

# The Smooth Transition from Authoritarianism to Political Theology: The Case of Eric Voegelin

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### *Abstract*

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. This is not the least due to the fact that the main popularizer of the term “political theology”, Carl Schmitt had become an ardent Nazi. But there is also another brand of political theology, connected to the name of Eric Voegelin, who was not a Nazi, but one who had to flee from the Gestapo into emigration. Quite naturally totalitarianism, or more precisely the causes of totalitarianism in religious disorder, became a major scientific topic for Voegelin. Does this mean that there exists a variant of political theology that is not bound up with fascism and that might therefore appeal to theologically minded liberal democrats?

Tracing back the intellectual biography of Eric Voegelin, it can be shown that this is not the case. Contrary to the myth that Voegelin was an anti-fascist of the first hour, Voegelin was in fact deeply influenced by the anti-democratic thinking of the 20ies and 30ies in the last century. He took sides with the authoritarian regime of Austria against liberalism and began to perceive the Nazis as a serious danger only as late as 1937. What is more, even in the emigration he retained most of his deeply authoritarian political convictions. It seems that his political theology was for him the means to keep his authoritarian convictions while at the same time supporting the liberal political order of the United States of America.

Thus the same conclusion about political theology in general which is easily drawn in Carl Schmitt's case is also fostered by the case of Eric Voegelin, namely, that political theology and liberal democracy do not mix.

## Introduction

When Eric Voegelin gave his lecture on “Hitler and the Germans” in the summer term of 1964 he had some strong words to say about Germany's National Socialist past and even more so about the inability of the contemporary German society to deal with this past and with its own guilt. Having himself been forced to flee from Austria – then Voegelin's home country – right after the “Anschluss” of Austria to the German Reich and having returned to Germany after many years of emigration, who could have been more suitable to talk about National Socialism and to analyse its causes than the emigrant Eric Voegelin who had lived through it all and who had himself firmly withstood the totalitarian seduction?

As to the causes for National Socialism, Voegelin believed that these were ultimately rooted in the spiritual disorder of modern times. The modern times had quite successfully done away with religion, as it appeared to Voegelin, but could not do away with the religiousness of humans, which was then left defenseless against its exploitation by the totalitarian movements of fascism and communism. As obvious as the cause of totalitarianism appeared to Voegelin so was his solution. Western civilisation would need to regain spiritual “reality” in order stabilize and safeguard its political order. Voegelin developed this concept of the spiritual prerequisites of political order into a full fledged political theology in connection with a philosophy of history. At the core of this philosophy lies the idea that political societies represent a transcendent truth (Voegelin 1952). For Voegelin this representation of a transcendent truth is not only required to preserve the unity of society (Voegelin 1966) but also for its being in a state of political order. The first clear exposition of Voegelin's political theology is found in a small pamphlet with the title “The Political Religions” which appeared in print for the first time in 1938, just before the “Anschluss”. While the term “political religions” was meant by Voegelin as a general term, it was primarily National Socialism and communism that Voegelin considered as the political religions of his own day.

Notwithstanding how its intellectual merits may be judged today (Webb 1997, Poirier 1997), given that Voegelin had to flee from the Nazis, there appears to be little reason to doubt that Voegelin's political theology was a reaction against totalitarianism and that Voegelin himself strongly rejected both fascism and communism. Or so it seems. For, a closer look on the genesis of Voegelin's political theology reveals that Voegelin was not at all an anti-fascist of the first hour, but – quite the contrary – that he set out as an authoritarian political philosopher very akin to fascism. Developing a political theology was for Voegelin the means to forgo a critical revision of his own antiliberal and antimodernist convictions when turning away from fascism. This will be shown in the following by tracing Voegelin's intellectual development from its beginnings in the intellectual

culture of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vienna until the post war era.

## **Voegelin's early intellectual development**

Eric Voegelin spent his formative years in the bristling intellectual atmosphere of Vienna in the post World War I period. He had enrolled as a student of political science at the University of Vienna, but his intellectual interests reached far beyond the curriculum of his study course and covered among others philosophy, history, literature and theology. It is a most notable feature of the academic intellectual life of Vienna during that period that to a large part it took place in private academic circles (Feichtinger 2001). Voegelin belonged to several of these circles and he must have been one of the most eager participants. Voegelin's early writings reflect his broad intellectual interests. He wrote on literature just as he published on political and legal philosophy.

As to the legal philosophy, Voegelin could hardly avoid the then dominating Pure Theory of Law (“Reine Rechtslehre”) by his academic teacher Hans Kelsen. Voegelin's stance towards the pure theory of law is at that time still one of sympathetic disagreement. While he does not dispute its importance for the interpretation of law, he considers it not only as an insufficient basis for a political or state philosophy in general – a limitation that proponents of the Pure Theory of Law would readily admit (Kelsen 1928) – but he does also contend that the Pure Theory of Law is itself in the need of a more comprehensive theory of the state and the political as its basis – a claim that proponents of the Pure Theory of Law would strongly reject.

It is not unlikely that Voegelin's early disagreement with the Pure Theory of Law was not only due to its – in his opinion – too limited content, but also to its rational and enlightened intellectual style. For, even though Voegelin is still far away from the aggressive and sweeping charges he would launch against positivism in his later works (Voegelin 1952), he seems by the end of the 1920ies to have been drawn increasingly into the irrationalist intellectual movements that rapidly gained ground among young academics in German speaking countries in the twenties and thirties of last century. In Voegelin's case it was particularly the influence of the “George circle”, an artist and scholarly sect around the German poet Stephan George as its central figure (Breuer 1995), that has influenced his way of thinking (Hollweck 1996) and in some instances also his rhetoric in this direction (Voegelin 1930). Quite in harmony with the intellectual fashions of his time, Voegelin became interested in national character and collective psychology. This trait is already apparent in his book “On the Form of the American Mind” (Voegelin 1928), a book that was written after an extensive educational journey to the United States and which studies “the Form of the American Mind” through the works of some of Americas leading intellectuals. Despite quite a few interesting con-

nections in intellectual history revealed by Voegelin in this book, the attitude he displays is not unlike that of people who after reading a few volumes of Dostoevsky believe they know what the “Russian soul” is all about and what moves “the Russians”.

Voegelin proceeded in this direction for several years. An appointment to the “Institut des Hautes Études Internationales” in Geneva failed, because the scholars of the “Institut des Hautes Études” did not consider the type of national psychology Voegelin drew on in his lecture about “National types of mind and the limits of interstate relations” as scientifically mature (Rappard 1930). In the context of his interest for collective psychology also Voegelin's two books on the “History of the Race Idea: From Ray to Carus” (Voegelin 1933a) and “Race and State” (Voegelin 1933b) must be seen. While Voegelin is strongly critical of most of the racist literature he examines in these two volumes and while he clearly reveals the instrumentalist political intention of the “race idea”, it can at times appear as if he is not so much against a race idea and race psychology as such but only considers the bulk of the race-literature as being on a deplorably low intellectual level. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the contemporary reception of Voegelin's race books in the early National Socialist Germany was not wholly adversarial (Krasemann, 2002, p. 108f.). It was most notably Ernst Krieck, thereafter a leading Nazi-ideologist and fierce racist, who was so pleased with Voegelin's “History of the Race Idea” that he asked Voegelin for his publication list and curriculum vitae (Krieck 1933). Obviously Krieck considered the talented young associate professor for a job, though he soon seems to have changed his mind. Voegelin's answer to Krieck is revealing: Not only does he downplay the association with his liberal teacher and patron Hans Kelsen, but he also hastens to inform Krieck about his perfectly Aryan ancestry (Voegelin 1933c).

In the context of Voegelin's intellectual development it is not of primary concern how this has to be judged from a moral point of view. (Voegelin did never believe in the superiority of the Aryan race. Still, since Voegelin knew quite well that Jewish scholars lost their Jobs in Germany because of racial discrimination, his preemptive obedience to the Nazi's racist policy is certainly a gross act of opportunism.) What is more relevant is that the letter to Krieck gives us an important hint about how we have to interpret the intellectual and political position of Voegelin's academic writing during the early thirties. If the Political Scientist Eric Voegelin was looking for jobs in Germany in late 1933 and early 1934 (Sigwart 2005, p. 227 fn. 162), he cannot himself have considered his scientific standpoint so incompatible with National Socialism as to render such job aspirations futile. This should caution against interpreting Voegelin's two books on the race topic as a frontal assault on Racism and the Nazi-ideology.

## Voegelin's political stance

Hand in Hand with Voegelin's intellectual development goes a change of Voegelin's political convictions. While Voegelin entertained a youthful enthusiasm for socialism as a young man, which he retained throughout his educational journey to the U.S. in 1924/25, he must at some point in his following development have changed alliances. In his "Authoritarian State" (1936) Voegelin is, as the title suggests, firmly authoritarian if not fascist. When exactly this change of alliances occurred is not easy to discern. It seems to have come about gradually in the late twenties and it is quite manifest already in Voegelin's speech on Max Weber, printed in 1930. The "Authoritarian State", ultimately, leaves little doubt where Voegelin stood at this time. Voegelin would later claim that his book was "an attempt to demonstrate that an authoritarian state that keeps radical ideologies in check would be the best means for the defense of democracy" (Voegelin 1973, p. 69). But apart from the obvious *contradictio in adjecto* in this statement, there is in fact no hint in Voegelin's "Authoritarian State" or in any of his other writings from this period that shows that its author cared about the defense of democracy (Henkel 2005). Quite the contrary, Voegelin aggressively attacks the rational and liberal outlook of the Pure Theory of Law of his former teacher Hans Kelsen. He charges its terminology with being a "system of ideological concepts" (in the German original: "System der Kampfbegriffe", Voegelin 1936, p. 116) and blames it for supposedly reducing the dignity of the state to that of a stamp collector's association ("Briefmarkensammlerverein", Voegelin 1936, p. 127).

To be sure, Kelsen's Pure Theory of Law does indeed refrain from ascribing any particular dignity to the state. At the same time, being pure, it is a theory that by its own pretense is politically neutral. It can reasonably be argued, though, that the very fact that it defies any attempt to employ legal science for the ideological justification of the state makes it appear more adequate in a liberal political context, where there is generally less demand for ideological justification than in an authoritarian context. Also, the primary inventor of the Pure Theory of Law, Hans Kelsen, was one of the fathers of the democratic Austrian constitution from 1920 and an expressed liberal (Kelsen 1929). Consequently, Voegelin describes the pure theory of law in the "Authoritarian State" as a severely outdated doctrine and he treats it with the disdain that political realists display towards a historical loser.

If the Pure Theory of Law is historically outdated, the question remains what are the political theories that are up to date. Voegelin leaves little doubt that for him this is the authoritarian or fascist philosophy of such authors as Ernst Renan, Maurice Hauriou, Engelbert Dollfuß, Ernst Jünger, Ernst Rudolf Huber and – most important of all – Carl Schmitt (Voegelin 1936, p. 7-53). All of

these authors and politicians are treated favorably in the “Authoritarian State” and Carl Schmitt is discussed very sympathetically with only slight reservations concerning the – to Voegelin's estimate – more political than scientific character of some of Schmitt's key concepts. But even this fault – if it is a fault at all – is attributed to the popular reception of Schmitt's concepts rather than to Schmitt himself (Voegelin 1936, p. 8ff.).

When interpreting the latest constitutional developments in Austria Voegelin heavily draws on Schmitt's political ideas. While the First Austrian Republic is described contemptuously as a merely transitory, more administrative than properly political state, the Authoritarian government is praised by Voegelin for its having taken “existential steps to the becoming statehood of Austria” (Voegelin 1936, p.3). It appears that for Voegelin the liberal Austrian postwar democracy has not been a proper state at all. There is an unmistakable triumphant tone in Voegelin's description of the process through which the Authoritarian regime took over the power.

Not surprisingly, Voegelin is generally critical of the constitutional state and advocates a strong executive that is largely unrestricted by parliament control and constitutional law (Voegelin 1936, p. 124, p. 265ff., p. 274). In advocating his point of view, Voegelin relies strongly on ontological assumptions and preconceptions about the political which he never properly justifies. It is at this point where the influence of Carl Schmitt becomes most obvious. Carl Schmitt's conception of politics encompasses three core elements (Schmitt 1922, 1928): 1) The discrimination between friend and enemy. 2) The sovereignty as an unrestricted highest power. 3) The emphasis on decisions leading to accomplished facts. From these three elements the first one remains absent in Voegelin political theory, while the latter two have strongly influenced Voegelin's conception of politics and state power in the “Authoritarian State”.

Another ingredient of the political ideology of Carl Schmitt, shared to a lesser degree by Voegelin, is collectivism. Although Voegelin would not – as Schmitt did – literally make “homogeneity” a necessary requirement of the modern state,<sup>1</sup> he still considers the “spiritual formation of the inhabitants of the [state's] territory into a political people” as a precondition of political statehood (Voegelin 1936, p. 2). In the foreword to “The Political Religions” Voegelin strongly rejects collectivism, but, as a matter of fact, his attitude towards collectivism has at least implicitly remained somewhat ambiguous even in his later works (Arnold 2007, p. 103).

There is, finally, one other element that Voegelin has in common with the fascist political philosophy of his time. This element is the great importance which Voegelin attributes to political myths. The roots of Voegelin's opinion about the importance of myths are independent from fascist political

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, Schmitt interprets homogeneity as the essence of a democratic state. But this must be seen in the context of Schmitt's reinterpretation of democracy along the lines of fascist ideology.

thinking, though. They can be traced back to his earliest writings (Voegelin 1925). But it is not implausible to assume that they have later been fostered under the influence of right wing political philosophy. In an essay titled “On the Theory of Consciousness” (Voegelin 1943) Voegelin would still speak of “the will to order that can only be active where it has its meaning in the order of the community myth [German: Gemeinschaftsmythos]” (Voegelin 1943, p. 50). The role of the myth is the point where Voegelin later gradually transformed his political philosophy into a political theology proper – without changing much else.

One of the key concepts of Voegelin's later political theology is that of transcendent reality. A political order can only be a good one if it rests on an undistorted experience of divine transcendent reality, Voegelin believed (Voegelin 1966, p. 301ff., Arnold 2007, p. 86ff.). This is a novelty – and it is about the only one – that Voegelin added when transforming his authoritarian political philosophy into a political theology. In his earlier writings Voegelin's concept of political symbols and political myths remains almost purely formal: It is important for a political community to have a community myth, but there are hardly any hints of a distinction between the true myths (or the “true story” as Voegelin would later call it) and false myths. While a religious undertone can already be found in Voegelin's earlier works, the religious becomes a central topic of Voegelin's political philosophy only starting with the “Political Religions”. The development of a political theology in Voegelin's work seems to have taken place in gradual and interlocking steps. Even as late as in the “Introduction to the History of Political Ideas” Voegelin would still speak of “evocation” rather than of the “experience” of (spiritual) reality (Voegelin 1939).

## **The transition to political theology**

The first clear statement of a political theology is made by Voegelin in his “Political Religions”. For Voegelin or, strictly speaking, for the later Voegelin of “The New Science of Politics” and “Order and History”, political order is always dependent on the state of the religious consciousness of the people living under it.

Voegelin's political theology has a descriptive as well as a normative side. On the descriptive side it can be understood as a research program the object of which is to explain the features of historical political orders by reference to their religious state of development. On the normative side it consists in the claim that a good political order must rest on a healthy religious consciousness and that thus all profane features of political order such as the constitution must strictly be subordinated to the more important matters of spiritual health.

To avoid confusion, it should be emphasized that Voegelin's political theology does not aim at

transmitting theological concepts to the sphere of public law and thereby charging the state with pretensions of absoluteness as Carl Schmitt would have it (Schmitt 1922). One can say that Voegelin subordinates the political to the religious while Carl Schmitt draws an analogy between the two. Thus, other than Carl Schmitt, Voegelin does not run into the danger of transferring attributes of God to the state. But there is a danger that Voegelin's doctrine – if it should ever become influential in politics – might justify political leaders that claim to act in the name of God. And it stands to reason that this is not much better.

The “Political Religions” are an attempt to deal with totalitarianism by interpreting it as a “political religion”. Political Religions arise when a “decapitation of God” takes place, a term by which Voegelin means that the religiosity of the people is cut off from its transcendent source. The “decapitation of God” can take one of two different forms: Either the transcendent is mediated exclusively through the political leader(s) or the transcendent is completely cut off and the political leaders assume the place of the transcendent in the religious beliefs and experiences of the people. As an example of the first form Voegelin relates to the Egyptian Pharaoh Echnaton. Examples of the latter form are the modern totalitarian governments. In contrast to these “political religions”, in medieval Christianity the access to the transcendent is mediated independently from the ruler through the church, even though the ruler is still part of a hierarchy that spans from God to the common man.

There are two peculiarities about the political theology of Voegelin's “Political Religions”. First of all, if political religions do – as the example of Echnaton suggests – occur more often in history, then also National Socialism and communism might, in so far as they are political religions, appear merely as another instance of a common historical phenomenon. It is no wonder therefore that early readers of Voegelin's pamphlet like Thomas Mann missed a forthright and unmistakable moral stance against National Socialism in Voegelin's book. While Voegelin hastened to state his moral disgust about National Socialism in the foreword to the second edition (Voegelin 1938, p.7), the impression remains that Voegelin was rather clueless when it comes to the question how to counter National Socialism intellectually. This impression is strengthened by the other peculiarity of Voegelin's “Political Religions” which is that the reader of Voegelin's pamphlet is left with the somewhat unpleasant alternative of either medieval Christianity or modern political religions, i.e. totalitarianism. There is not the slightest hint at what a third alternative could be or even whether there can be a third alternative at all. In fact, Voegelin believed that the sort fundamental change which in his opinion was desperately needed could only be brought about by great religious personalities (Voegelin, 1938, p. 8), a messianic hope that, again, is at best an expression of the intellectual helplessness. At worst it is another variant of a “Führer-Mythos”. Against this background it is only slightly surpris-

ing to learn from Voegelin's autobiography that "In the wake of the Austrian occupation by Hitler, I [Voegelin] even for a moment contemplated joining the National Socialists" (Voegelin 1973, p. 70), although Voegelin himself would attribute this temporary aberration to his frustration with the lenient reaction of the Western democracies ("those rotten swine who called themselves democrats", Voegelin 1973, p. 70).

How can it be explained that a political scientist like Eric Voegelin, though – by that time – an expressed opponent of National Socialism, remains so pathetically clueless when dealing with this phenomenon on an intellectual level? A likely explanation would be that after having widely submitted to a fascist political philosophy and having scornfully rejected the Austrian democracy as not being properly political and as historically obsolete, Voegelin almost completely lacked any intellectual resources on which he could have drawn when combating National Socialism. In fact, about the only intellectual resource which was left to him, when he wanted to confront National Socialism without completely reversing his political believe system, was the sort of conservative Catholicism that also formed the ideological basis of the Austrian "Ständestaat". By the same token, endorsing theology allowed Voegelin to turn against fascism while retaining most of his authoritarian political convictions.

## **The authoritarian heritage of Voegelin's political theology**

Just how much of his authoritarianism Voegelin retained becomes obvious in his "New Science of Politics" (Voegelin 1952). Most readers of Voegelin's "New Science of Politics" are primarily interested in the historical-theological theory put forward in this work, a theory which declares modernity to be an age of Gnosticism. This theory constitutes a radicalization of the concept of "political religions" insofar as now not only National Socialism and communism are considered political religions, but almost the whole of modernity falls under the title of Gnosticism, which has replaced the concept of political religions. Underneath this Gnosticism-theory the authoritarian political convictions of Voegelin remain quite vivid and are only slightly disguised by a theological philosophy of history. Just as he criticized the constitutional state in his "Authoritarian State" (and quite reminding of the rhetoric of the anti-democratic right in the German Weimar Republic) Voegelin now scornfully describes the democratic elections as merely "placing check marks on pieces of paper" (Voegelin 1952, p. 33), thereby omitting both the functions of political participation and government control through regular elections and – what is more surprising for Voegelin – completely missing out the deep symbolic meaning of democratic elections which consists in reaffirming the democratic ideal and emphasizing the democratic value of equality of all citizens.

That Voegelin is unable to make much sense of the democratic elections is by far not the only point that betrays his strong authoritarian heritage. Even more so does his extremely positive valuation of tough hand politics and military strength. In this connection Voegelin employs the idea of historical legitimation through successful power politics, an idea which was widespread in German historical literature and German philosophy of history starting with Hegel and remaining dominant throughout the Bismarck-Age and the Kaiserreich and, of course, National Socialism. For Voegelin a people is “in form for action in history” (Voegelin 1952, p. 36) when its military strength allows it to assert itself by war or warlike action (Kelsen 1954, p. 41). Apart from going back to arcane antique sources to support his idea of being “in form for action in history”, Voegelin uncritically draws on German sources from the time of National Socialism (Voegelin 1952, p. 92ff., Kelsen 1954, p. 72).

In some way, however, Voegelin must account for the fact that it is not always the good guys that win in history. Since he cannot retreat to liberal or democratic ideals or to humanist moral values to make the distinction, it is again only theology that can save him from fully submitting to the “right of the stronger” when interpreting history. Therefore, Voegelin invents – next to the category of “existential representation”, which is a mere synonym for successful power politics and a term which Voegelin (as it seems) solely invents for the purpose of opposing it to the democratic mode of representation that he despises – the category of representation of truth, where under “truth” always theological truths are understood by Voegelin.

The interpretation of Voegelin's “New Science of Politics” as an expression of poorly disguised authoritarianism also helps to cast light on some of the startling obscurities of this work (as, in fact, also of many of his later works) among which the first and foremost is Voegelin's rather eccentric treatment of intellectual history (Arnold 2004, p. 128ff.). To pick just one example, Voegelin placed Puritanism in the fore front of the Gnostic revolution that was in his opinion responsible for the political chaos of our age (Voegelin 1952, p. 93ff.). But how can it then be explained that the political order of the United States, which to some degree certainly rests on the Puritan heritage, was never plagued by totalitarianism? The reason for this and for other obscurities of Voegelin's later work may be the following: In some way or other Voegelin had to deal with the fact that the American liberal democracy he was now living in was a very successful one. But, given that his political thinking remained deeply authoritarian, he could not easily ascribe the the success of the United States its having a constitution that firmly rests on the political philosophy of liberalism. Instead, Voegelin invented ever more abstruse theories to account for the (from his premises) surprising strength and stability of the American democracy. The latest and probably most eccentric of these

was the theory that a healthy consciousness of the transcendent had – through the mediation of Schottish common sense philosophers like Thomas Reid (!) – found its way in to the all present common sense of the America of his day (Voegelin 1966, p. 352-354, Arnold 2007, p. 120ff.). With this awkward theory in mind, the case of the American Democracy could – for Voegelin – seemingly confirm one of the central premises of his political theology, namely, that no successful political order can subsist without a proper consciousness of the transcendent. However, the price that Voegelin had to pay to achieve this feat was a considerable distortion of intellectual history.

## **Is the Voegelinian brand of political theology necessarily anti-liberal?**

Having demonstrated, as I hope, that Voegelin's later, theological political philosophy retains many of the deeper authoritarian convictions of Voegelin's formative years, the question remains whether this connection between authoritarianism and political theology is just an accidental one, due to the specific conditions of Voegelin's intellectual development, or, whether there is a systematic connection between a political theology of the Voegelian type which strictly subordinates the political to the religious and an authoritarian political outlook.

There are, in my opinion, two reasons, why a political theology of this type must inevitably assume an authoritarian flavor: The first reason is that it is incompatible with religious pluralism. If political order depends on religious truth then it is hard to imagine how different religious truths can be tolerated under the same political order. Any compromise between conflicting religious beliefs must appear as precarious and politically dangerous.

Taking this point a little further, one can argue that within Voegelin's conception of political order it is impermissible to leave spiritual questions completely at the private discretion of each individual citizen as the modern liberal state does. Quite the contrary, Voegelin was firmly convinced that the spiritual health of the political leadership was of crucial importance for the maintenance of political order. Consequently, he demanded the banning of political parties that were of an “anti-christian” or “anti-philosophical” kind (Voegelin 1959, p. 33). In the Cold-War era Voegelin's attitude blended seamlessly with the then prevailing anti-communism, which made Voegelin's distinctive authoritarian stance less visible at that time. In much the same vein Voegelin considered dialogue with people that he believed to be “spiritually diseased” or “pneumopathological”, i.e. people that do not believe in the existence of a transcendent ground of being or that do so in the wrong fashion, as *prima facie* futile. A view that is still echoed by some of his later adherents (Farell 1997).

The second reason why Voegelin's political theology is incompatible with liberalism is connected with the problem of who is to judge on what is the right spiritual truth on which the political order

must rest. Once a group of people has successfully made the claim to represent the one true spiritual truth, who is then left to control when and whether they overstep the limits of interpretation of the divine? The latter is in fact a problem that Voegelin himself has raised as a characteristic problem of those political orders that have lapsed into “political religions”. Unfortunately it is hard to see how Voegelin's own political theology is going to escape this problem.

Summing it up, Voegelin's political theology does not only retain a historical burden of authoritarianism from the time when he took side for the Austrian authoritarian state against its liberal opponents (Voegelin 1936), but it is also bound up with Authoritarianism by its own systematics which make the right spiritual order of the soul a necessary requirement for political order.

## Conclusions

As has been demonstrated above, Eric Voegelin's political theology is inextricably mixed with his political authoritarianism. The connection between Voegelin's political theology and authoritarianism is not merely due to historico-biographical accident, but also emerges from the systematics of Voegelin's political thinking. Therefore, it would be impossible to strip Voegelin's political theology from its authoritarianism without touching the systematic core of his philosophy – a fact that is well reflected in the pronounced reactions of some of Voegelin's adherents (Poirier 1997, Farrell 1997) to Eugen Webb's moderate Voegelin-criticism (Webb 1997).

This finding has important consequences for the project of a political theology in general. While in Carl Schmitt's case the cloven hoof of the anti-democrat and later Nazi is all too obvious, the authoritarian heritage of Voegelin has gone largely unnoticed in the secondary literature (see the series of the “Occasional Papers” on Voegelin that is published by the Eric Voegelin Archive in Munich, where Henkel's study (2005) is really one of the very few exceptions to the rule). Yet, as has been demonstrated above, Voegelin's political theology does not provide a liberalism-compatible alternative. This suggests the conclusion that political theology is generally prone to authoritarianism, which should caution religious minded liberals against the otherwise potentially seductive ideal of a political theology.

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