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TOTALITARIANISMS AS POLITICAL RELIGIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

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Despite all contents of secularisation, a certain kind of religious element is important in every modern totalitarian system, like Communism or National Socialism. Therefore, totalitarian systems can be regarded as political religions. The following historical and philosophical reflections on the history of ideas of political religions will contain three major parts: First, early uses of the concept 'political religion' by Campanella and Clasen in the 16th and 17th centuries will be considered, then the interpretation of totalitarianism as political religion will be analysed, with regards to Eric Voegelin, Raymond Aron and several ramifications, and finally, the perspective of political messianism in Jacob Leib Talmon's work will be discussed.

Keywords:
ideology, political messianism, political theology, religion and politics, secular religions, secularism, theory of totalitarianism

1. EARLY USES OF THE CONCEPT 'POLITICAL RELIGION': CAMPANELLA AND CLASEN

1.1. Tommaso Campanella

Giovanni Domenico – later Tommaso – Campanella (1568–1639) entered the Dominican Order in 1583 and devoted himself to theological studies. In 1591, he was imprisoned several times for heresy. He spent the last years of his life in Paris, in the cloister of Saint-Jacques under the protection of Cardinal Richelieu.

As George Thomson had already done before him in 1606,[1] Campanella attributed a significant role to the relationship of religion and politics. Where both Campanella and Thomson speak of *religio politica,* they stand at the beginning of the formation of the concept of 'political religion'.

In his comprehensive *Metaphysics* (1638), which is structured into three major parts, Campanella examines religion at the beginning of the sixteenth book. With regard to its relationship to politics, he describes an appropriate rhetoric as the core of political religion as well as public ceremonies:

> Beyond a sacrifice, political religion (*religio politica*) also requires a nice-sounding speech, but much more yet, a speech that addresses one's mind: for the people are occupied with bodily [fleshly] things and neither knows how to philosophise appropriately about God nor how to demand thanks or give thanks, as it [political religion] teaches it, it must announce priests and hear prayers and learn to pray from them: this is also of use to the priests in stimulating both the spirit of others and their own: for otherwise, a nice-sounding speech is worth nothing, if it does not also address the mind.[2]

> For the first mystery, which is common to all nations, as St. Thomas [Aquinas] establishes, also consists in faith and in the question as to why each who believes in God, entrusts his sons and his property to God for this reason: as a result of this a public portrayal of religion in the form of various ceremonies, ablutions, circumcision, and so on became clear in politics, and thus are they [or is one] cleansed of original and present sins.[3]

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1 George Thomson, *Vindex vertatis adversus Iustum Lipsium libri duo. Prior insanam eius religionem politicam, fatuam nefariamque de Fato, sceleratissimam de fraude doctrinam refellit* (London: Meester, 1606). In his work, Thomson admonishes, among other things, the frequent conversions of Justus Lipsius. See Martin Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002), 163.

2 Praeter sacrificum indiget religio politica, etiam oratione vocali, nedum mentali: quoniam Populus corporeis occupatus nesciens Philosophari rite de Deo, neque petere gratias, neque agere, ut docet, indiget audire sacerdotes praedicantes & orantes, & ab eis discere orare: & hoc etiam prodest sacerdotibus ad excitandam aliorum & propriam mentem: alioquin oratio vocalis valet nihil, nisi adsit & mentalis. (Tommaso Campanella, *Universalis Philosophiae seu Metaphysicarum Rerum, iuxta Propria Dogmata* (Paris: D. Langlois, 1638), pars III, book XVI, ch. V, art. 1, 307).

3 Nam & primum mysterium omnibus nationib. commune, ut notat S. Thom. est fidei quo quisquis credit in Deum, & per hoc comendat se & filios & sua Deo: ex quo eluxit in Politica Religionis protestatio sub diversis

Campanella points out the necessity of the public education of the people in religious matters by a priest. The citizens must, therefore, be introduced *officially* into religious thinking and speaking. Hereby is expressed, not uncritically, the occasionally propagandistic character of public religious speech, for Campanella speaks of a 'stimulation of the mind'. Beyond these, public religious ceremonies are presented, in particular confession and expiation, perhaps also initiation; but the personal confession of faith is also clarified.

Campanella expressly names the concept 'political religion' in his *Metaphysics* of 1638, but earlier, in 1623, he had already described a state system founded on political religion, in his utopian writing *Civitas Solis* (State of the Sun).[4] This work of Campanella is reminiscent of Plato's *Politeia* – not only for the reason of its dialogue form, but also because of the meaning of the sun, which represents the idea of good according to Plato (*Politeia* 509 b). However, Campanella does not use the concept 'political religion' literally in the *Civitas Solis*. The supreme ruler of this utopian state is a priest: he is called a 'metaphysicus' or 'Sol'. Further, he is 'the head of everyone in secular and spiritual things, and all businesses and disputes are ultimately decided by his judgement'.[5] Only he, who is knowledgeable about religions, morals, customs and manual arts of all peoples attains the dignity of the 'Sol'.[6] Like in Plato's *Politeia,* civil servants regulate and influence all areas of daily life: education, division of labour, meals, reproduction, raising of children and the conduct of war, to mention only the most important areas. The area of the 'religion of the members of the State of the Sun' is precisely described by Campanella like a political religion.[7] As the supreme priest, the 'Sol', is responsible for the state cult: 'But then he [the Sol] sacrifices to God and prays; previously, however, he confesses to God the sins of the entire people publicly on the altar of the temple.... [Y]et without calling any one sinner by name. After that, he absolves the people....'[8]

This portrayal of the public cult, closely related in terms of content with the previously cited passage from the *Metaphysics,* already shows the collectivistic character of this religion. It may thoroughly be described as a political religion. In this state cult, even

ceremoniis, lavacris, circumcisione, & c. & sic ab originali, & actuali culpa mundantur. (Ibid. ch. VII, art. 3, 214). A further reference to religious ceremonies in the political sphere can be found in ibid. ch. VII, art. 4, 215: 'ceremonialia politicè'.

4 Tommaso Campanella, 'Sonnenstaat', in *Der utopische Staat,* ed. by Klaus J Heinisch (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1987), 111–169. Original text: Tommaso Campanella, 'Civitas solis', in *Realis Philosophiae epilogisticae partes IV* (Frankfurt/M.: Gottfried Tambach, 1623). Citations from Campanella's *Civitas Solis* are, in this contribution, according to Heinisch.

5 Ibid. 119–120.

6 Ibid. 126. The name, 'Sol', refers in my view, to two things: first, he is 'the only one' in Latin, *solus,* who has at his disposal such a treasure of knowledge that he does justice to the position of the 'Sol'. Further, he shines with his knowledge lofty over all like the sun in Latin, *sol.* Eric Voegelin also enters into the sun metaphor in the sphere of state power. See Eric Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 2nd ed. (München: Fink, 1996), 29–30.

7 Campanella, 'Sonnenstaat', 153–162. Thomas More describes a similar conception of religion in his *Utopia:* Thomas More, 'Utopia', in *Der utopische Staat,* 96–106. Francis Bacon, by contrast, prefers Christianity as the religion in his utopian *New Atlantis:* Francis Bacon, 'Neu-Atlantis', in *Der utopische Staat,* 184–186.

8 Campanella, 'Sonnenstaat', 153.

human sacrifices are foreseen – albeit voluntary ones.[9] This, too, points towards a coercive character of Campanella's utopian state concept, one almost verging on a totalitarian character. Similar to political religions of antiquity, the priests are a long mediating 'bond between God and the human being'.[10] The human fate of the citizens of the *Civitas Solis* depends upon them alone. Hereby, the priests – under the instruction of the 'Sol' – also claim to be authorised to advise about things 'that they have recently discovered for the well-being of the state and [beyond that] to all peoples of the world.'[11] Indeed, this claim thoroughly admits a bold arc to the imperialism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one that stands in historical connection with the totalitarianism of the 20th century. The staging of the religion of the State of the Sun also reminds of the pompous parades that were typical of totalitarian systems. In the same way do the occasions, the holidays without genuinely religious backgrounds, as well as celebrations and memorial days of the state, remind of festivals in totalitarian systems. One is almost tempted to believe that one has a Fascist or National Socialist parade or festival before one's eyes in the following:[12]

> New moon and full moon are also both holidays, just as much as the day of founding of the state, certain victory memorial days, and so on. Then music and singing rings out from women; then one hears drums, trumpets and cannons. The poets sing the praise of the great field marshals and their victories.[13]

A concluding, equally apocalyptic and clairvoyant interpretation of the future in Campanella's dialogue of the early 17th century might serve as a further indication of his critique of his era and its religion: '[There] will occur a reformation and renewal of the laws, of the arts and of the sciences. And they [the citizens of the State of the Sun] say that, from now on, Christianity is facing a great upheaval; first, there will be annihilation and eradication, but then there will be building up and planting, and so on.'[14]

Campanella's dialogue *Civitas Solis* points far ahead in this description of the future, too: the description of progress, but also of violent upheavals, accurately describes both the historical reality of the violent revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries and the reality of the period of the imperialism that ends with the epoch of totalitarian violence in the 20th century.

Campanella's insights, therefore, represent an important step in the conceptual history of political religion: if he names the concept, 'political religion' literally in his *Metaphysics,*

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid. 154.

11 Ibid.

12 On the theme of 'festivals and celebrations in National Socialism', see Wolfgang Kratzer, *Feiern und Feste der Nationalsozialisten. Aneignung und Umgestaltung christlicher Kalender, Riten und Symbole* (München: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität [Diss. phil.], 1998). See also Yvonne Karow, *Deutsches Opfer. Kultische Selbstauslöschung auf den Reichsparteitagen der NSDAP* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997).

13 Campanella, 'Sonnenstaat', 155.

14 Ibid.

in his *Civitas Solis* he also describes a religion that manifests clearly recognisable features of the political religions of the 20th century – in its controlling character, for example, one that enlists everything.

1.2. Daniel Clasen

Some years after Campanella, Daniel Clasen (1622–1678) critically analysed the theme of politics and religion in Germany.[15] Dietrich Reinkingk argued in a similar way during that time in his *Biblische Policey* (1653): 'That right and authority in religious matters accrue to the secular authority.'[16] Also Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff in *Teutscher Fürsten-Stat* (1656) underlined, that 'the prince of the land gives laws and ordinances in religious matters'.[17] These, too, provided examples of the extension of state power into the sphere of religion in the 17th century. In general, 'a 'politicisation' of philological, religious, scientific and historical research'[18] can also be ascertained during this period in Germany. Clasen's professor in political philosophy, Hermann Conring, especially shaped his understanding of politics. Clasen, who was a jurist and philologist, was also certainly influenced in his thoughts by his philology professor Christoph Schrader, who had brought back a liberal spirit to Helmstedt from his period of study in Holland. Clasen's posing of political questions issued from his environment, which was formed by philology and political theory; in particular, the question of political religion also issued from it. Thus did Clasen publish his first larger writing *De religione politica* in 1655,[19] which made him well known and brought him a position as a Professor in Helmstedt in 1661. In his work *De religione politica,* Clasen presents 'the political dimension and function of religion'.[20] Hereby, Clasen is oriented less towards the theoretical standpoint of an ideal-typical relationship of politics and religion than upon the ruling practice of the leading political situation of his time. It was nonetheless necessary to clarify continually, which ruling claim the state has over religion and church; hereby – precisely in Germany during that period – it was always necessary to deliver a balanced judgement as to the relationship between Christianity and *raison d'état*. Thus, Clasen – like Campanella before him – goes especially into the abuse of religion as an instrument by which to legitimise rule. In contrast to Campanella,

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15 On politics and religion in Germany in the 17th century see also the chapter entitled 'Polizeibegriff in den älteren Regimentstraktaten und in der christlichen Staatslehre des 17. Jahrhunderts', in Hans Maier, *Die ältere deutsche Staats- und Verwaltungslehre,* 4th ed., in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4 (München: C. H. Beck, 2009), 147–204.

16 Ibid. 187, from Dietrich Reinkingk, *Biblische Policey,* 5th ed. (Frankfurt/M.: Bencard, 1701), I, axiom VI.

17 Maier, *Die ältere deutsche Staats- und Verwaltungslehre*, 192, according to Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff, *Teutscher Fürsten-Stat,* ed. by Andreas Simson von Biechling (Frankfurt/M. – Jena: Meyer, 1737), pt. II, ch. I, paras 7–8, 38–41.

18 Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund,* 223.

19 Daniel Clasen, *De religione politica* (Magdeburg: Johannes Müller, 1655). See Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund,* 223.

20 Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund,* 216.

however, he first systematises the various politico-religious thematic circles and sources of his time in his work.[21] Therefore, Clasen was regarded as a proponent of political religion. In theological circles of the time, he was suspected of atheism, because he chose the theses of political religion as the chapter titles of his book and criticised them only in the discussion. In a Machiavellian way, the meaning of religion depends less upon the particular confession than upon the practicability of the religion with respect to the political situation: 'The supreme ruler should uphold the religion that supports the reason of state, and he should forcefully move his subjects to it if he is not capable of doing so by a gentler path.'[22]

Nonetheless, it would be, as Martin Mulsow puts it, 'certainly mistaken to suspect a radical in Clasen'.[23] His is a liberal mind that is occupied in a provocative yet critical way with a relevant topic of his time. Conversely, it is Clasen's goal that the readers also make a critical judgement.[24] This is why he often abstains, especially in his later, provocative writings,[25] from making a decided critique of the position portrayed. Clasen stands with his portrayal of political religion in the conceptual history of the political religions in the 20th century. Hereby, however, there is a significant difference between Campanella and Clasen: it is no longer a traditional religion, but one's own ideology that represents the content of political religion.

2. THE INTERPRETATION OF TOTALITARIANISMS AS POLITICAL RELIGIONS OR POLITICAL MESSIANISMS: ERIC VOEGELIN, RAYMOND ARON AND JACOB L TALMON

2.1. Eric Voegelin

The jurist, political theorist, and philosopher Erich Wilhelm, later Eric,[26] Voegelin (born 1901 in Cologne, died 1985 in Palo Alto/Cal., USA), who taught in Vienna in the 1930s, wrote a short treatise in 1938: *Die politischen Religionen* [The Political Religions].[27] This work was formative in the concept of political religions in the 20th century. The period of

[21] Ibid. 216, 221–222.

[22] Princeps eam Religionem amplectatur, quae faciat ad Status Rationem, et ad eam subditos commoveat vi, si leniore via non possit. (Clasen, *De religione politica,* ch. X, 222).

[23] Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund*, 220.

[24] Ibid. 222.

[25] Daniel Clasen, *De oraculis gentilium et in specie de Vaticiniis Sibyllinis libri tres* (Helmstedt: Henning Müller, 1673); Daniel Clasen, *Theologia gentilis* (Frankfurt/M. – Leipzig: Friedrich Lüderwald, 1684).

[26] Voegelin's first names are Erich Hermann Wilhelm. Voegelin used the anglicised form of his first name after his immigration to America.

[27] Eric Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen* (Wien: Bermann-Fischer, 1938), 2nd ed. (Stockholm–Berlin: Bermann-Fischer, 1939), new edition by Peter J. Opitz (München: Fink, 1993, 2nd ed. 1996). On the new edition of Opitz, see the extensive review of Ernst Nolte, 'Von Echnaton zu Hitler', *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* 07 December 1993.

his life when he wrote this essay was filled with tension: the terror of the National Socialists forced him to immigrate to the United States a short time later in the same year. Although Voegelin himself did not regard *Die politischen Religionen* as central to his later work,[28] the text nonetheless offers a first, direct glimpse into Voegelin's perspective on the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

The intersecting topics of Voegelin's study provide not only a historical interpretation of the development of totalitarian regimes, but a philosophical analysis of the relationship between religion, politics and the state. Psychological assessments of the development of the mass regime also play a role here. In strokes that are occasionally very broad, Voegelin sketches a universal history of political religions. Beginning with Egyptian antiquity, he traces it through many epochs and thinkers of Western European intellectual history up to Voegelin's own era: to 1938 and the era of the totalitarian despotic regime – specifically, to that of National Socialism. Voegelin had already analysed the concepts of "total" and "authoritarian" two years earlier in 1936 in *Der autoritäre Staat* [The Authoritarian State], a work that focused on the 'problem of the Austrian state.'[29]

The foreword to *Die politischen Religionen* clarifies Voegelin's intention. Writing in Cambridge, Massachusetts at Christmas in 1938, Voegelin speaks of the 'radical' struggle against National Socialism. He means 'radical' in a very literal sense here: 'I do not wish to say... that the struggle against National Socialism should not also be an ethical struggle. It is simply not carried out radically in my opinion; and it is not carried out radically because it lacks its *radix*, its root in religiosity.'[30]

What is important for Voegelin in this context is progressive secularisation: 'The secularisation of life that is borne in the idea of humanity [is] the very same ground... upon which anti-Christian religious movements like National Socialism could flourish in the first place.'[31] As Voegelin's later work also indicates, he regards secularisation to be a factor far more important than the 'relapse into barbarism' that was often lamented in connection with totalitarian regimes. In presenting the 'problem', Voegelin's very first sentence strikes at the heart of his seminal interpretation of the political movements of his era: 'To speak of political religions and to understand the movements of our time not only as political ones, but above all as religious ones is not yet a matter of course at the present time, even though the facts compel the attentive observer to speak this way.'[32]

Voegelin holds the very strict conceptual distinction between the spheres of politics and religion to be responsible for the current failure to recognise that religion and politics share their roots in the essence of the human being, in its 'creatureliness' (Max Scheler).

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28 See Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographsiche Reflexionen* (München: Fink, 1994), 69–70.

29 Eric Voegelin, *Der autoritäre Staat. Ein Versuch über das österreichsche Staatsproblem* (Wien – New York: Springer, 1997), 1st ed. (Wien: Springer, 1936). See especially the first section on the symbols 'total' and 'authoritarian', 9–55.

30 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen*, 6.

31 Ibid. 7.

32 Ibid. 11.

When we speak of religion, we intuitively think above all of the church; when we speak of politics, we first associate it with the state and its institutions. Seeking to draw these divorced spheres closer together, Voegelin broadens the concept of religion to include not only the soteriological religions, but all religious phenomena. On the other side, he extends the concept of the state beyond the purely secular sphere of the organisation of communal being out to the sphere of the religious.[33] Thus is the political 'resacralised', with antiquity providing the model.[34] In *The New Science of Politics* (1952) Voegelin assumes that in the perspective of universal history the process of 'de-devinisation' was followed by the process of 're-devinisation'.[35]

In *Die politischen Religionen,* Voegelin first defines the 'state' in 'scholarly terms' as 'human beings in association, settled on one territory'.[36] What becomes problematic then is the concept of power. A genuine power stands above all other things; it is a power of powers that has no power above it and 'powers below it only through its toleration'.[37] This is what Voegelin understands by 'original power':[38] A power, which has no power above it. It should not be overlooked that the religious sphere enters into the definition of the state via the concept of power. To the extent that the power that was present from the beginning has been decapitated and a secular head set upon it, that power becomes secular, pertaining to the state. That which is in fact transcendent now becomes secular. Thus, the state originates from its self. A natural hierarchy of powers derived from the original, divine power has been lost. Voegelin mentions Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in this context. With the state existing in and for itself, according to Voegelin, Hegel intended the nation to become the spirit of its own immediate reality and thereby the absolute power on earth.[39] Voegelin sees a grave danger in the Hegelian 'spiritualisation' of the nation as the state: the translation of the secular power of human beings into a purely spiritual power ultimately renders it a *realissimum,* a most real thing, of the sort that the world-transcendent God originally had been. Yet this *realissimum* of the Hegelian spirit is already 'in-human' according to Voegelin.[40] Thus, secular political power becomes 'the core of religious experience', a 'mystical process'.[41]

33 See ibid. 15–16, 12–13.

34 See on this, among others, Peter Berghoff, 'Säkularisierung und Resakraliserung politischer Kollektivität', in *Säkularisierung und Resakralisierung in weltlichen Gesellschaften. Ideengeschichtliche und theoretische Perspektiven,* ed. by Mathias Hildebrandt, Manfred Brocker and Hartmut Behr (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2001), 57–70.

35 Eric Voegelin, *Die Neue Wissenschaft der Politik* (München: Anton Pustet, 1959), 153–154 (1st ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952).

36 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 12.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 According to ibid. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 'Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts', in *Werke in 20 Bänden. Theorie-Werkausgabe,* vol. 7, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), § 270, 415–431.

40 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 14.

41 Ibid.

As for 'religion', Voegelin remarks that human beings experience their existence as creaturely and therefore, as St Augustine also says, it is questionable. Hence, Voegelin incorporates human existential experiences into his reflections. The religious experience tugs at the navel of the soul, at the nexus connecting the human being to the cosmos. In offering his anthropological definition of religion, Voegelin refers to Max Scheler's *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* [The Position of Man in the Cosmos] (1928).[42] Besides Scheler,[43] Voegelin cites the Jesuit Erich Przywara,[44] Alois Dempf[45] and others as his sources. He also speaks in this context of an 'intentio', a 'tension towards God',[46] in which one should locate one's own human existence and through which one discovers the supreme existence, God: 'Whenever a real thing can be recognised as a sacred thing in the religious experience, it becomes the most real thing of all, the *realissimum*.'[47]

These conceptual definitions set the parameters for Voegelin's intellectual history of the development of political religions. Such religions were not secular at first,[48] but gradually assumed a secular character that culminated in the totalitarian movements of the 20th century. Following the Egyptologist James H Breasted,[49] Voegelin states that the first 'political religion' of a 'civilised people' was the 'sun faith of the Egyptians'.[50] The most highly developed form of the sun cult is said to go back to Akhenaton. Yet even the first kings of Egypt understood themselves as successors of Horus, the sun god, who governed the country in its mythic beginnings.[51] Similar to the Roman emperors, especially after the reign of Caligula in the 1st century A.D., the Egyptian pharaohs were worshipped as gods after their death.

The *ekklesía,* church in a broad sense, represents a hierarchical principle all its own. The concept of *ekklesía* was developed from the Pauline letters – in particular, from the *Letter to the Romans,* the *Letter to the Hebrews* and the *First Letter to the Corinthians.*[52] Understanding the church as the mystical body of Christ, *corpus Christi mysticum,*[53] symbolises all people, who are disciples of Jesus Christ and orientate their lives to Him.

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42 Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos,* 14th ed. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1998).

43 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 67.

44 Erich Przywara, 'Religionsphilosophie Katholischer Religion', in *Handbuch der Philosophie,* section II (München–Berlin: Oldenbourg, 1927).

45 Alois Dempf, *Sacrum Imperium. Geschichts- und Staatsphilosophie im Mittelalter und der Renaissance* (München–Berlin: Oldenbourg, 1929).

46 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 16. The use of the terms 'tension back towards so./sth.' in the context of 'religion' is etymologically problematic: *religio* is derived more from *re-legere,* 'to do (something) carefully' than from *religare,* 'to bind back', according to Ernst Feil, *Religio,* vol. I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), 39–49.

47 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 17.

48 Michael Henkel refers in his introductory study particularly to the originally non-secular character of political religion. See Michael Henkel, *Eric Voegelin* (Hamburg: Junius, 1998), 76.

49 James H Breasted, *Geschichte Ägyptens,* transl. by Hermann Ranke (Stuttgart: Parkland, s. a.).

50 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 19.

51 See Breasted, *Geschichte Ägyptens,* 43, 47–60.

52 Rom. 12:3–8; Heb. 5:5–10; 9:11–24; 10:1–25; 1Cor. 12:12–30.

53 1Cor. 12:27.

The *ekklesía* is a divinely legitimated hierarchy all its own; it has its own substance, one in which the symbolism of the community plays an essential role. Although the *ekklesía* exists alongside the secular hierarchy, it encompasses both secular and divine kingdoms. 'Modern inner-worldly political units', of which the totalitarian mass movements of the 19th and 20th centuries are also examples, are 'determined by reinterpretations of the substance of the ekklesia'[54] – states Voegelin.

With the filling of Christian communities with natural content – in other words, with the view that the 'populus Christianus [was a] nation among the nations'[55] – the spiritually constituted communities were reorganised and institutionalised as inner-worldly, secular bodies. The development of purely political communities, of states in a modern sense, begins. This is why elements of the *ekklesía* have manifested themselves in the Christian church in part, but also in the state up to the present days, according to Voegelin. This holds even if the state is decidedly opposed to the church, but nonetheless demands freedom, equality and fraternity for its citizens – as was the case with the French Revolution. Here, Jacobinism became a certain kind of 'civil religion', which was much more a political religion than the civil religion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tradition. And it was far away from a Christian religion. Some elements of Rousseau's civil religion have also asserted themselves in the state and social community of the United States. Consequently, individual members of the United States are seen to be bound together by a 'like-mindedness',[56] as Robert Neely Bellah also pointed out. Indeed, the United States provides an example of the establishment of civil religion via the legitimation of the ruling order, as Bellah has demonstrated over the last decades.[57]

Voegelin shows that, although National Socialism strongly distances itself from the Christian church, its basic form is still that of a mystical body and its limbs bound into a unit by the *pneûma,* spirit.[58] Here, an analogue to the *ekklesía* lives on in the requirement for 'spiritual conformity'.[59] In condensed form, this same statement demonstrates Voegelin's basic thesis, which is by no means uncontentious: the thesis of an immanent community that allows the mystical *pneûma* of the *ekklesía* to live on through the sense of the fated

54 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 32. More precise observations on the development of the world-immanent communities and mass movements can be found in Voegelin's essay entitled *The People of God* (1941). Beginning at around the year 1300, the Christian Church could no longer perform the integration of eschatological and Gnostic splinter groups, which was important to the preservation of its authority. Thus a revolutionary movement devleoped that led, via the Protestant Reformation, to further divisions. The development revealed ultimately its 'secularized, anti-Christian character', which peaked in the political mass movements of the 20th century. See Eric Voegelin, *Das Volk Gottes* (München: Fink, 1994), 25–26.

55 Ibid. 34.

56 Ibid.

57 According to Robert N Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 96, no 1 (1967), 7–8. Bellah refers in his characterisation of the American civil religion particularly to the entrance speeches of various American presidents: here, 'God' is often spoken about without making reference to individual religions. Bellah distinguishes his specifically American conception of the civil religion from Rousseau's conception (ibid. 5–9).

58 Eph. 4:15–16.

59 Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', 35.

and missionary character of its own movement. This occurs although, or even because, the movement rejects the Christian church and religion; no totalitarian regime regarded itself as a religion at all! The spiritual regions of the individual human being that had previously been occupied by religion are now occupied by immanent ideologies that virtually make the inhuman demands of their regimes a 'sacral duty'.[60]

A further symbol of the distinction between secular and divine spheres lies in the designation 'spiritual and temporal'. Taken together, these concepts indicate a side of existence that is spiritual and religious on the one hand and on the other hand has a side that is distinct, but not separate, from the former: a temporal-secular side. This distinction reminds us of Mircea Eliade's portrayal of *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957)[61] – a portrayal that retains its significance in a secular horizon of meaning. Here, Voegelin introduces Saint Augustine as an example from intellectual history: in *De civitate Dei* (c. 420), Augustine distinguishes a *civitas Dei*, state of God, and a *civitas terrena,* immanent state, whereby both *civitates,* citizenships, are intermingled on the journey within this world.[62] The *civitas Dei,* which began as a state of angels, is directed towards an eschatological fulfilment of history at the end of the ages.[63] The pure equation of the *civitas Dei* with the church and of the *civitas terrena* with the state is too simplistic, but should still be interpreted, even though such tendencies arise in Augustine's own presentation. Both *civitates* are to be understood in terms of internal disposition rather than in institutional terms: if the citizens of the *civitas Dei* live in accordance with God, then the citizens of the *civitas terrena* are those, who are hostile to God and Christ.[64] Thus does Augustine's concept of the *civitas Dei* also include those pre-Church and pre-Christian peoples, who are *bonae voluntatis,* of good will. The historical background of Augustine's concept of the two *civitates* was the Visigoths' invasion of Rome in the year 410: Augustine defended Christianity, which had yet to establish itself as the state religion, against the accusation that it had not been capable of preventing the misfortune of the invasion. What counts is solely the steadfast internal attitude of the Christian, which is formed by the discipleship of Christ, no matter how hostile the environment is, in which the believing Christian resides. The concept of the two *civitates* is not entirely clear, however, because a clear, institutional distinction between state and church was lacking, even in Augustine's era. During the early 5th century, it will be recalled, Christianity was still on the path to becoming a strong state-bearing religion.

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60 On the creation of a 'new human being' in totalitarianisms, see also Barbara Zehnpfenning, 'Der 'Neue Mensch' – von der religiösen zur säkularen Verheißung', in *Säkularisierung und Resakralisierung in weltlichen Gesellschaften,* 81–95.

61 Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane. Vom Wesen des Religiösen* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1990).

62 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, in *Migne Patrologia Latina*, vol. 41, I, preface, 13–14.

63 Ibid. XI, XII, XXII, 315–376, 751–804.

64 See, among others, ibid. XIV, c. 28, 436.

The 'new ekklesiae [sic!]',[65] known as the national states, developed in various ways throughout European history. They arose in a process for which parts of the old *ekklesía* gradually detached themselves from the universal kingdom with its pinnacle in God, and sealed themselves off within the immanent world. In the process, they became fonts of the sacral in their relations with another. According to Voegelin, the development of the 20th century political religions is already anticipated at this stage. As his discussion on Emperor Frederick II demonstrates, Voegelin sees political religions arise from a melding of spiritual and temporal spheres on the temporal side of secular rule and power. Hereby, political religions span a spectrum from the 'kingdom of evil' that was initially understood to be the opposite of the liberal state up to totalitarian systems. Ultimately, political religions posit whole new counter-kingdoms; such kingdoms must necessarily be destroyed if the purpose of the reigning political religion – which leads the world to what it sees to be good – is to be attained. In the case of National Socialism, the counter-kingdom is world Jewry. The 'politico-religious symbolism'[66] remains the same as that of the *ekklesía,* but its content has radically changed to become secular and non-transcendent. 'Religiosity' becomes 'political', the 'mission of God' becomes the 'mission of history'.[67] The divine order is suppressed; Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's basic question, asking why there is something and not nothing, sinks into oblivion, despite its resumption by Martin Heidegger. The faith in science gains ground. The dominant image of the world becomes increasingly atheistic in the 19th and 20th centuries: one need to think here only of Auguste Comte's law of stages,[68] leading from a theological-fictive stage through a metaphysical-abstract stage to a positive-scientific one, and of the almost total devaluation of religion by Karl Marx[69] and Sigmund Freud.[70] The question of human existence is the only question left open to the human being; beyond this, the secular content obscures all divine content.[71] What is more, the elevation of partial world-content to an absolute restricts the value of the human being as a person. Although reference to transcendence is integral to the essence of the human being in Voegelin's view, such reference is made impossible by the absolutisation of contents of the immanent world.[72] New apocalyptic visions emerge. This is not a kind of spiritualisation, but a kind of scientification of the world to be immanent:

65 Not an admissible plural, even if it reads thus with Voegelin. It would have to be read either the Greek *ekklesíai,* or the Latin *ecclesiae.*

66 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 49.

67 Ibid.

68 See Auguste Comte, *Rede über den Geist des Positivismus* (1844), 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1966), 4–41.

69 See Karl Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Hegel'schen Rechts-Philosophie', in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (1844), 71–72, esp. 72 ('*Opium* des Volks').

70 See Sigmund Freud, 'Die Zukunft einer Illusion' (1927), in *Studienausgabe,* vol. IX (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), 135–189, esp. 164–189.

71 See Eric Voegelin, *Realitätsfinsternis,* transl. by Dora Fischer-Barnicol (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2010).

72 Michael Henkel also underlines: 'For the person, the reference to transcendence [is] constitutive.' See Henkel, *Eric Voegelin,* 85.

> The final kingdom is no longer a supernatural community of the spirit, but a secular condition of perfected humanity. Kant's ideas of a history according to the intention of a citizen of the world present an idea of history in which the rational human person, as a world-immanent one, ascends to ever-higher levels of perfection.[73]

According to Immanuel Kant, the human being is always a citizen of two worlds: the immanent world and the transcendent world.

'Race theory' is said to be an important component of political religions. In 1933, Voegelin's book *Rasse und Staat* [Race and State] already presented important reflections on this theory.[74] Human corporality is used as a basis upon which to present ideas of the body that are crucial to forming the body of the state.[75] One such idea concerning the body is the idea of race. Whereas race theories are underpinned by biologic foundations, the race ideal is based upon spiritual, mythical constructs that constitute a certain kind of *corpus mysticum*.[76] The ideology of National Socialism contains both components – both mystical and biological ones. In *Die politischen Religionen,* Voegelin demonstrates that race theory exploits transcendent contents for secular purposes: he names the early German idealistic philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who describes a 'revelation' in which he shows the kingdom of God realised already in this world.[77]

The individual's belief to the collective articulates itself according to Voegelin in a 'faith' of its own. It is a faith for which the *realissimum* is not in God, as with supra-mundane religions, but in itself, in the predestined national community.[78] 'Ecstasies' of this kind of 'faith' are 'not spiritual, but instinctual' and end in 'the murderous frenzy of the deed'.[79] Characteristic of these secular faiths are the poems of the *Lieder vom Reich* [Songs of the Reich] by Gerhard Schumann in 1935:

> The millions bowed themselves before him in silence.
> Saved. The sky flamed in the morning's pallor.
> The sun rose. And with it rose the Reich.[80]

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73 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 51.

74 Eric Voegelin, *Rasse und Staat* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1933). See also Eric Voegelin, *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte von Ray bis Carus* (Berlin: Junker & Dünnhaupt, 1933). Here can be found, in particular studies, the history of the concept on the idea of race and race theory.

75 See Voegelin, *Rasse und Staat,* 5.

76 See ibid. 14.

77 See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, 'Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung' (1792), in *Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bänden,* ed. by Fritz Medicus, vol. I (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), 1–128.

78 On the element of faith in National Socialism, see Klaus Vondung, "Gläubigkeit' im Nationalsozialismus', in *'Totalitarianism' and 'Politische Religionen',* vol. II, ed. by Hans Maier and Michael Schäfer (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997), 15–28, esp. 16–17.

79 Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 58.

80 Ibid. 59.

Voegelin's reflections pertain only to Fascism and National Socialism directly. Although Voegelin includes Communism as one of the political religions,[81] his reflections are less applicable to Communism insofar as the Communist faith is characterised by a strongly theorised ideology.

In the epilogue to *Die politischen Religionen,* Voegelin attains a result that can be summarised in four points. First, the political community has roots that are clearly religious. The political sphere, therefore, is not a strictly profane or secular sphere. Second, the political and legal order is always modelled on the Christian order and its *ekklesía*. Third, each political community is characterised by a religious dynamic and symbolism, even if both are often not recognised by anti-religious interpretations. Fourth, the human being is essentially religious and spiritual. As such, every human community – even and especially the political community – must seek to consider and protect these qualities, as the 'like-mindedness' requires it in the civil religion.[82] Further: the human being is not permitted to find the transcendental source of good within him/herself in Voegelin's view. The attempt marks a lapse from God, insofar as immanent realities, like the human being, the collective or the state, might never become the *realissimum;* indeed, the secular cannot become the *realissimum,* due to its immanent character. Rather than effectively stemming the totalitarian mass movements, a modern, secular enlightened humanism covertly plays into their hands. Here, Voegelin's thought approaches the *Renouveau catholique* – especially the Neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain. Like Voegelin, Maritain criticises modern positivist thoughts and politics for their contribution to the general distancing of the person from Christianity and God.[83] The disintegration of rationality into pure scientism in modernity, leads to new kinds of Gnostic movements – these later become one of the main topics of Voegelin's book *The New Science of Politics* (1952).[84] And as he already makes clear in the foreword to *Die politischen Religionen,* the only way to destroy the foundations of political mass movements would be a genuine 'religious renewal' of the human being.[85]

As an overview, political religions begin in antiquity with an indistinct boundary between politics and religion. Here, the supreme ruler alone is the divine mediator between human being and God. In the *ekklesía,* Christian individuals relate to God. The hierarchy, from Greek *hierè archê* (sacred power), that flows from God, has a spiritual and a temporal side. In the model of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), the state itself becomes the *ekklesía*. A division between temporal and spiritual orders becomes superfluous. In the period that follows (one for which state and church are distinguished) the ekklesia gradually detaches itself from the universal kingdom with its pinnacle in God. In a process that unfolds in

[81] See ibid. 41.

[82] According to ibid. 63: the connection of the political to the religious also occupies the centre of Voegelin's political-scientific approach later. See Voegelin, *Die Neue Wissenschaft der Politik*.

[83] See Jacques Maritain, *Christlicher Humanismus* (Heidelberg: Pfeffer, 1950), 86–91, 176–180.

[84] See Voegelin, *Die Neue Wissenschaft der Politik*, chs IV–VI, esp. 257–259. On Voegelin's criticism of modern humanism, see also Dietmar Herz, 'Der Begriff der 'politischen Religionen' im Denken Eric Voegelins', in *'Totalitarismus' und 'Politische Religionen',* vol. I, ed. by Hans Maier (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996), 196–200.

[85] Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 6.

various stages, the national states come to replace the *ekklesía* as immanent communities that become sources of sacrality in their own right. In a further, more radical step, this development leads to the formation of political religions. These religions gain expression in the totalitarian mass movements of the 20th century.

According to Voegelin, the totalitarian regime manifests the severe spiritual crisis of European culture directly after the First World War. Voegelin's interpretation expands the concept of religion beyond the traditional boundaries of that concept – one that primarily comprehends and characterises the high religions. For him, the concept extends into the political sphere. He thereby lays bare the religious roots of political movements: politics and religion have common roots in the depth of the human being, in its creatureliness and its psyche. Voegelin's work *Die politischen Religionen* heads towards the comprehensive conception of human and political order that he later presented in his major five-volume-work *Order and History.*[86] If – like Leo Strauss or now Heinrich Meier[87] – one understands political theology in contrast to political philosophy as a political theory for which the highest authority and ultimate foundation is divine revelation, then Voegelin's concept of political religions could also be understood as a kind of secular political theology.[88] Both Michael Henkel and Jan Assmann[89] discern a clear relationship of Voegelin's position to Carl Schmitt's concept of *Politische Theologie* [Political Theology] (1922).[90] Schmitt also sees concepts of political theory to have developed as a secularisation of theological concepts.

Voegelin's concept of religion is so expansive that a religion can still be a religion, even if it has no reference to transcendence. A problem lurks within this concept, however.[91] Although political religions indeed make reference to such world-immanent goals as 'perfected humanity' or one's own race, the transcendent character of this reference is retained: such goals can be attained only at the end of a long historical development. Only thus can Voegelin maintain the description 'political religions'. However, political religions manifest continuously an inner-worldly, secular eschatology.

In his later work Voegelin distances himself from the concept of political religion overall:

> The interpretation is not completely false, but I would no longer use the concept of religions, because it is too imprecise and already corrupts the actual problem of experiences from the beginning in that it mixes them with other problems of dogmatic and doctrine.[92]

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86 Eric Voegelin, *Order and History,* V vols (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956–1987).

87 According to Heinrich Meier's introductory essay 'Was ist politische Theologie', in Jan Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel* (München: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1992), 16–17.

88 Michael Henkel, among others, agrees. See Henkel, *Eric Voegelin,* 91, 127–129, 178.

89 See Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel,* 30 and Henkel, *Eric Voegelin,* 128.

90 See Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität.* 2nd ed. (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1934), ch. III, 'Politische Theologie', 41–55, esp. 43.

91 See on this Mathias Behrens, "Politische Religion' – eine Religion?' in *'Totalitarianismus' und 'Politische Religionen',* vol. II, 249–269.

92 Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographische Reflexionen,* ed. by Peter J Opitz (München: Fink, 1994), 70.

Then, beginning with the 1940s, he speaks only of 'Gnosis' – which then became the core concept of Voegelin's theoretical considerations on politics and religion – of 'Gnostic mass movements' and even of '*Ersatzreligionen*' (substitute religions).[93]

One further critical remark would apply primarily to the effectiveness of Voegelin's concept of political religions. Insofar as the concept is based on his methodology, it can indicate the origins of many totalitarian phenomena, but cannot explain the development of totalitarianism entirely. Totalitarian regimes, therefore, cannot be exhaustively explained in terms of political religions.[94]

Voegelin's study *Die politischen Religionen* is important for showing that – despite all secularisation – religiosity is an important aspect of modern political systems, especially in modern nation states. Later, in 1962, the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich similarly interpreted secular movements that evince a religious dimension, as it is the case with totalitarian mass movements, as 'quasi-religions'.[95] Voegelin's philosophic-historical depiction also clarifies the origins of religious elements. Also, like the historian Jacob Leib Talmon in the 1950s and 1960s,[96] Voegelin sees the roots of modern totalitarianism to lie in the close association of religion and politics before the Enlightenment.[97]

2.2. Raymond Aron

At quite the same time as Eric Voegelin, the French sociologist and philosopher Raymond Aron (1905–1983) discovered the origins of totalitarianism – in contrast to Hannah Arendt in her famous book with the same title, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*[98] – in unfinished Enlightenment. Aron already recognises the presence of religious features in totalitarian regimes as early as 1936. Three years later, in 1939, he speaks explicitly of 'political religions' in his review of Élie Halévy's book *L'ère des tyrannies*. In 1941, he mentions the concept of 'political religions' again in characterising the phenomena of totalitarian mass movements. He started to speak of 'secular religions' in his two-part essay *L'avenir des religions séculières*

[93] According to Henkel, *Eric Voegelin,* 88. On Voegelin's concept of 'Gnosis' and the 'Gnostic mass movements', see Eric Voegelin, 'Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis', in *Der Gottesmord. Zur Genese und Gestalt der modernen politischen Gnosis,* ed. by Peter J Opitz (München: Fink, 1999), esp. 57–63, 83–90 and 91–93 and also Eric Voegelin, 'Religionsersatz. Die gnostischen Massenbewegungen unserer Zeit', in *Der Gottesmord,* 107–110.

[94] According to Herz, 'Der Begriff der 'politischen Religionen' im Denken Eric Voegelins', 209.

[95] Paul Tillich, 'Das Christentum und die Begegnung der Weltreligionen', *Gesammelte Werke,* ed. by Renate Albrecht, vol. 5, 'Die Frage nach dem Unbedingten' (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1964), 51–98. English first edition of this contribution appeared in New York in 1962.

[96] See Jacob L Talmon's *History of Totalitarian Democracy,* which is presented as a trilogy: *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952), *Political Messianism. The Romantic Phase* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), and *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980).

[97] See the contribution by Robert Chr. van Ooyen, 'Totalitarismustheorie gegen Kelsen und Schmitt: Eric Voegelins 'politische Religionen' als Kritik an Rechtspositivismus und politischer Theologie', *Zeitschrift für Politik* 49, no 1 (2002), 56–82, esp. 58–59.

[98] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951, 2nd ed. 1958).

appearing in 1944 in the journal *La France Libre,* in which he reflected on the religious dimension of Marxism and National Socialism in particular. Furthermore, he used the concept of 'secular religions' in various contributions even long after the Second World War:

> I suggest calling 'secular religions' those doctrines which occupy the place of the disappeared faith in the hearts of our contemporaries and which cast the salvation of humanity in the form of a social order that is to be recreated in the distant future of this world.[99]

In Raymond Aron's point of view, a political or secular religion is characterised by the following four elements: first, by its ideological doctrine. The content of the respective system or ideology is dogmatised and formulated into fixed principles of faith that claim to present the truth. Political or secular religions erect their own scale of values, one attempting to justify certain political actions and often tending to absolutize world-immanent entities. Hereby, the rule of a single party has its pinnacle in an 'omnipotent' prophetic leader who embodies these values – values which usually approve of everything that is useful to the party and the leader. As a second element of a political or secular religion – reminiscent of Carl Schmitt – its system constructs an objective enemy that embodies everything opposed to its own good doctrine. This enemy must be annihilated in order to attain the salvation that the political religion has prophesised. Political or secular religions imitate soteriological religions. They suffuse the political sphere with a religious character by replacing the personal religious faith of the individual and prophesying a saved state that is to follow an apocalypse at the end of our present times. This state of salvation, however, can only be attained through a radical reordering. Such reordering must occur through a strict adherence to the program set forth by the doctrines of the political or secular religion. The ties generated by these religions go well beyond ideological ones. Creating a dimension of depth that is even greater than that generated by ideologies; these ties underpin the ruling totalitarian system. Political or secular religions also appeal to the human psyche, exploiting religious forces that are no longer captured by the dissolving traditional religions. A third characteristic of political or secular religions is that they uproot people from such traditional communities as the family and bind them into new communities, like the nation or the state. Hereby, political or secular religions make use of a mass propaganda that they themselves have developed and that has its counterpart in an esoteric teaching for a small circle of people. Such teachings bind the groups for which they are intended in each case with a force that is almost spiritual. Fourth, political or secular religions interpret the entire course of history – that, which was, is and is to come – to their own benefit. Solely the revitalisation of traditional religious values and views can expose

[99] Je propose d'appeler 'religions séculières' les doctrines qui prennent dans les âmes de nos contemporains la place de la foi évanouie et situent ici-bas, dans le lointain de l'avenir, sous la forme d'un ordre social à créer, le salut de l'humanité. (Raymond Aron, *Chroniques de guerre. La France libre, 1940–1945,* ed. by Christian Bachelier [Paris: Gallimard, 1990], 926).

the fleeting character of the values of political or secular religions.[100] Aron's concept tends to be problematic to the extent that Aron never precisely explains how, in terms of the history of religion, political or secular religions are typical of the European nations. To the extent that these nations have undergone a break with the public culture from Christianity, political religions – as Voegelin correctly ascertains – can claim to fill a 'value-vacuum' that has arisen in Europe. Aron does not go far enough in terms of the philosophy or phenomenology of religion either.

Worth emphasising is Voegelin's contribution to overcoming the modern crisis of meaning, as well as his contribution to heightening our critical perception of ideologies and our understanding of the structures of totalitarian regimes. Peter Joachim Opitz underlines: 'According to Voegelin's thesis, crucial needs of large sections of the population were very essentially religious. The thesis that these needs – needs that were satisfied by the ideologies – lay at base of the rise of the ideological mass movements, remains valid today.'[101]

2.3. Jacob Leib Talmon

'Messianism' or 'messianic movements' emerge predominantly within the Abrahamic religions. As such, they are generally stamped by 'the emergence of personalities' that, 'on the basis of their salvation-historical consciousness of mission, exercise a magnetic attraction upon growing hordes of adherents'.[102] The expectation of an apocalyptic coming of a Messiah prompts the rise of mass movements that are at times marked by intoxicated enthusiasm. Often, the charismatic leader of the Messianic movement is himself identified as a Messiah and honoured in a cult that surrounds his person; this phenomenon can assume the features of an apotheosis. The order that religious messianism pretends to support is a firmly established order with its reference point in the Messianic arrival of God. Political messianism is different: 'The point of reference of modern messianism is reason and the human will. Its goal, happiness on earth, is to be attained through social transformation. Although the reference point is secular, the demands are absolute.'[103]

According to the Israeli historian Jacob Leib Talmon (1916–1980), political, secular messianism develops an almost Schopenhauerian, unrestricted will to transform its own doctrines into reality and thereby to transform the world. If the idea of the perfection of human life still predominates in religious messianism, so does 'secular Messianic

[100] On Aron's 'secular religions' see David Bosshart, *Politische Intellektualität und totalitäre Erfahrung. Hauptströmungen der französischen Totalitarismuskritik* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1992), esp. 118–123, 126.

[101] Afterword by Peter J Opitz on Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen,* 71.

[102] Peter Beyerhaus, 'Messianische Bewegungen', in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche,* ed. by Walter Kasper et al., vol. 7. 3rd ed. (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 1998), 164–166, 164 (citation).

[103] Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy,* 10. See also *Political Messianism,* VII.

monism'[104] seeking the fulfilment of all plans and projects already in this world. Parallel to religious messianism, these two kinds of messianisms also issue from some kind of 'leader', who paves the way to the goal – whether it is in this world or in heaven.

The first volume of Talmon's trilogy *A History of Totalitarian Democracy*[105] is entitled *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952). At the beginning of this book, Talmon already clearly states that his investigation of totalitarianism moves within the history of ideas. He sees the roots of the political situation of the mid-20th century to extend back into an intellectual pre-history that is one hundred and fifty years old. In this pre-history, Messianic, hence religious, elements play a central role on the totalitarian side of the development of democracy, which has to be strictly distinguished from the liberal side.[106] Talmon describes the resulting situation as the contemporary world crisis:

> Seen from our standpoint – from a vantage point in the middle of this 20th century – the history of the last hundred and fifty years appears in fact to be a systematic preparation for the abrupt clash between empirical and liberal democracy on the one hand and totalitarian messianic democracy on the other – and that is the world crisis of today.[107]

In a style similar to that of Eric Voegelin,[108] Talmon arranges his investigations as a universal history of ideas: unlike Voegelin, however, he does not begin with antiquity, but in the 18th century with Morelly and Mably as well as Rousseau – with his concept of natural order *(ordre naturel)* – and other thinkers of that epoch. If democratic elements can still be found in left totalitarianism, dictatorial elements predominate in right totalitarianism.[109] As it is expressed in the arrangement, 'Morelly, Mably, Rousseau', Talmon sees the social element to be an important impulse for the 'secular religion of totalitarian democracy'.[110] Socialist ideas play a similar role in Paul Tillich's concept of 'quasi-religions'.[111] It is the social impulse that distinguishes modern political Messianism from other religious-chiliastic movements; having the character more of sects than of political movements, the latter have religious rather than secular roots. Talmon sees the philosophy of the 18th century – especially in French philosophy – to mark the starting point of a development whose

104 Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy,* 10.

105 Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy; Political Messianism. The Romantic Phase; The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution.*

106 On this distinction see Klaus Hornung, 'Politischer Messianismus: Jacob Talmon und die Genesis der totalitären Diktaturen', *Zeitschrift für Politik* 47, no 2 (2000), 131–172, esp. 134.

107 Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy,* 1.

108 In particular: Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen; Order and History.*

109 In his volume *Totalitarismustheorien* Wolfgang Wippermann critises that Talmon argues too little with the sources of 'right totalitarianism' and the ideologies of racism and anti-semitism: Wolfgang Wippermann, *Totalitarismustheorien. Die Entwicklungen der Diskussion von den Anfängen bis heute* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 25–26. Klaus Hornung represents an opposite view in 'Politischer Messianismus: Jacob Talmon und die Genesis der totalitären Diktaturen', 155.

110 Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy,* 8. See also *Political Messianism,* 35–39, 70–124.

111 Tillich, 'Das Christentum und die Begegnung der Weltreligionen', 51–98.

out-growths in the 20th century are the totalitarian dictatorships of Russia and Germany, Italy and Spain.[112] According to Talmon, the first manifestations of a political messianism can be found within the Jacobine regime during the French Revolution. Michael Burleigh supports this position.[113]

Political messianism intends to establish a political program by leading the believer to believe in a utopian goal that includes the realisation of a saved state in the immanent world. A single leader leads on to this goal, one leader, who realises his ideas and images through one party and who is venerated in a cult of personality up to the point of an apotheosis.

3. CONCLUSION

The concept of political religion and, more specialised, the concept of political messianism, are even more appropriate than the concept of totalitarianism in explaining an absolute following, the special kind of belief, and the efficiency of totalitarian ideology, which 'sticks like pitch' in human minds, even nowadays. Traditional forms of religion, which have a serious and honest transcendental relation, have in contrast the power to discover the horrible totalitarian ideologies with their terrible places (*Gulags, Konzentrationslager*) and to keep them away from human minds and bodies. In this aspect, religions do really have the power to criticise ideologies in their centres. For the future, this critical potential of true religion is of great importance for the benefit of the society and the success of the political community.

[112] See Hornung, 'Politischer Messianismus: Jacob Talmon und die Genesis der totalitären Diktaturen', 138–142.
[113] See Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers. Religion and Politics in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Great War* (London: Harper Collins, 2005).

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