

From "political theology" to "political religion": Voegelin and Carl Schmitt

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In his book on *Politics as Religions*, Emilio Gentile credits Eric Voegelin with the invention, if not of the term (of which earlier occurrences can be found), of the concept of "political religions", a concept which will be systematically used in the 1960s to describe totalitarian regimes. We know that Voegelin himself was not particularly attached to this expression, which he practically does not use in his published work after 1938. He briefly explains himself in his *Autobiographical Reflections*:

I would no longer use the term "religions" because it is too vague and already deforms the real problem of experiences by mixing them with the further problem of dogma or doctrine.

The term "religion" is therefore ambivalent. We mean by it a fundamental experience that man makes of his existence and his participation to an order that links the two levels of temporal and eternal: in this sense, every politic, for Voegelin, has a religious dimension and, vice versa, every religion has a function of structuring the social order. But by the term "religion" we also mean a body of dogmas and doctrines. For Voegelin, this is a secondary aspect of the problem. It is true that totalitarianisms (and maybe not only totalitarianisms) have produced a form of religious propaganda. But what is characteristic of totalitarianisms is not this instrumentalisation of theology, which is only a concomitant phenomenon, but a spiritual perversion.

Among the sources that inspired his title, Voegelin quotes Louis Rougier and his *Mystiques politiques*. He also implicitly refers to French Christian personalists (such as Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac or Joseph Vialatoux) who, before him, had explained totalitarianisms less by their historical and social context than by referring to a kind of spiritual disorder. But nowhere does Voegelin quote Carl Schmitt's famous work, *Political Theology*, published in 1922. Carl Schmitt too had invented, if not an expression (which was used at times from Varro to Bakunin), at least a concept destined for a promising future. Both Schmitt and Voegelin's books share at least one theme: they both put forward that every political doctrine involves a relationship of man to the sacred -- even (and maybe above all) the doctrines that claim to have severed this link.

Why did Voegelin leave out this reference even though he quoted Schmitt several times in his earlier works? The obvious reason is that, in 1938, Carl Schmitt was considered one of the major intellectual figures of Nazism. Surprisingly, Voegelin appears to be virtually ignoring Schmitt's adherence in his 1936 work on the *Authoritarian State*, referring only to the writings of Carl Schmitt of the early 1930s : only a short footnote mentions the more recent developments in his thinking. It is likely that, in 1938, Voegelin had a clearer idea of Schmitt's intellectual project. This is probably why he seldom quoted him in his subsequent published work. But this is not the only reason. Even in the years 1930-1936, when he often discussed Carl Schmitt's theses, Voegelin's interest turned to legal and political issues, such as constitutional law, forms of

governance, analysis of parliamentary democracy and its contemporary development, etc. But the references to Carl Schmitt never concern, or only indirectly, *Political Theology*, published in 1922.

However, I would like to highlight the existence of an implicit discussion between the two authors, a dialogue that, in my view, points to one of the most important alternatives of our time to consider the relationship between politics and religion.

Let us take a look at Voegelin's writings of the 1930s. One may be sensitive to the apparent points of consensus between the two writers, and in particular to their common criticism of the vulnerability of parliamentary democracy when confronted with the rise of radical anti-democratic parties, be it communist and Nazi. In reality, this consensus is superficial, since the two philosophers disagree on the metaphysical, ethical and theological foundations of politics. This disagreement becomes obvious when it comes to the question of decisionism. Voegelin is aware that Schmitt's doctrine cannot be reduced to decisionism. Voegelin occasionally refers to the "catholic" period of Schmitt's thought in the 1920s, as he also refers to the institutionalist period of the mid-1930s [1]. But, more importantly, decisionism appears to him less as a particular doctrine than as a general attitude in Schmitt's thinking. Schmitt's attitude is the reflection of a form of pneumo-pathology that explains his numerous changes of opinion, and in particular his opportunist adherence to Nazism. In short, although Carl Schmitt was not always a decisionist in the doctrinal sense, he remained for Voegelin a decisionist in the sense of "an agnostic and unprincipled existentialist like Sartre", that is to say a sort of nihilist.

One of the clearest texts about Schmitt's decisionism can be found in Voegelin's study on "National Types of Mind and the Limits to Interstate Relations", wrote in the early 1930s. :

I cannot accept Schmitt's decision. For who decides? Schmitt does not tell us; he says that the State bears the decision within itself, thus avoiding naming the subject [...]. The essence of the nation-state, as of other type of political existence, is belief, [...] not decision (CW, XXXII, p. 477-478).

"Who decides?" This question brings to mind one of Hobbes': "*Quis iudicavit? Quis interpretabitur?*" This is also a recurring question for Schmitt: who decides, that is, who is the actual authorized person that embodies legal norm? Only the "ex nihilo" decision, hence purely irrational, can give to the norm, which in itself has no more reality than an ideal abstraction, a "visibility" in the public space. For Voegelin, the question has quite a different meaning. For him, norm is never an abstract idea, separate from concrete political reality. Each norm is an object of representation in the human mind. Therefore, the norm always acts as a motive of

1 [1] On the catholic period of Schmitt's thought, cf. the letter to Theo Morse of November 18 1953 (CW, XXX, p. 184). On the institutionalist period, cf. *The Authoritarian State* (CW, IV, p. 53) and, above all the review of Krupa's Carl Schmitt's *Theorie des « Politischen »* (1937 (CW, XIII, p. 109).

action. "Norms -- says Voegelin -- are components of reality like decisions" 2 [2] . So the question is no longer about the effective subject of decision, but about the general nature of the will that makes decisions. Decision, for Voegelin, is not an irrational act that brings to existence a political order from a normative *nihil*. It is the act of rational will, moved by a representation of the good. As medieval Aristotelians used to say, "*quidquid appetitur, appetitur sub ratione boni*" -- everything that is desired, is desired under the aspect of good. The question thus shifts from decision to the representation that motivates it, hence Voegelin's conclusion: "The substance of the State, is belief, not [...] decision". Any decision thus presupposes a normative aim and a prior orientation of will toward the good. This openness of the human mind toward the good is, for Voegelin, both the fundamental experience that man makes of his existence, and the substantial core of political order.

For both authors therefore, political order structures itself around a core of transcendence. But transcendence does not have the same meaning for Schmitt and for Voegelin. For the former, it essentially means the radical heteronomy of a decision vis-à-vis all forms of legal rationality. For Voegelin, it refers to the subsumption of the legal order by a higher ethical and metaphysical order in which it finds its meaning. The two political structures are linked to two very different theological structures. Schmitt's decisionist political structure fits with a theology of *potentia absoluta Dei*, which finds its roots in late medieval Scotist or Ockhamist theologies. As for Voegelin, he refers to a theology of a Platonic type, for which the divine is not understood as radical otherness, but as the transcendent good toward which the human soul is naturally open.

The radicalisation of the transcendent characteristic of political power for Carl Schmitt, and its comprehension under a fundamentally irrational theological scheme, the origin of which is to be found in the Epicurean *clinamen* of the atoms, paradoxically leads to the realization of the divine at an intra-mundane level, and to the formation of what, precisely, Voegelin calls a "political religion" in 1938. The similar reversal mechanism of a radical theology of *potentia absoluta Dei* to an immanent position of self-affirmation of man has been studied, in a different context (the transition between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance), by Hans Blumenberg in his book on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Ages*, writing that "the provocation of the transcendent absolute passes over at the point of its most extreme radicalization into the uncovering of the immanent absolute" 3 [3] .

Clearly, Carl Schmitt severely criticizes Promethean thoughts of human self-poiesis, as he does their political equivalent, the doctrines of the spontaneous formation of the State by society. Nevertheless, he occasionally reveals some secret fascination, as in his argument against Blumenberg at the end of his second *Political Theology* of 1969. To this liberal optimism, he opposes the Christian theology of original sin. But the problem lies in the meaning he gives to the notion of original sin. In his *Political Theology* of 1922, he underlines the heterodox nature of the conception of original sin of the counterrevolution thinkers, such as Louis de Bonald,

2 [2] CW, XIII, p. 109.

3 [3] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Ages*, trad. L.M. Wallace, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1983, p. 178.

Joseph de Maistre and Donoso Cortès, for whom the state of man after the sin is a state of absolute abjection, preventing man not only from reaching the good, but also from striving to reach it 4 [4] . But in reality, Schmitt himself rallies towards this radical pessimism. I quote the *Notion of politics* of 1927: "All true political theories postulate a corrupt (*böse*) man, fully problematic, of a dangerous and dynamic nature" 5 [5] . And, among these "true" (*echt*) political theories (which exclude liberal political theories as "false" theories), Schmitt quotes among others the names of Joseph de Maistre and of Donoso Cortès : we may conclude that, for Carl Schmitt, "true" political theories postulate a man deprived of the desire of God. The paradox is that, however serious the fault may have been, it nevertheless gave man a real chance, so that the sin appears to be a "felix culpa". Thanks to this fault, hostility is preserved as the foundation of political identity -- I mean an identity based on the seriousness of the human existence. If we remove sin, and with it hostility, we find an economic and cultural society. This society, as Leo Strauss summarized, of peace and recreation, but with no possibility of sacrifice and therefore with no ethical dimension. Evil thus becomes the foundation of an order, besides which there is nothing for man to desire.

By depriving man from momentum toward the divine, the Schmittian conception meets, at least functionally, its antagonist, that is secularized liberalism in its most extreme version, that of Bakunin's atheist anarchism. On a number of occasions, Voegelin analyzed this paradoxical phenomenon in his studies on Hobbes 6 [6] . By removing the desire of God, Hobbes reduced the *homo politicus* to his mere *libido dominandi*, and politics to a mere race for domination. To the transcendent orientation of the Platonic-Christian *Imperium sacrum*, Hobbes substituted a purely immanent orientation of secularized politics. This rebellion of the soul against order constitutes, for Voegelin, the ultimate foundation of totalitarianism. The distortion of the meaning of transcendence into a radical heteronomy, with its corollary -- removing the desire of God -- therefore paradoxically leads to the elevation of the mundane political institution to a deified immanent reality. As Voegelin summarized in his *Political Religions*, "when God is invisible behind the word, the contents of the word will become new gods" 7 [7] . In this context, Carl Schmitt's adherence to Nazism, as opportunistic as it may have been, appears to be quite consistent with his intellectual positions in the 1920s.

4 [4] Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie ...*, München und Leipzig, Duncker und Humblot, 1922, p. 51.

5 [5] Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1932, reed. Berlin, Duncker und Humblot, 1987, p. 61.

6 [6] There are many references to Hobbes' *Leviathan* as a step toward the formation of the modern state, of which totalitarianism is the assumption, and above all in the *Political Religions* of 1938. However, one of the clearest text, to my view, is to be found in the letter to Robert Heilman of August 20 1959 (CW, XXX, p. 393).

7 [7] CW, V, p. 60.

To conclude, Voegelin's reflection on the relationships between religions and politics (what we could call in a very specific sense "religious politics") has nothing to do with "political theology" in Carl Schmitt's sense. By "political theology", Carl Schmitt designates an analogy of structure between two types of rationalities, both confronted with the problem of visibility (that is of concreteness) and, therefore, with a certain form of irrationality (revelation, dogma and miracles for theology, sovereign authority for politics). Both rationalities, while similar, keep their autonomy in their specific order. According to Voegelin, such autonomy does not exist: the question of the relationship between theology and politics is always presented in terms of direct relationship. The man who lives in society is the same man who strives for a transcendent end. State and church, says Voegelin in his course on *Hitler and the Germans*, are not two different societies, but "the same societies, which only have different representations, one temporal and one spiritual [...]. There isn't, on the one side, the Churches and, on the other, political people, but [...] people are the same in both cases" 8 [8] .

In fact, political society can never acquire the full status of *societas perfecta* as it does for Schmitt. Voegelin's "religious politics", if we can call it that, has a different meaning. It designates the structuring presence of the religious experience at the heart of the rational activity of man, and in particular of his communitarian activity. This presence preserves the finitude of politics -- or what could be called a zetetic of politics --, preventing its self-formation in a mundane theology (be it republican, liberal or totalitarian). More generally, it preserves the fundamental inquietude of the human soul and its openness to the question of the transcendence of the foundation 9 [9] .

8 [8] *Hitler and the Germans*, CW, XXI, p. 156 and 175.

9 [9] This text is the summarized version of a longer article, which is to be published in French shortly : 'De la théologie politique aux religions politiques : Voegelin et Carl Schmitt', in Th. Gontier & D. Weber, *Eric Voegelin. Politique, religion et histoire*, Paris, éd. du Cerf.