

On Eric Voegelin's (1901-1985) Totalitarianism and Gnosticism: Gnosticism as the Essence of Modernity

Adelaide de Faria Pimenta, Catholic University of Minas Gerais, Brazil

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Abstract

This paper is part of a master's thesis in progress. The chosen theme arises from the need to understand the relation that the political philosopher makes between totalitarianism and ideologies, Gnosticism and modernity. For this research, two basic concepts proposed by his philosophical-political theory will be used as fundamental theoretical base: *political religions* and Gnosticism. Voegelin used the concept of political religions as one of the initial elements of his analysis of twentieth-century political movements - notably National Socialism in Germany and Stalinist socialism. With extensive work and career as a scholar, he took on the task of investigating the deep origins of the political ideologies of his time. His project was being outlined through criticism of the ideologies of his time and research for spiritual causes of it. He investigated the symbolism in history in order to recover the formative experiences that gave rise to them, introducing the idea of Gnosticism as the essence of modernity. The author's claim that modern ideological movements reflect a tendency to immanentize Christian eschatology instigates a broader understanding of the phenomenon. This topic is extremely current and pertinent to the Religious Studies, a field that allows the investigation of religion and its interfaces with historical, political, philosophical and psychological bias, among others, possibly opening perspectives to understanding totalitarianism and its repercussion in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Eric Voegelin. Totalitarianism. Gnosticism. Modernity. Political religions.

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Introduction

Facing some challenges and legacies of modernity, especially regarding the understanding of totalitarian movements and political ideologies of the twentieth century, there is still much to be researched due to its complexity.

Professionals from several areas, from their own epistemologies and methodologies, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, political scientists, have sought and still seek answers to such a prevalence of evil – seen, perhaps unprecedented in its proportion – in the history of humankind, facing totalitarianism, especially National Socialism (1933-1945) in Germany and Stalinist Socialism (1924-1953) in the former USSR.

Among them, the philosopher and political scientist, who is still little known in the Brazilian academia, who brought instigating and extensive contribution to the theme of totalitarian ideologies and phenomena, is Eric Voegelin, to whom will be referenced in particular.

Regarding Eric Voegelin

The political philosopher Erich Hermann Wilhelm Vögelin, or just Eric Voegelin, as he became known, was born on January third, 1901, in the city of Cologne, Germany. As Henriques (2010, p. 31) expresses “he was born with the 20th century”, the century of great technological advances and at the same time of great wars.

His father, Otto Stefan Voegelin, was German, a civil engineer and Lutheran, and his mother, Elisabeth Ruehl Voegelin, Viennese, Catholic, raising one daughter along with Eric.

They lived in the city of Cologne until Voegelin was about 4 years old in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, west region of Germany divided by the Rhine. In his book *Anamnesis* (2009), Voegelin refers to the marks that this region of the Rhine River, its histories, fairy tales, and his own experiences exerted on his personality.

His family moved to Vienna, Austria, when Voegelin was 10 years old, and there he finished high school, having studied eight years of Latin, six years of English and two years of Italian, besides having had extracurricular lessons in elementary French. From this time, he quotes one teacher in particular: Otto Kraus, journalist and interested in Adolf Adler’s psychoanalytic approach. He confesses that studying Hamlet for a semester, from the perspective of Alfred Adler’s psychology of superiority – *Geltung* – was particularly memorable (VOEGELIN, 2015c).

In 1919, he studied Political Science at the Law School of the University of Vienna, having as mentors: Othmar Spann, the Austrian economist and sociologist who introduced him to the most profound studies of philosophy; and Hans Kelsen, the Austrian Jurist author of the Austrian Constitution of 1920 and the Pure Theory of Law, of whom he became an assistant. Sandoz (2010) emphasizes the importance of this double contribution in Voegelin’s formation:

This was a considerable feat, since Kelsen's and Spann's philosophical positions were viewed as incompatible. Spann's seminars introduced Voegelin to the serious study of the Classic philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and to the German idealist systems of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Hegel e Schelling. (SANDOZ, 2000, p. 35).

On vacation between 1921 and 1922 he got a scholarship in Oxford to improve his English, and graduated from the University in 1922, presenting the thesis ("Reciprocal influences and duplication"). Henriques says that "We can perceive the tension between the individualist and universalistic doctrines of society that will emerge in his future research." (HENRIQUES, 2010, p. 33-34).

Voegelin got a scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation for the period from 1924 to 1926, having gone to the United States to study in the universities of Columbia, Harvard and Wisconsin. He reports that this experience was a rupture in his intellectual development, enabling him to open his perspectives to the world; he learned about the English tradition of "common sense", which he took as a philosophy of life, perceiving its importance "to the cohesion of society." (VOEGELIN, 2015c, p. 56). He realized that this tradition was not present in his native land, and only to a lesser extent in France.

Another significant difference in the US was the lack of Kantian influence in intellectual debates, which he had been used to in Europe. In America, Voegelin found that Christian tradition and classical culture were taken into account, free of Heidegger's influences. On this, he comments that "such a plurality of worlds had a devastating effect" on him. (VOEGELIN, 2015c, p. 61).

However, Voegelin (2015c) confesses that he was heavily influenced by the thinking of George Santayana, Spanish philosopher, poet and essayist, who Voegelin considered as a great philosopher, sensible to the spiritual matters without been linked to dogmas.

Having had the scholarship extended for another year, he went to Paris to study at Sorbonne. At that time Paris was receiving large numbers of Russian refugees. He decided to learn the language to study political documents, as well as French literature and philosophy. Studying Paul Valéry, he noticed that his lucretian philosophy was similar to Jorge Santayana's. (VOEGELIN, 2015c, p. 64).

In 1929, he became *Privatdozent* (professor) of State Theory and Sociology at the University of Vienna; in 1932 he got married to the Viennese Elisabeth (Lissy) Onken, and became a naturalized "Austrian in 1934" (HENRIQUES, 2010, p. 52).

Continuing his research, he began to write about law theory and power theory to develop a *Staatslehre* (2016), a State Theory, which required a chapter on political ideas. He reported that he had to abandon this entire Project and start studying on the issue of race, once National-Socialism began to emerge. He made two books about this, and realizes

[...] that political theory, especially when analyzing ideologies, must be based on Classic and Christian philosophy. (VOEGELIN, 2015c, p. 69-70).

From the researched material, three books were published, *Race and State*, (in two volumes) and *The history of the race idea: from Ray to Carus*, both from 1933.

Hitler's proclamation as a chancellor on January 30th, 1933, followed by the "Authorization Act" of March, which granted him full legislative powers, and the political crisis and Austrian civil war in 1934 propitiated the book *The Authoritarian State* of 1936. According to Voegelin, it was his "[...] **first serious attempt to study ideologies from both sides, right and left** [...]". (VOEGELIN, 2015c, p.73). This book was a watershed moment in his relationship with his former master Kelsen.

Apart from these influences, the Russian revolution was also decisive for the construction of his political theory, realizing that the whole of the events combined together precipitated his research:

The stimuli for going deeper into the matter were provided by political events. Obviously, when you live in a time dominated by the recent Communist revolution in Russia, Marxism (and behind Marxism the work of Marx) becomes a matter of some importance for a political scientist. I began to get interested in the problem of the ideologies. The second great stimulus was, of course, provided by the raise of Fascism and National Socialism. (VOEGELIN, 2011, p. 52).

Henriques (2010, p. 56) emphasizes that the 1936 book makes "an historical juridical analyses of the Austrian constitution", highlighting the difference between Voegelin's proposition of an *Authoritarian State* perception, in relation to the *Democratic State* proposed by Kelsen, and the *Neutral* or *Total State* of Carl Schmitt.

Afterwards, he publishes *Political Religions* and introduces the idea of *Gnosticism*.

The Political Religions and Gnosticism

At Christmas of 1938, Voegelin (2002) publishes *Political Religions*. In this book, the concept of political religion is used as one of the initial elements of his analysis of the political movements of the twentieth century.

By introducing the term, he point out a religious perspective on the political ideologies of his time. Drawing on studies of political symbolism, he traces the earliest political religion of civilization - Egypt and its worship of the Sun god -, especially the worship of Akhenaton, in which the sun is worshiped for being "the life-spreading power" and as a symbol of sacred emanation. He goes on, following the rupture of the Augustinian conception of Christian society by the Cistercian abbot Joachim of Fiore (~1130 - 1202), who applies "the Trinity symbol to the course of history" (VOEGELIN, 1987, p. 87) up to modernity.

With the annexation of Austria by Hitler - the *Anschluss* - Voegelin and his books became a great threat to the regime. He was fired from the University of Vienna and realized he was going to be arrested. Thus, he quickly prepared to emigrate, first going through Switzerland, where his wife met him before and they headed to the United States. His books were destroyed by the Nazis, but fortunately their copies can still be found in his complete works. The book *Political Religions* was reissued in 1929 in Stockholm.

Federici (2011) comments that for this reissue, Voegelin wrote a new preface in which he addressed Thomas Mann, in response to his accusation that Voegelin hadn't been "sufficiently critical of the Nazis". Voegelin reaffirmed his "opposition to collectivism" by arguing that ethical debate, alone, would not provide all the answers to the deeper problem – and is not just about the rupture of "ethically reprehensible actions" – because the central issue is the Evil itself.

In *Political Religions* (2002), Voegelin departs from the Augustinian perception and affirms that National Socialism should be observed through the prism of *Evil in the world*. Not in a deficient way or as some negative conduct, but as a true substance and force that acts in the world; and emphasizes that one cannot fight against this satanic force with morality or feelings of humanity.

He further contends that it is not possible to understand man's life in the political community without including the bodily, spiritual and religious dimensions; in the same way, the political language turns into a symbolic penetration of the mundane human experience through a transcendent and divine experience. (VOEGELIN, 2002).

Voegelin (2002) observes that symbolic and transcendent aspects have influenced the mass attitudes and manifestations of ideologies and totalitarian movements. He proposes that it is the loss of the experience of transcendence that leads to dehumanization; and the attempt of immanentization is what favours the idea of a "*pneumopathological humanity*", (VOEGELIN, 2008, p. 145) a spiritual disease in which "the emphasis is transferred to the experience of the world of things, in the space-time existence." (VOEGELIN, 2008, p. 339).

He states that the suppression of these transcendent religious symbols bring new symbols, that emerge from the scientific language and take their place. (VOEGELIN, 2010, p. 69). To depict this, Voegelin cites one of the most sacred symbols from the political realm and divine realm – the *sacred emanation*:

- a) present in the solar myth from Egypt, it appears in Dante's *Monarchie*;
- b) likewise, it also appears with Louis XIV, who called himself the 'Sun King', in a similar way to God;
- c) with Jean Bodin, the French jurist, adept in the divine right of the kings theory from which he radiates his power.

Therefore, it is necessary to look for the symbolic forms of representation of experience.

The proposal of comprehension of the totalitarian phenomena initially advanced by Voegelin, originating from *political religions*, searching for existing symbols in collective representations, **has as an addition the idea of *gnosticism* as the essence of modernity.**

Voegelin (2015c) mentions that in the 1940s and 1950s, he noticed the “existence of other representations beyond the classic philosophy and revealed Christianity symbolisms, that some specialists called as gnostics” (VOGELIN, 2015c, p. 105). The reading of the introduction of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s book (1905-1988) – a Swiss priest, considered to be one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century –, published in 1937 and named *Prometheus*, awoke him to the Gnosticism question and its application to modern ideological phenomena. He discovered that the idea of Gnosticism in continuity in the modern era, was perceived by other authors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as in the 1935 work of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1869), a German theologian and historian. In his book *The Christian Gnosis or the Christian Religious Philosophy in Its Historical Development*, Baur traced the history of gnosticism “from the first Gnosis of Antiquity” through the Medieval Age, the religion philosophy of Jakob Böhme, Schelling, Schleiermacher and Hegel.” (VOGELIN, 2015c, p. 105).

Studies about Gnosticism gained momentum with other authors, and Voegelin emphasized the existence of the research by Henri Charles Puech (Paris), Gilles Quispel (Utrecht) and Carl Gustav Jung (Zurich) on the subject.

Gnosticism, having, therefore, a central role in Voegelin’s analysis of modernity, portrays six primary characteristics (FEDERICI, 2011, p. 90):

- (1) A “Gnostic is dissatisfied with his situation.” Voegelin notes that this is not unusual or limited to Gnostics;
- (2) Gnostics respond to this dissatisfaction, not by finding fault in human nature (Voegelin notes that “Gnostics are not inclined to discover that human beings in general and they themselves in particular are inadequate”) but rather by claiming that “the world is poorly organized” and that if “something is not as it should be, then the fault is to be found in the wickedness of the world.”;
- (3) Gnostics believe that “salvation from the evil of the world is possible.”;
- (4) Thus Gnostics believe that the world can be fixed and that “from a wretched world a good one must evolve historically.”;
- (5) This evolutionary change is possible because “a change in the order of being lies in the realm of human action, that this salvation act is possible through man’s own efforts.”;
- (6) The Gnostic must therefore work toward “the construction of a formula for self and world salvation” and this will be made evident in “the Gnostic’s readiness to come forward as a prophet who will proclaim his knowledge about the salvation of mankind.”;

However, studies on Gnosticism applied to modern ideologies probably opened up new research and perspectives, which Voegelin diligently addressed. His later works, *Order and History* (2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2010), in five volumes, bring new challenges to the understanding of modern totalitarian phenomena.

Conclusion

Renowned author in international academic environments, Eric Voegelin's thinking is still little explored in Brazil. His extensive work is the fruit of a lifetime dedicated to research, addressing the political, philosophical, transcendental aspects, trying to fight totalitarian ideologies and regimes, proposing answers to the challenges of modernity.

Facts narrated in his biography point directly to the influence, on his research, of the historical and political moment in which he lived, regarding the theme of modern totalitarian movements.

His initial research focused on the concept of *political religions*, bringing reflections on the aspect of religious symbolism **on the intramundane**. The attempt to apply in modernity, the symbolism proposed by Joachim de Fiore on the Third Kingdom, shows, according to the author, the deep connection between the political and religious phenomena.

What makes the author question himself on "how can a civilization, progress and decline at the same time" (VOEGELIN, 1982, p. 98) propelled him to search for answers and truth, throughout his 84 years.

The intention with this work is to open the question to a greater understanding of the subject, and does not pretend to exhaust the theme. It may even contribute to elucidate some flaws on the topic of Gnosticism according to Voegelin pointed out by some authors.

The theme of *Gnosticism* as the essence of modernity deserves to be researched; once applied to totalitarianism, it points to an attempt to "immanentize the eschaton", that is, a salvationist attempt by a leader who believes in being anointed, to produce paradise on Earth.

Voegelin coined a term to express the spiritual disease, the main symptom of which is to omit an element of reality in order to create a new world fantasy: *Pneumopatology*.

This is one of the challenges that modernity leaves as a legacy, and such sphinx enigma, awaits to be revealed.

Seeking a final image for this work, synchronicity happened, and the crucial image that connects this words and the research was found: **Akhenaten as the Sphinx, worshipping Aton.**



Figure 1: Akhenaten as the Sphinx worshipping Aten (or Aton)
(Hans Ollermann, 22 jan. 2008)

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Contact email: adepimenta@gmail.com.