

## Panel 8: “Race, Ethnicity and Politics: Voegelin’s Early Concerns”

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I’ll begin by saying a few words about the paper on Palestinian identity by Prof. Elhajibrahim. I will only mention, but not discuss, her powerful presentation of what she calls “the Palestinian narrative,” to which, as she points out, the West is relatively little exposed; and likewise pass over her vivid exposition of Yasmin Zahran’s novel *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*. About these aspects of her paper, I will just say that she persuasively emphasizes how the literary form of the novel, especially of this particular novel with its three principal voices that speak for three differing viewpoints, is a particularly apt medium for conveying the narrative of a people by way of contrasting viewpoints. One readily acknowledges her points that every culture presents itself by means of a story; that humans are narrative animals; and that we are all—as Voegelin understood—engaged in a quest to make narrative sense of our lives, individual and communal, within the context of the overarching story of human history, and indeed, of the cosmos as a whole—that is, the story being told by what Voegelin in his last writings called the It-reality in which we all participate.

All that I will address, however, is one theoretical element in the paper, insofar as Voegelin’s discussion of the symbolism of “story” as explicated in volume 5 of *Order and History, In Search of Order*, is employed by Professor Elhajibrahim to underscore the importance of “the Palestinian narrative” for the Palestinian identity and “collective memory.” Without in the slightest challenging her assertion that this narrative provides the substance for a crucial sense of identity and offers a deeply resonant symbolic expression for a communal sense of historical meaning and purpose—and without addressing the complex issue the *historical* truth of the Palestinian narrative as she presents it, which is important but separate from my theoretical focus—I would like to suggest that, in my view, Voegelin’s discussion of the symbol of “story” in the passages and chapters quoted in her paper is not perhaps so easily applied to the story of a people, or nation, as the paper suggests.

The context of Voegelin’s discussion is the story of humankind told in the biblical Book of Genesis. He explains that this is a story whose authors are conscious of as expressing a quest for understanding their place, and the place of their people, within the comprehending Whole of reality—It-reality. The concern of the storytellers is self-understanding as participants in the “story of [spiritual] evocation of order from disorder (26).” The essential concern of the story is the attunement of the narrative, as a representative

movement within human history, with what Voegelin calls “the command of the pneumatic Word,” the Word of God (24). The story—or any story from any traditions such as Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist—will have the resonance of “truth,” writes Voegelin, if it resonates with “what is commonly present in everybody’s consciousness” concerning the essential structure, or *logos*, of reality as a whole (26).

Now, not every narrative that is taken hold of as defining a people’s identity and collective memory is *explicitly* concerned with the articulation of attunement with ultimate reality—that is, with the structure of the cosmic story being told by It-reality as an evocation of order from disorder. In much of the narrative of Genesis, as Voegelin indicates, one can indeed find—in such elements as the emergence of light from darkness, or the story of human disobedience to God and consequent exile from the Garden—narrative symbols and events that speak to what is commonly present in everyone’s consciousness about both human existence and the isomorphism between the elemental human quest for understanding order and the unfolding story of reality itself. This is where its “truth” comes from. But not every community-establishing or community-guiding story found in the minds of a people to whom it evokes a sense of collective memory, meaning, and purpose, is necessarily “true” in this metaphysical or existential sense. The narratives may certainly be real, in that they exist and create a community’s identity; but let us note that the twentieth century has offered us plenty of examples of nation-building and nation-cohering narratives that have mobilized societies for action in history that are not at all in attunement with the deep truths of cosmos and history—20<sup>th</sup> century German, Serbian, & Russian national narratives come to mind; and we scarcely need to dwell on the identity-creating narratives underlying imperialist colonialisms. In other words: the stories that establish a people’s identity, and narrate its collective memory, can, existentially and metaphysically speaking, just as easily be untrue, as true. For her use of Voegelin’s account of the symbolism of “story” to be appropriate to her designs, Prof. Elhajibrahim would need to show how “the Palestinian narrative” resonates both with the truth of the drama of history as a whole and with the divine story in process of being told by It-reality—and not just the Palestinian need for, or right to, a narrative—or for that matter, of modern Israel’s need for or right to a national narrative—in order for these theoretical passages of Voegelin and their use of the term “truth” to apply.

Turning to Professor Hoye’s paper: it also makes reference to Voegelin’s notion of It-reality, in the course of its analysis of the impact of social Darwinism on race consciousness in Japan, in the U.S., and on Japanese-American relations in the period between the Meiji restoration and the Second World War. The paper knowledgeably summarizes quite a few major historical developments, including specific social,

political, religious, linguistic, and philosophical phenomena in Japanese as well as in Western (or American) culture. But I would like to focus only on a rather subtle argument he makes regarding Voegelin's notion of It-reality.

This is introduced in the context of his brief treatment of the great Japanese writer Natsume Soseki. There, Professor Hoye suggests that our apperception of It-reality as the supervening context of meaning within which we exist—an apperception lost to obliviousness for many in modernity—becomes damaged when we lose a measured appreciation of any of the four basic partners in the community of being: God, man, world, and society. And he indicates that one way this damage occurs is through the rash application of concepts from the study of one basic area of reality—say, the natural world—to the explanation of the structure of a different basic area of reality—say, society. The notions of “survival of the fittest” and “selection” through competition, as found in Darwinian biology, whatever their merits might be in that context, are only foolishly applied wholesale to social and cultural anthropology. The wisdom traditions of East and West, including the Platonic, Judeo-Christian, and Buddhist traditions, which might otherwise provide a measured, balanced insight into what humans are, and how societies genuinely progress and decline, are rendered “publicly unconscious” when tidy explanations provided by reductionist pseudo-science are embraced by cultures in search of simplistic narratives that can be used to underwrite imperialist or racial dreams of power.

All this is nicely suggested by Professor Hoye, who also points out that it is the task and responsibility of imagination, in the service of existence in truth, to remain vigilantly aware of the four basic partners of the community of being in their respective domains and qualities of being—God or *Urgrund* as a genuine Beyond of transcendence; individuals as those creatures who, as William James recognized, have the capacity to make choices incompatible with the “survival of the fittest”; the natural world as manifesting laws, regularities, and properties of development peculiar to physical realities conditioned thoroughly by space-time, as distinct from humans, who exist in the *metaxy* of immanent and transcendent realities; and society as communities of human beings, whose mutual and universal participation in the transcendent pole of reality, in God or divine ground, precludes any hierarchization of elemental human status whether based on race, ethnicity, nationhood, gender, wealth, social standing, technological sophistication, political party, or any other category that might be used to undermine the worth and dignity of some portions of the human population for purposes of self-aggrandizement or the appeasement of existential fears.