die Größe Max Webers*, op. cit.

²⁷ Cf. Eric Voegelin: *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*, University of Chicago Press 1987 (first published in 1952), hereafter cited as Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 133ff.

²⁸ See Voegelin, Eric: *Die geistige und politische Zukunft der westlichen Welt*. (Edited by Peter J. Opitz and Dietmar Herz), Munich 1996, p. 33.

²⁹ Cf. Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics*, p. 64.

³⁰ Cf. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 36.

³¹ In this respect, it is not surprising that Voegelin naively draws on secondary literature such as Premerestein's account of the Roman principate (1937), which does not deny the (in)spirit of its time. Cf. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 92ff. Cf. Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 71f.

³² Eric Voegelin: *Anamnesis. On the Theory of History and Politics*, Munich 1966, p. 50.

philosophical and political thinking. Whereas Voegelin was previously convinced that the political order requires a mythical foundation in some form, it now becomes crucial for him that it is also the right mythical foundation, the "true story", as he calls it. Voegelin found this "true story" in the Christian religion and the ancient philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.

For Voegelin, the explanation for the political catastrophes of the 20th century lay in the decline of religious consciousness, and only through a return to religion or, to put it in more Voegelinian terms, to a clear awareness of our relationship to the transcendent ground of being, can a stable political order be established that is protected against these dangers. The concept of "political religions" is replaced by the concept of "Gnosticism". While it was still possible to assume with some certainty that the term "political religions" referred only and above all to totalitarian forms of rule, the term "Gnosticism" describes the character of an entire age and Voegelin includes not only communism and National Socialism, but also progressivism, liberalism, humanism and Marxism, among others.³³ And it is not only the representatives of totalitarian regimes, or at best their intellectual glorifiers in the West, whom Voegelin insults as "Gnostics", but also those liberal and democratic politicians who do not offer enough resistance to totalitarian regimes, such as Chamberlain to National Socialism,³⁴ or who Voegelin at least believes do not, such as the Roosevelt and Truman administrations in his opinion.³⁵ Not only can the (secular) religious character of the totalitarian regimes explain their acts of violence, to which the "political religions" had still limited themselves, but the gnostic character of the modern era can now explain the emergence of totalitarianism in general. With the transition to "Gnosticism" Voegelin's the concept of "political religions" thus changes from a political philosophy to a philosophy of history, with the result that Voegelin hopelessly overtaxes the explanatory power of his concept and it loses almost all credibility.

Voegelin's theory of Gnosticism in modern times is brought to a head once again in his Munich inaugural lecture "Science, Politics and Gnosticism",³⁶ which, alongside Voegelin's "New Science of Politics", is the second of Voegelin's writings to be criticized by Kelsen in "Secular Religion". In it, Voegelin interprets dissenting and especially atheistic convictions not as an expression of other, but perhaps also respectable ideological opinions, but as the result of foolish obduracy, which a person can only hold on to against his or her better judgment. If Voegelin had his way, such religiously obdurate people would not be allowed to take part in public political discourse under any circumstances.

A little too sweeping. Voegelin sees Christianity and Platonism as reflexive forms of criticism of myth, which at the same time absorb it into themselves - as something to be purified, but ultimately insurmountable. For Voegelin, the relationship to transcendence is expressed in two directions: firstly upwards, to the heights of consciousness; secondly, to the depths of the dark and that which can be enlightened through reason. For Voegelin, both remain interrelated and interdependent, so that a one-sided Enlightenment direction that seeks to lead the irrational and opaque into the light by rational means misses the reality of the soul, where there is a mutual interplay between light and dark, as expressed for Voegelin in "Anamnesis" in the context of remembering and forgetting. For Voegelin in the 1940s (following Vico, Schelling and Plato), the myth is still the decisive factor, the unconscious is the one through which COMMONWEALTH can be established - and not a rationalist contract theory of a hypothetical union under constructed natural conditions. From the 1950s onwards, Voegelin tends to emphasize the light side of transcendence, the binding forces of a conscious reference to a common spiritual fixed star (in the divine spirit, nous), which does not eradicate the dark, but merely relativizes it!
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³³ Cf. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 128ff, p. 173ff.

³⁴ It is revealing that, according to the account in his autobiography, Voegelin's outrage at the Anschluss of Austria in 1938 was primarily directed against the democratic governments of England and France ("rotten swine that called themselves democrats"), while he does not say a word about the role of Austria's authoritarian government and even stylizes Mussolini as a would-be saviour of Europe. Cf. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflection*, op. cit. p. 70ff.

³⁵ Cf. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. Cf. Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics*, p. 106.

³⁶ Voegelin, *Eric: Science, Politics and Gnosis*, Munich 1959.

Kelsen therefore had good reason to criticize Voegelin's "science of politics". With the interpretation of National Socialism and Communism as perverted religions, and the resulting demand for a return to the correct religion, and both combined with an intolerance that would have done honor to medieval inquisitors, Voegelin's type of political science corresponds quite precisely to the thought pattern that Kelsen attacks in "Secular Religion". In addition, Voegelin assigns responsibility for totalitarianism to modernity as a supposedly heretical³⁷ age, to which he ascribes a significant share in particular to the Enlightenment as another supposedly heretical current. When Voegelin speaks of "destructive positivism" in this context, then Kelsen must also feel personally addressed.³⁸

4. The key points of Kelsen's criticism of Voegelin in "Secular Religion"

The main points on which Kelsen attacks Voegelin in "Secular Religion" are 1) his interpretation of modern times as a gnostic age, 2) Voegelin's reinterpretation of Enlightenment and secular philosophers as gnostics in disguise, especially his interpretations of Hobbes, Comte, Marx and Nietzsche, and 3) Voegelin's rejection of modern politics and, with reservations, modern science, especially scientific thought.

In contrast to his Voegelin review, on which the work "Secular Religion" is based, Kelsen no longer deals with Voegelin's theory of representation and does not treat his polemic against positivism in the 20th century with the same level of detail.³⁹ Both differences result from the different structure of the work "Secular Religion", which is no longer a critique of Voegelin's "New Science of Politics", but, as the subtitle says, a "polemic against the misinterpretation of modern social philosophy, science and politics as 'new religions'". The polemic against Voegelin's Gnosis-theory is once again much more thoroughly elaborated and substantiated by secondary literature on Gnosticism than the already thorough criticism in the Voegelin review. Kelsen had no reason to make any major self-corrections.⁴⁰

³⁷ Voegelin speaks of a "gnostic" age, but, as Kelsen very convincingly demonstrates, he means a "heretical" age. Cf. Hans Kelsen: *Secular Religion. A Polemic against the Misinterpretation of Modern Social Philosophy, Science and Politics as "New Religions"*, Springer Verlag, Vienna / New York 2012, hereafter cited as Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, p. 82.

³⁸ Voegelin confirmed this accusation in his correspondence with Kelsen, even if he tried to politely defuse it, among other things by admitting that Kelsen had not fallen into gnosticism despite his positivism (letter to Kelsen dated February 10, 1954). Voegelin consistently ignores the fact that not a single representative of neo-positivism has fallen into gnosticism and that, moreover, hardly any other European school of philosophy has proven to be as resistant to totalitarianism as neo-positivism.

³⁹ Instead, Kelsen adopted the criticism of representation theory in a slightly modified form in "Foundations of Democracy", published in 1955 in the journal "Ethics". Cf. Hans Kelsen: *Foundations of Democracy*, op. cit. pp. 258-268 (in the first publication in "Ethics": pp. 6-15).

⁴⁰ There are only minor differences. For example, Kelsen seems to take the intellectual-historical role of Joachim Fiori comparatively more seriously, whom he had dismissed in his review as an "eccentric monk" (Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics*, op. cit., p. 77).

Before discussing the content of Kelsen's critique, something needs to be said about his method: Kelsen examines Voegelin's theses by very carefully reconstructing the context of their justification and, in particular, Voegelin's use of primary and secondary literature. What comes to light is likely to disillusion Voegelin aficionados, but should not surprise any Voegelin connoisseur: Voegelin's hermeneutics are, to put it politely, often too congenial to be accurate.⁴¹ As Kelsen demonstrates, Voegelin's interpretations of the primary philosophical literature are often clearly wrong.⁴²

But Voegelin's use of secondary literature is also questionable in many cases. Not infrequently, Voegelin follows the *principle of epigonal radicalization* by adopting theses from secondary literature, but at the same time assuming a broader scope of application and, in addition, normatively aggravating them. One example of this is Voegelin's reference to Ferdinand Christian Baur's work on "Christian Gnosis". While Baur actually only talks about certain developments in the philosophy of religion in the 19th century, Voegelin sees this as describing a main trend in German and European religious history.⁴³ Another example is Karl Löwith's book "Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen", from which Voegelin takes his interpretation of Augustine, his critique of the philosophy of history and also the emphasis on Joachim Fiori's role in the history of ideas. While Löwith speaks primarily about the development of the philosophy of history, Voegelin intensifies Löwith's interpretation into a history of the decline of modernity, without justifying this intensification on the basis of the primary literature.⁴⁴ It is a merit not to be underestimated that Kelsen's extremely careful reconstruction of the context of Voegelin's reasoning also sheds some light on Voegelin's questionable scientific approach.

1. The Gnosis Theory

Gnosticism is a religious movement of early Christianity that combines a comparatively radical rejection of the world with pronounced hopes of salvation. A characteristic feature of early Christian Gnosticism is its radical dualism, which in some variants appears as a separation of the

⁴¹ One of the reasons for this is that Voegelin quite consistently ignores the author's intention in favour of a kind of historicizing deep hermeneutics. In this respect, his method is reminiscent of Heidegger, although Voegelin's approach is still more scientifically serious in comparison.

⁴² The most striking examples of this are Voegelin's interpretations of Hobbes, Marx and the encyclopaedists. (Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit., p. 87f., p. 181ff., p. 124f). Further examples can easily be found in other works by Voegelin, e.g. his theological dressing down of the Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid (cf. Arnold, *Religiöses Bewusstsein und Politische Ordnung*, op. cit., pp. 121, 124) or - a particularly hair-raising example - the comparison of Condorcet with Goebbels in the "History of Political Ideas". Cf. **Eric Voegelin: History of Political Ideas. Volume VIII** Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man, ed. David Walsh, in: *The Collected Works by Eric Voegelin*. Volume 26, p. 151.

⁴³ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 80ff.

⁴⁴ Löwith is in some respects a kindred spirit to Voegelin. Like Voegelin, he uses real and supposed parallelisms in terms of content to construct lines of development in the history of ideas. However, Löwith's critique of modernity is much more cautious and moderate than Voegelin's. Voegelin's critique of modernity is therefore not covered by the reference to Löwith. Cf. Karl Löwith: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 2005 (first published in 1949 under the title "Meaning in History"). Cf. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 111ff. Cf. Kelsen, *A New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 84.

Very nice!

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Creator God and the Redeemer God. While an evil God created the world, a good God, who is not burdened with the responsibility for the creation of the bad world, will redeem people from it. Contrary to Voegelin's frequent talk of "gnostic immanentism", gnosticism, at least in its original form, is by no means immanentist. It is about salvation from the world, not in the world.⁴⁵ But how does Voegelin then succeed in deriving a political theory from this?

Voegelin's Gnostic theory consists of an interpretative and an explanatory component. The interpretative component consists in the fact that Voegelin interprets the entire modern era, beginning with Joachim Fiori, as a Gnostic age. The explanatory component consists of the fact that Voegelin explains all kinds of political misconduct, namely both the violent excesses of totalitarian rulers and - although politically and psychologically quite different - the unwillingness or inability to confront them as the expression and consequence of a basic Gnostic attitude. According to Voegelin, this occurs because gnosticism in the form of gnostic immanentism either hopes, as activist gnosticism, to bring about salvation in the manner of Christian eschatology in this world and considers the unrestricted use of violence to be justified. Or because, as a passive gnosis, it hopes that redemption will come of its own accord and therefore shows insufficient willingness to oppose the politically justified use of violence.⁴⁶ Voegelin does not provide any empirical evidence that gnostic religious convictions, e.g. the belief in the separation of the Creator God from the Redeemer God, must have one or other of these consequences. It remains with psychologizing insinuations. Voegelin and other theological critics of Gnosticism are probably also spared proof because today there is no influential church that sees itself as Gnostic,⁴⁷ which could at best protest against such insinuations.

Voegelin has a particularly peculiar explanation for the re-emergence of gnosis in the Middle Ages: it is the result of an attempted re-divinization of the world after Christianity had presumably de-divinized the world. This refers to the replacement of the pagan world of gods as a rather this-worldly oriented faith by the transcendent Christian God, which Voegelin combines with the existentialist self-praise of being able to endure the special tension to the transcendent pole of being as a Christian in a de-divinized world. But because, as Voegelin evidently believes, only a small elite of soul-aristocrats can really endure this, gnosis reemerges as a result of urbanization.⁴⁸

Kelsen refutes this whole convoluted complex of theories by demonstrating, piece by piece and with the greatest care, that Voegelin's interpretation is largely based on gross, not to say willful,

Correct! Even if Voegelin assumes a shift from a world-rejecting striving for redemption to a world-affirming one as a transition from a first (early Christian) to a second (medieval) gnosis, Voegelin does not really succeed in maintaining his gnosis thesis. The only thing that is true is that every left-wing, (neo)Marxist form of world change always contains a piece of mysticism, a form of escape from the world, the possibility of overcoming the structure of the given, the necessity of matter and domination, at least in the form of projective ideas or universal claims to validity. Voegelin recognized the shortcomings of his gnosis thesis, even if he did so more quietly than through an open retraction. From the 1960s onwards, Voegelin differentiated between apocalypse and gnosis, with the former now assuming the function of a spiritual model for the modern quest for inner-worldly redemption that the latter still held in the "New Science". Voegelin now uses gnosis solely for real forms of flight from the world, of disgust with the world and its derivatives (such as the left-wing disgust with power, the basic constituent of politics). Christianity - in Voegelin's interpretation - stands between the two as a reconciliation between the world and transcendence, as a reconciliation between creation and redemption. The Christian should stand in the world, affirm it, but at the same time know about his redemption in the hereafter, but not seek to anticipate it within the world.

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However, there are still prominent defenders of gnosis, such as Peter Sloterdijk, who - interpreting gnosis as an affirmation of the possibilities of escaping the world - would like to uphold it against Voegelin's slobbering insinuations - precisely as a counterweight to the radical immanentism of the modern world.

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⁴⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Röd: The path of philosophy. From the beginnings to the 20th century. Volume I. Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, C. H. Beck Verlag, Munich 2000 (first published in 1994), pp. 280-284.

⁴⁶ Voegelin, New Science of Politics, op. cit. p. 121ff., p. 173ff.

⁴⁷ By its very nature, Gnosticism does not tend towards institutionalization. One exception, which certainly cannot be considered influential, is the Ecclesia Gnostica in Los Angeles. Website of the Ecclesia Gnostica: <http://www.gnosis.org/eghome.htm> See also Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia_Gnostica (6. 1. 2013).

⁴⁸ Cf. Voegelin, New Science of Politics, op. cit. p. 122/123.

misinterpretations.⁴⁹ First of all, one can hardly speak of Christianity de-divinizing the world. If anything, de-divinization is much more pronounced in Gnosticism, since in Gnosticism the world was not even created by God. The fact that Voegelin wants to see Joachim Fiori of all people as a pioneer of modern Gnosticism is questionable, if only because Joachim Fiori was in agreement with the Church, while the Gnostics were ostracized by it. If this could possibly still be explained politically,⁵⁰ then it does not fit into the picture at all that Joachim decidedly represented a theology of history, while Gnosticism is fundamentally a-historical. Precisely because of its detachment from the world and the purely individual character of the redemption of the soul from this world, it is also poorly suited as the basis of a political movement. Voegelin was never able to resolve the tension between the two forms of expression of gnosis described by him as political activism on the one hand and political attentism ("gnostic dreamers") on the other. Voegelin's talk of Gnostic immanentism is almost a contradiction in itself. When Voegelin finally speaks of "gnostic prophets"⁵¹ and even a "gnostic Koran"⁵² in connection with a supposedly politically mobilized gnosis, he is merely describing typical characteristics of many, or at least of the three major monotheistic religions, namely religious leaders and sacred texts.⁵³

The internal contradictions of Voegelin's concept of gnosis, as well as the blatant contradictions that Kelsen identifies between Voegelin's concept of gnosis and the historical accounts of gnosis, raise the question of how these inconsistencies in Voegelin's concept could come about. Kelsen has an astonishingly simple, but at the same time extremely plausible answer: Voegelin uses the word "gnosis", but what he means is "heresy".⁵⁴ Voegelin is not referring to a specific historically localizable and identifiable school of thought, but to any deviation from the (correct) religious worldview itself. The observation that Voegelin's accusation of Gnosticism is, in terms of its structure, an accusation of heresy is one of the most important interpretative achievements of Kelsen's "Secular Religion". For it explains why Voegelin does not use the term gnosis in any even remotely precise historical sense. It also makes it understandable why he could spare himself the trouble of specifically demonstrating the political danger of "gnosis", because

As I said above: he saw it more as a way of dialectical reversal...

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⁴⁹ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 55ff.

⁵⁰ The Church took a two-pronged approach in its confrontation with the heretical currents. On the one hand, it tried to incorporate at least some of these movements. On the other hand, where this was not possible or desired, it fought them with the usual brutality of religious persecution.

⁵¹ This is how Voegelin characterizes the *Dux e Babylone* Joachim. Cf. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 111.

⁵² This is Voegelin's accusation against Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*. Voegelin is obviously embarrassed to use the more obvious comparison with the "Bible"; although the characterization of the *Encyclopaedia* as a "gnostic Koran" or a "Bible" is not comprehensible anyway. The *Encyclopaedia* was neither meant in this way, nor was it understood or used in this way. Voegelin's problem is that he actually has to admit that many of the problematic traits he ascribes to Gnosticism are problematic traits of religion as such. Indirectly, this can be seen as a confirmation of Blumenberg's thesis that Christianity failed in its defense against gnosis, which could only be successfully overcome in modern times. Cf. Hans Blumenberg: *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, p. 139ff.

⁵³ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 76.

⁵⁴ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 82.

from an orthodox religious point of view, the dubiousness of heretical currents is more or less self-evident.

One can only speculate about the reasons for this kind of obfuscation in Voegelin's work. The fact remains that Voegelin's concept of gnosis becomes only then somewhat coherent if one interprets Voegelin's concept of gnosis as a concept of heresy.⁵⁵ Even then, however, Voegelin's explanation for political disorder that is based on it is not scientifically convincing due to the gaps in the reasoning already mentioned. It can also be formulated as a question: What would be so fatal about it anyway if someone were actually a Gnostic heretic and believed, for example, that there are two gods, an evil one who created the world and a good one who redeems the soul from it again? In the end, that's no worse than being Catholic or Protestant.⁵⁶ And there is no reason why someone who believes this should be a worse citizen or a less capable politician, as Voegelin believes.⁵⁷ From an ecclesiastical point of view, apostasy may be a tragedy. Politically, it remains completely harmless.⁵⁸

2. The reinterpretation of secular philosophies as crypto-religion

If, like Eric Voegelin, one takes the view that all modern thought is an expression of heretical or, more precisely, gnostic aberrations, then one is inevitably faced with the problem of reconciling the increasing spread of agnostic and atheistic philosophies with this view of history. For it is not easy to see how an atheistic philosophy, such as that of Karl Marx, can be an expression of heresy and thus of a religious belief. Voegelin had a very simple solution to this problem, which also enjoyed great popularity among the other theorists criticized by Kelsen in "Secular Religion". He interpreted the corresponding atheistic philosophies as religious convictions in disguise. In doing so, he used precisely the technique that Kelsen characterized at the beginning of his book as the dangerous "search for parallelisms".⁵⁸ How this works and how easily Kelsen succeeds in levering out this technique will be briefly described using two examples. Subsequently, however, two further examples will be used to show that Kelsen's criticism of the religious interpretation of atheistic philosophies is not always convincing.

The clearest examples that demonstrate the failure, not to say the arbitrariness, of Voegelin's crypto-religious interpretation of Enlightenment philosophy are his interpretation of Thomas Hobbes and his interpretation of the intentions of the encyclopaedists in the "New Science of Politics". Like he did in so many others cases, Voegelin insinuates that Thomas Hobbes represents

⁵⁵ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 82.

⁵⁶ There is - which will come as no surprise to anyone - no evidence that the *Ecclesia Gnostica* (www.gnosis.org/eghome.htm, as of January 6, 2013), the *Ecclesia Gnostica Aeterna* (<http://ega.kosmic-gnosis.org>) or the *Gnostic Society* (<http://gnosis.org/gnostsoc/gnostsoc.htm>) are anything other than completely harmless and peace-loving religious communities.

⁵⁷ Cf. Arnold, *Religiöses Bewusstsein und Politische Ordnung*, op. cit. p. 90ff.

⁵⁸ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 17ff.

I don't really know. What does heresy mean here? Deviation from specific (church) dogmas? Deviation from Christianity as such? I don't expect much from this approach to heresy. Voegelin undoubtedly appears with the anti-heretical zeal of a born-again Irenaeus, but to equate Voegelin's "gnosis" with "heresy" misses the point somewhat. This is not simply about a deviation from the heretical doctrine, but about a specific disposition of transcendence, world and redemption.

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Voegelin does not base political cohesion on a mere consensus or compromise between citizens, but on a spiritual unity and refers here to a concept of spirit that we no longer know today, but which was still used in the 19th and early 20th century, whereby he assimilates this concept of spirit to monotheism. For Voegelin, what he experienced in continental Europe in the 20th century, namely a political fragmentation into ideologies fighting each other to the death, is the result of an inner worldliness. For Voegelin, the world is necessarily plural, which is why it is almost inevitable for Voegelin that there is a multitude of opposing worldviews. However, Voegelin does not want to understand politics through a moderate pluralism that defuses certain conflicts by renouncing violence or equalizing mechanisms, but through a high concept of unity. However, according to Voegelin's logic, this cannot be found IN the world, but only beyond it. The only way to achieve something like peace and a sense of community is by orienting those within the world towards this divine vanishing point outside the world. One can criticize Voegelin's radical separation into world and spirit, Voegelin's assumption of a spiritual unity and, in general, his lack of a sense for precarious but at least temporarily effective inner-worldly compromises and reconciliations. In Voegelin's thinking, however, it is almost inevitable that the apostasy from faith, the orientation towards the spiritual ground of being that is identical for all, leads to the catastrophe of a multiplicity that tends towards warlike conflict.

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a veiled form of Gnosticism. Voegelin builds his case by interpreting Hobbes' attempt to design a state that is virtually assured of permanent existence as an attempt to bring historical development to a halt in the first place. By analogy, Voegelin interprets this as a final state, as postulated by the religious history of salvation. Of course, Kelsen can easily prove that Voegelin's interpretation is a willful misinterpretation using the text of Hobbes' *Leviathan*.⁵⁹ Hobbes was in fact only concerned with political stability and thus permanence within the scope of human possibilities, but not with the end of history.

Voegelin claims that Diderot and D'Alembert's encyclopaedia is an attempt to create a "gnostic Koran" that supplants all other sources of knowledge with a definitive version. Literally, Voegelin writes:

In the eighteenth century, Diderot and D'Alembert claimed koranic function for the *Encyclopédie française* as the comprehensive presentation of all human knowledge worth preserving. According to their conception, nobody would have to use any work antedating the *Encyclopédie*, and all future sciences would assume the form of supplements to the great collection of knowledge.⁶⁰

In fact, however, it is a compendium explicitly aimed at lay readers. For this reason, the articles are written in such a way that they are comprehensible on their own without forcing readers to consult works other than the *Encyclopédie* itself for clarification. A glance at D'Alembert's *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie* is enough to convince oneself of the absurdity of Voegelin's interpretation.⁶¹ The fact that Voegelin speaks of a "Koran" in this context is possibly only out of consideration for a Christian readership, who could possibly take offense at the comparison with the "Bible", which is actually closer.

Another aspect of the reinterpretation of secular philosophies is that for Voegelin, atheism seems to be excluded by definition. For Voegelin, a person cannot be non-religious. The price that Voegelin pays for this dogmatic determination is that he becomes incapable of taking agnostic or atheistic positions seriously in their self-understanding, and that he must presume to understand them better than they understand themselves.

But this does not mean that all of Voegelin's examples of religious analogies are absurd. In contrast to the previous examples, Voegelin's interpretation of Comte's philosophy as secularized Christianity is even very obvious, because Comte himself had in his later philosophy proclaimed a "positive religion",⁶² which was very closely oriented to the model of the Catholic Church, which Comte admired. To exaggerate somewhat, one could say that it is the same system with the same spiritual and social mechanisms, only with exchanged symbols. Kelsen's insistence on Comte's philosophy being atheistic is misguided here, because Kelsen's criticism of religion, as well as his

⁵⁹ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 88.

⁶⁰ Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 139/140.

⁶¹ Cf. Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 104.

⁶² Cf. Wolfgang Röd: *The path of philosophy. From the beginnings to the 20th century. Volume II. 17-20th century*, C. H. Beck Verlag, Munich 2000 (first 1996), p. 315f.

Exactly!

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Voegelin's theory of the state from the early 1930s is revealing - an unfinished work, but nevertheless groundbreaking for Voegelin's thinking. In it, man is not simply given to himself in his finitude, for example as a subject in the sense of *ego cogitans*. For Voegelin, the person, as he introduces as a propaedeutic section of the aforementioned theory of state and rule, is only given to himself in his finitude via the DIFFERENCE FROM and AT THE SAME TIME RELATION TO an infinite. "Finite" and "infinite" may still be categories here that were discussed particularly in idealist philosophy, for example in Kant and Hegel. Voegelin is closer to Hegel than to Kant. And the structure - there is a boundary between finitude and infinity that is not absolutely impermeable - has a lasting influence on Voegelin's thought structure. For the later Voegelin, one would simply have to replace infinity with God or spirit and substitute the world for finitude. Man, the person, stands between immanence and transcendence, IN the finiteness of the world, but at the same time in communication with a transcendent God. For Voegelin, gnostis/apocalypse would be the abolition of the boundary, a merging of finitude and infinity. Therefore, for Voegelin, man must necessarily be religious; he only exists in relation to an infinite, absolute being; the decisive alternative remains only whether one is to be EQUIVALENT with him or whether one enters into a DIFFERENTIAL RELATIONSHIP with him. Voegelin leaves out a third alternative: That man does not need infinity to establish his finiteness, but rather reflexively catches up with it, finiteness would remain related to finiteness, temporality to temporality - without necessarily having to recur to the idea of the infinite, the absolute, the timelessly eternal. The infinite thus does not have to be negated, but it is not a constituent of person and rational faculty, but remains more radically transcendent than Voegelin would like, whose idea of transcendence is always simultaneously compensated for by the idea of reciprocal communication (via philosophy and revelation).

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criticism of the religious reinterpretation of modern intellectual currents in "Secular Religion", is motivated precisely by the fact that he wants to protect the independence of science and politics from religion as essential achievements of the Enlightenment. But then he would have to be deeply suspicious of a philosophy like that of Auguste Comte. Representatives of the Vienna Circle and related neo-positivist movements also tended to distance themselves from Comte's philosophy.⁶³ The interpretation of Comte's philosophy as a secular religion therefore remains understandable despite Kelsen's objections. However, the same does not apply to the diagnosis of danger, as Voegelin does not provide any sound reasons why Comte's positivist church is politically more dangerous than its role model, the Catholic Church.⁶⁴

Another example in which Kelsen's defense of a secular philosophy misses the mark is Marxism. Kelsen may still be right that the supposed religious-eschatological traits in Marx's writings themselves do not play an important role. Nevertheless, the religious traits in the political movement of Marxism are palpable. The religious character of communist forms of rule can be seen most clearly today in the example of dynastic Stalinism in North Korea. Against this it says little when Kelsen states that Marx's philosophy - according to its own claim! - is scientific and areligious.

All in all, Kelsen succeeds in demonstrating numerous almost wilful errors of interpretation in Voegelin's reinterpretation of secular philosophies as secularized religions. But not in all cases is the analogy to religion prompted by misinterpretation or merely superficial in nature. In the case of Comte's Positivist Church or Marxism as a political movement, the analogy is almost obvious and could perhaps even help to explain the success of these currents as social movements. But even in these cases it would be questionable to use the secular-religious character, as Voegelin does, as an explanation for their supposed political danger. For not all secular-religious movements degenerate into totalitarianism, and conversely, religious fanaticism proves that violent politics can very well go hand in hand with a belief in a transcendent deity.

3. The rejection of modern (liberal) politics and science

One of the most striking features of almost all of Voegelin's writings written after his flight to America in 1938 is their aggressive anti-modernism. Voegelin's writings already had an anti-modern tendency before he went into exile. But the unrestrained polemical streak that repeatedly breaks through is a characteristic of Voegelin's later writings. Two reasons may have been decisive for this change: firstly, the experience of flight and exile. Secondly, the fact that Voegelin, who had always felt himself to be in tune with the intellectual trends of the time,⁶⁵ having been

⁶³ Cf. Richard von Mises: *Kleines Lehrbuch des Positivismus. Einführung in die empiristische Wissenschaftsauffassung*, Frankfurt am Main 1990 (first: Den Haag 1939), p. 65.

⁶⁴ Comte's philosophy has found its way into the Brazilian constitution - with historically harmless consequences. One can speculate as to whether it could have become a threat to freedom under different conditions.

⁶⁵ This sentiment is most evident in Voegelin's "Authoritarian State". Cf. Arnold, *Voegelin als Schüler Hans Kelsens*, op. cit. pp. 537-541.

close to fascism himself, suddenly found himself swimming against the tide in democratic America. As previously indicated, Voegelin reacted to this experience with a religious "U-turn" and otherwise with the intensification of his anti-modern resentments. Passages such as the following from Voegelin's "New Science of Politics" are not atypical for Voegelin in their combination of a lack of understanding for the importance of basic democratic freedoms and of being offended by his own perceived lack of public impact:

Since gnosticism lives by the theoretical fallacies that were discussed in the preceding lecture, the taboo on theory in the classic sense is the ineluctable condition of its social expansion and survival. This has a serious consequence with regard to the possibility of public debate in societies where Gnostic movements have achieved social influence sufficient to control the means of communication, educational institutions, etc.. To the degree to which such control is effective, theoretical debate concerning issues which involve the truth of human existence is impossible in public because the use of theoretical argument is prohibited. However well the constitutional freedoms of speech and press may be protected, however well theoretical debate may flourish in small circles, and however well it may be carried on in the practically private publications of a handful of scholars, debate in the politically relevant public sphere will be in substance a game with loaded dice which it has become in contemporary progressive societies - to say nothing of the quality of debate in totalitarian societies.⁶⁶

Voegelin's anti-modernism concerns many aspects of modern society, politics and culture.⁶⁷ Not surprisingly for a political scientist, however, it relates particularly to modern science and politics. In the field of science, his anti-modernism expresses itself as a critical attitude towards scientific thinking, insofar as it is supposed to serve as a model for science per se. To be fair, it must be pointed out that Voegelin - unlike Brinton, for example, who was also criticized by Kelsen - does not regard modern science as such as heresy or "Gnosticism", but "only" those philosophical currents that take scientific thinking as their model.

However, Voegelin's ideas of a methodologically adequate "new science of politics" go far beyond the often-raised demand for the methodological independence of the humanities and social sciences. Rather, Voegelin explicitly pursues a scientific program whose goal is to commit the humanities and social sciences to a religious model of thought, which includes the recognition of religious experience as a source of knowledge as well as the respect of spiritual authority.⁶⁸ Kelsen rightly argues that the emancipation of science from religion in the modern era was one of its essential prerequisites for success.

It is not quite as convincing when, in the same breath, Kelsen also defends philosophies that are merely inspired by (natural) science as supposedly scientific systems. For, as the example of Comte shows, there are indeed philosophies inspired by the natural sciences that have a religious

⁶⁶ Cf. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, op. cit. p. 141/142 - Cf. also Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, op. cit. p. 260, where the second half of the passage is also quoted.

⁶⁷ See also the summary of Voegelin's basic philosophical positions above.

⁶⁸ This becomes even clearer in Voegelin's writings on the philosophy of consciousness than in the "New Science of Politics" and "Science, Politics and Gnosis", the two works by Voegelin to which Kelsen's criticism refers. Kelsen only knew the tip of the iceberg. Cf. Arnold, *Religious Consciousness and Political Order*, op. cit.

or metaphysical character. Kelsen's error of reasoning consists in the fact that he already grants a philosophy a scientific character if it is this-sided and scientific in its self-conception. In case of doubt, the scientific results of Comte, Marx or Nietzsche - all three of whom Kelsen interprets as secular and (in Nietzsche's case, only for some parts) scientifically arguing thinkers - may be wrong. But that does not make them any less scientific for Kelsen. Kelsen overlooks the fact that scientificity is not solely a question of self-attribution in connection with a strictly this-worldly orientation. Rather, one can only seriously ascribe scientificity to a philosophy, regardless of how it understands itself, if it fulfils the criteria of intersubjective criticizability, empirical verifiability and, at least by and large, the scientific standards of its time. In Marx's case, this may still work to some extent. With Comte and even more so Nietzsche, however, it is usually not the case even where they explicitly refer to science.

The reintroduction of the religious model of thought not only remains a methodological demand of Voegelin in the field of science, but Voegelin also transfers it to politics. The political order must also be shaped in the spirit of recognizing a world order originating in the transcendent pole of being. An intact spiritual background of experience is indispensable for political leaders. Those who are not willing and able to do so should be excluded from political participation as far as possible.⁶⁹ This was Voegelin's view, even if he often expressed it in a coded way. The obvious contradiction between his own ideas of the indispensable spiritual prerequisites of a successful political order and the de facto largely secular and secularist politics of Western modernity could only be resolved by Voegelin through a certain lack of clarity and often quite adventurous intellectual constructions.⁷⁰ As a rule, Voegelin does this by assuming an intact religious background of experience whenever he agrees with the political order or even concrete politics, while where he disagrees, he always assumes a disturbance of religious consciousness as the more or less sole cause. Thus, for Voegelin in the "New Science of Politics", communism and National Socialism are the expression of a religious disorder of consciousness, namely the Gnosticism discussed above. The United States of America, on the other hand, is based on an intact religious consciousness. However, the same no longer applies to the liberal policies of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, which Voegelin classifies as just as gnostic as communism. In "Secular Religion", Kelsen has painstakingly worked out the implausibility of such constructions on the occasion of Voegelin's Gnostis-theory.

We should specify what "religious" means here. The term is far too general; "spiritual" fits better, although Voegelin also differentiates between various hierarchical forms of spirituality. It should also be noted that Voegelin hardly uses "religion" as a terminus technicus after "political religions". There are several reasons for this, one of which is that the distinction between experience and doctrine/dogma, which is important for Voegelin, is difficult to make with the concept of religion. What one also notices is that Voegelin prefers to speak of "revelation" rather than "religion". By revelation, he does not primarily mean the concrete content of revelation, i.e. the sacred scriptures, but uses it as a characterization of the relationship between God and man. For Voegelin, it forms the complement to philosophy. For Voegelin, philosophy is the expression of a human quest for God, for eternal truth. Revelation means the opposite direction, God's gracious devotion to man. However, I consider both understandings to be highly problematic!
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⁶⁹ Cf. Voegelin, Eric: *The Spiritual and Political Future of the Western World*, op. cit. p. 33.

⁷⁰ For example, Voegelin attributes the resistance of Anglo-American culture to ideology to the "common sense", which Voegelin claims contains a core of religious orderliness. To this end, Voegelin constructs a genealogy via the 18th century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, who did indeed create a "common sense" philosophy. However, by "common sense" Thomas Reid by no means meant a "compact form of noesis" (as Voegelin calls the religious consciousness of order when, according to his conjecture, it appears in an implicit form), but rather Reid used the term to describe that part of the rational faculty of thought that is available to everyone, especially scientifically illiterate people. Cf. Arnold, *Religiöses Bewusstsein und Politische Ordnung*, op. cit. pp. 120-125.

The precision with which Kelsen proceeds in his criticism of Voegelin might seem exaggerated in view of the obvious absurdity of Voegelin's diagnoses of Gnosticism. But Kelsen is concerned with more than just the academic question of how well-founded the interpretation of contemporary political movements with the help of a religious-historical conceptualization is. For Kelsen, one of the essential achievements of modern history is at stake, namely the emancipation of politics from religion, which - Kelsen was convinced - is an indispensable prerequisite for liberal democracy.⁷¹ Indeed, it is questionable to what extent Voegelin's ideas of political order are compatible with the principle of religious freedom as one of the first and most fundamental liberal freedoms. Voegelin's mystical-fuzzy concept of transcendence still allows for a limited degree of religious pluralism, but this does not change the fact that Voegelin makes the right to participate in public political discourse dependent on a religious qualification. After his book on the "authoritarian state" from the 1930s, Voegelin himself no longer commented extensively on constitutional issues. Since the constitution as a prerequisite for successful political order was of secondary importance to the state of religious consciousness for Voegelin, this is not surprising. However, if one were to conduct a thought experiment as to which concrete political order is most compatible with Voegelin's principles, then it would be difficult to avoid the assumption that this is a political order in which either the clergy has a leading role, as is the case in Iran,⁷² or in which the clergy can at least control intellectual and social life, of which Saudi Arabia is an example.

5. Is Kelsen's criticism justified?

According to his biographer Métall, Kelsen left his work unpublished because he had doubts about the coherence of his argumentation, particularly with regard to the tenability of his central thesis that religion is inconceivable without belief in gods. In fact, Kelsen's "Secular Religion" contains several errors of reasoning that severely limit the validity of his criticism, at least for some of the authors discussed in the book. The question to be asked here is to what extent this also applies to the criticism of Voegelin. Kelsen can be accused of the following errors of reasoning:

1) Kelsen assumes that the characterization of totalitarian dictatorships as political religions entails the demand for a return to religion. However, this does not apply to Raymond Aron, Julien Huxely and Bertrand Russell. The case of Russell, who, as an avowed agnostic, had nothing but derision for Christianity, is particularly clear.⁷³ Kelsen can only save his thesis by assuming that Russell unintentionally encouraged the demand for a return to religion, but this is not very

⁷¹ Cf. Kelsen, Foundations of Democracy, op. cit. p. 307ff. Cf. Kelsen, Secular Religion, op. cit. p. 269.

⁷² Cf. Eckhart Arnold, Afterword: Voegelin's "New Science" in the Light of Kelsen's Critique, in: Kelsen, A New Science of Politics, pp. 109-136 (pp. 125-126).

⁷³ Cf. Bertrand Russell, Why I am not a Christian. On religion, morality and humanity. Von der Unfreiheit der christenmenschen, Rowohlt Verlag, Reinbek 1982 (first published in 1957).

Voegelin believed he could achieve a form of tolerance by distinguishing between symbol and experience. The differences between the various religions would indeed come to light on a dogmatic-symbolic level if one were to examine the symbols for their underlying (transcendental) experiential content. This would reveal that behind all 'religious' symbols there is a unified experience of the one and same source of transcendence. However, this experience could only differentiate itself in different degrees of compactness (cosmologically up to the transcendent universal religion of Christianity as the highest level). A negative freedom of religion, the freedom not to identify with a religion, i.e. to be an atheist, cannot be justified by Voegelin in any way.

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Well! I would doubt that Voegelin could be described as a supporter of a theocracy in this sense. He emphasizes too much the progress through the separation of temporal and spiritual, of the secular sphere of power and spiritual institutions. For him, a separation of church and state is certainly something to be affirmed, even if he would like to see both via a civil theology - and less the rule of a priestly caste. Well, that's not so far removed from theocracy either, you just have to be a little more precise. It should also be borne in mind that Voegelin's emphasis on the possibility of direct experiences of transcendence has a trait that tends to overcome intermediary hierarchies of office and institutions. Why do we need a priest or a pope as mediators between the individual and God, when God can be experienced directly? What Voegelin thinks about the necessity of institutional organization and personal hierarchy of offices in matters of faith is a very difficult question. However, Voegelin was more of a mystic than a Catholic in need of authority.

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convincing. Unlike Russell, Voegelin had very much linked the diagnosis of secular religion with the demand for a return to religion, and Voegelin also considered this consequence to be unavoidable. In this respect, the criticism of Voegelin remains unaffected by Kelsen's error.

2) Kelsen is of the opinion that the comparison of social movements or philosophical currents of thought with a religion is only meaningful and goes beyond superficial analogies if they include a belief in gods. However, he bases this on an overly narrow definition of religion that focuses solely on the belief in gods as a defining characteristic. If the concept of religion is understood more in terms of the sociology of religion, then in addition to the religious belief system (which may or may not include belief in gods), there is at least a religious practice in the form of customs and ritual acts and a community of believers.⁷⁴ Understood in this way, a comparison between religions and other social movements can already be meaningful if some of these elements are sufficiently similar. And the thesis is at least worth discussing that it was also the religious element that ensured mass following and a perverse willingness to self-sacrifice for Communism and National Socialism. The comparison of religion was also used in Kelsen's time by Raymond Aron, for example, in a sufficiently cautious and therefore convincing manner.⁷⁵ Voegelin's concept of "political religions", too, can be seen as a concise concept for characterizing totalitarian forms of rule. However, Voegelin's attempt to explain political disorder through the supposedly heretical character of certain political currents with the help of an extension of this concept in form of his of gnosticism-theory is misguided.

3) Complementary to the misjudgement that the comparison with a religion only makes sense where there is also a belief in gods, is Kelsen's other misjudgement that atheistic philosophies are necessarily free of religion. The counter-example of Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity has already been mentioned. Kelsen's criticism of Voegelin must therefore also be qualified on this point. However, also this time this limitation only concerns the diagnosis of the religious character of atheistic philosophers, with which Voegelin, moreover, is not wrong in only a few cases. Even in those cases where Voegelin's diagnosis is correct, the prognosis of political danger that for Voegelin follows as a necessary conclusion from this diagnosis is generally untenable. The chapter on Condorcet in Voegelin's "History of Political Ideas" shows the absurdities to which Voegelin sometimes allowed himself to be carried away.⁷⁶ In it, Condorcet is compared to Goebbels - even though Voegelin himself states in the same chapter that Condorcet demanded freedom of thought, something that the Nazi propaganda minister would never even have dreamed of doing.

⁷⁴ These elements can already be found in Durkheim's work. Cf. Émile Durkheim: Die elementaren Formen des religiösen Lebens Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1981.

⁷⁵ Cf. Gerda Bohmann: "Political religions" (Eric Voegelin and Raymond Aron) - a concept for differentiating fundamentalisms? In: Austrian Journal of Sociology 34 (2009), p. 3-22 (p. 10ff.)

⁷⁶ Cf. Eric Voegelin: History of Political Ideas. Volume VIII Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man, ed. David Walsh, in: The Collected Works by Eric Voegelin. Volume 26, p. 151.

The vast majority of Kelsen's criticism of Voegelin thus remains unaffected by the above mentioned misconceptions of his work "Secular Religion". This is not surprising when one considers that his book arose from a critique of Voegelin, and that Voegelin was thus presumably the model from which Kelsen's comprehensive critique of the religious interpretation of secular philosophies originated.

6. The key question: Does politics need a spiritual foundation?

As Hermann Lübbe aptly observed a few years ago, today we can at best only speak of a "marginally remaining reception of Eric Voegelin"⁷⁷. The motivation to engage with Voegelin often lies in the fact that Voegelin's political philosophy appears at first glance to decisively enhance the role of religion, in that Voegelin claims that a successful political order requires a spiritual foundation. At least for religious people, this may seem attractive. Kelsen, on the other hand, clearly advocated the separation of religion and politics. Which of the two is right? And is religion really served well by Voegelin's ideas of political order?

One of the reasons why Voegelin was so firmly convinced of the necessity of an intact spiritual foundation was because he believed that totalitarianism was a consequence of the disruption of religious consciousness. However, Voegelin never even made a serious attempt to prove this connection empirically. This may be partly due to his purely hermeneutic method, which alone cannot build a bridge to real history. But it also has to do with his presuppositions. For Voegelin's assumption that one can recognize whether a political movement is dangerous to order or not by the character of its spirituality is at least as naïve as the view that the goodness or justice of a person depends on their religious devotion. For example, the religious consciousness of the Christian Middle Ages, which was fairly intact by Voegelin's standards, also produced a great deal of political disorder - insofar as crusades, pogroms against Jews, the burning of witches and heretics can be considered phenomena of political disorder. And the philosopher Plato, highly revered by Voegelin for his spiritual sensitivity, presented a draft for a state order that is nothing less than **totalitarian**.⁷⁸

Apart from the fact that the causal connection Voegelin assumes between the state of religious consciousness and that of the political order is highly questionable, it also seems extremely doubtful whether religion is really served well by Voegelin's philosophy. Voegelin's idea that the political order should be secured through a reawakening of religious consciousness immediately

I can't do much with this transfer of the category of totalitarianism to Plato's Politeia, I'm sorry. For me, totalitarianism is something specifically modern. I couldn't really follow Popper's denunciation of Plato either. But that's a separate chapter...
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⁷⁷ Cf. Hermann Lübbe: *Modernity capable of consent. Gründe einer marginal verbliebenen Rezeption Eric Voegelins*, Munich 2003.

⁷⁸ Cf. Kelsen's apt remark in *Foundations of Democracy*, op. cit. p. 302, footnote 69: "Voegelin ... suggests not to rely on 'destructive' positivism and its value-free description of social reality but rather on the methods of 'metaphysical speculation,' such as applied by Plato and Aristotle, and 'theological symbolization,' such as presented by Thomas Aquinas. This suggestion should not be accepted without taking into consideration the results of the political philosophies of these authorities."

loses its appeal if we consider the thought experiment that it is not our own religion that is meant. What if one's own spirituality is different from the one identified as the acceptable basis of the political order by intellectual masterminds such as Voegelin, who claim the right to define it as a matter of course?⁷⁹ One then immediately realizes that the supposed reevaluation of religion through Voegelin's philosophy is a poisoned gift. The realization of Voegelin's concept of political order is hardly conceivable without encroaching on the individual's spiritual privacy. Especially if one considers religiosity to be the most primal aspect of human nature, this could give one pause for thought.

If one contrasts Voegelin's political thinking with Kelsen's critique, it is paradoxically noticeable that Kelsen's liberal-secular ideas, despite their atheistic-anti-religious basis, at least harmonize much better with a purified "religion after the Enlightenment" (Lübbe) than Voegelin's design. Kelsen has thus proven to be more viable for the future. Not only for this reason, but also because it contains one of the few discussions of Voegelin's philosophy that is not influenced by the Voegelin school, the Voegelin-critique in Kelsen's "Secular Religion" is still unreservedly worth reading.

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⁷⁹ Cf. Arnold, *Religiöses Bewusstsein und Politische Ordnung*, op. cit. p. 93ff.

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