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Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish philosopher, lived through what Bertoldt Brecht called the „Dark Times“. As a Jew, she had to flee Germany in 1933 and arrived as a refugee in France, where she first sought exile. Having become a „stranger enemy“ under the Vichy government, she was interned in the French camp of Gurs from which she managed to escape after a few weeks. She then succeeded to obtain a visa for America, where she arrived in 1941. Enduring the condition of the stateless people, which she describes in such a moving way in *The Jew as Pariah*¹, she became an American citizen in 1951. In the same year she published her first great book, which made her famous in America: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*².

Eric Voegelin – who was born in Germany, but studied in Vienna, and who having already behind him a long work of political philosophy opposed to Nazism³ – also had to flee to the United

¹ H. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. with an Introduction by Ron H. Feldmann, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1978.

² *Id.*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace & Co., New York and London, 1951 / *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955. H. Arendt first thought to entitle her book *The Elements of Shame: Antisemitism, Imperialism, Racism*, or may be *The Three Pillars of Hell*, or even *History of Totalitarianism*.

³ E. Voegelin, *Über die Form des amerikanischen Geistes* (1928), Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1928 / *On the Form of the American Mind*, transl. Ruth Hein, *Collected Works* vol. 1, ed. by Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, University of Missouri Press, Columbia; *Rasse und Staat*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1933 / *Race and State*, transl. Ruth Hein, *CW*, vol. 2, ed. by Klaus Vondung; *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte von Ray bis Carus*, Berlin, Junker & Dünnhaupt, 1933 / *The History of the Race Idea from Ray to Carus*, transl. Ruth Hein, *CW*, vol. 3, ed. by Klaus Vondung; *Der autoritäre Staat: Ein Versuch über das österreichische Staatsproblem*, Wien, J.

States in 1938. In 1952, he published his first book in exile, *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*⁴, grown from the Walgreen Lectures on „Truth and Representation“ which he gave in 1951 in Chicago. In this book he describes the crisis of modernity as gnosticism defining the totalitarian movements of our time as „the existential rule of gnostic activists [...], the end form of progressive civilization.“⁵ H. Arendt read it and recommended it to Gertrud Jaspers in a letter dated November 1st 1952: „Es ist m. E. auf dem Holzweg, aber trotzdem wichtig. Die erste prinzipielle Diskussion der wirklichen Probleme seit Max Weber.“⁶ To put it briefly for the moment, if H. Arendt thought that E. Voegelin was „on the wrong track“, it is because he thought that the only remedy to the crisis of our time, which he interpreted as a disease of the soul, was a return to religion, be it inside the Churches or outside. Eric Voegelin had also read Hannah Arendt's book and reviewed it in *The Review of Politics* of January 1953.⁷ Waldemar Gurian who was running the

Springer, 1936 / *The Authoritarian State. An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State*, transl. Ruth Hein, CW, vol. 4, ed. by Gilbert Weiss; *Die politischen Religionen*, Wien, Bermann-Fischer, 1938 / *The Political Religions*, transl. Virginia Ann Schildhauer, CW, vol. 5; *Modernity without Restraint*, ed. with an Introduction by Manfred Henningsen, trans. Ann Schildhauer.

⁴ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1952, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (= CW), vol. 5, *Modernity without Restraint*, *op. cit.*.

⁵ *Id.*, *ibid.*, 195.

⁶ H. Arendt-K. Jaspers *Briefwechsel 1926-1969*, hrsg. v. Lotte Köhler und Hans Saner, Piper, München, 1995, 240 / *Correspondence*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1992, 203: „I think the book is on the wrong track, but important nevertheless. The first fundamental debate with the real problems since Max Weber.“

⁷ E. Voegelin, „The Origins of Totalitarianism“ in *Review of Politics*, vol. 15, 1953, no. 1, 68-76. Voegelin spent the entire summer of 1952 working on his review, as is told us in *Voegelin Recollected. Conversations on a Life*, ed. by Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn, University of Missouri Press, 2008, 177. In a letter he wrote to H. Arendt on March 16, 1952, E. Voegelin seemed much more balanced than in his review, see CW, vol. 30, *Selected Correspondence 1950-1984*, 69-72.

Review of Politics asked Hannah Arendt a „Reply“, whereas Voegelin was left the last word with his „Concluding Remarks“.

In *The Origins*, a book which she began in 1945, some six years before its completion, and which is composed of three parts, *Antisemitism, Imperialism, Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt tries to „understand and to come to terms“⁸ with the totalitarian movements by asking three questions: What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened? What was at stake is how everything could become possible – what she called at that time the „absolute evil“ achieved in the extermination camps. Further, how could men have become „superfluous“ and how could an „unprecedented form of government“ such as totalitarianism manage to dominate the world. H. Arendt wrote in 1954, „Though up till now we have been confronted with only two types of totalitarianism, [the „brown“ one, Nazism, and the ‘red’ one, Bolchevism], each started from an ideological belief whose appeal to large masses of people had already been demonstrated and both of which were therefore thought to be highly appropriate to inspire action, to set the masses in motion.“⁹ I wish to comment this sentence here, since today, confronted with a revival of religion, especially under its Muslim fundamentalist version, and terror having become the daily fate of our world, we may wonder, in the light of Arendt’s and Voegelin’s analysis, whether or not we are facing a third type of totalitarianism.

⁸ „Understanding“, writes H. Arendt, „is not the same as having correct information and scientific knowledge“, but is a „complicated process [...] and unending activity“ which aims not to „condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all“, „Understanding and Politics“, in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. by Jerome Kohn, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, San Diego, London, 1994, 307-308). This reconciliation will take place for H. Arendt in the *Human Condition* in 1958, a book she first wanted to entitle *Amor Mundi*, as testifies for example as soon as April 1955 a note of her *Denktagebuch, 1950-1973*. 2 Bände, hrsg. v. Ursula Ludz und Ingeborg Nordman, Piper Verlag, München 2002, Heft XXI, 26. (French translation Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Journal de pensée*, Paris, ed. du Seuil, 2005).

⁹ H. Arendt, „On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding“, in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954, op. cit.*, 356.

A new word for an unprecedented form of government

First, let us consider what exactly this new word „totalitarianism“ means. „The popular use of the word “totalitarianism“ – writes H. Arendt – for the purpose of denouncing some supreme political evil is only five years old. Up to the end of the Second World War, and even during the first postwar years, the catchword for political evil was “imperialism”. As such, it was generally used to denote aggression in foreign politics, identification was so thorough that the two terms could easily be exchanged one for the other. Similarly, totalitarianism is used today to denote lust for power, the will to dominate, terror, and a so-called monolithic state structure.“¹⁰ But even if this change is indeed noteworthy, if the choice of this new word indicates that everybody knows that something new and decisive has happened, popular language nonetheless still continues to use it as a synonym for familiar evils such as tyranny and despotism. H. Arendt herself, although her thesis is that totalitarianism is an „unprecedented“ form of government, contributed to the confusion since the word „origins“ in the title, which she regretted¹¹, seemed to infer a historical causality in the phenome-

¹⁰ *Id.*, „Understanding and Politics. On the Difficulty of Understanding“, in *Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 311. In fact, we already find the expression „Stato totale“ in fascist Italy in 1920's and in 1925 Mussolini defined it as „everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against State“. In „Mankind and Terror“, though admitting that we owe the term „total state“ to Mussolini, H. Arendt states that he had no idea concerning what totalitarianism meant (*Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 299). In 1930-1932, Ernst Jünger talks of war as a „total mobilization“ and Carl Schmitt uses the expression of *totale Staat*. But it is only in 1939, from the German-Russian pact on and with Franz Borkenau's book, *The Totalitarian Enemy* (Faber & Faber, London, 1940), that the word becomes commonplace.

¹¹ In her „Reply“ to the review of her book by Eric Voegelin, she had the opportunity to explain what she aimed at: „I did not write a history of totalitarianism but an analysis in terms of history [...] The book therefore does not really deal with the “origins“of totalitarianism – as its title unfortunately claims – but gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized

non of totalitarianism. Due to the Cold War, this book was wrongly considered an anti-communist product of McCarthyism. People reproached her „tone“, often polemical, ironic, and, as she recognizes it herself, passionate, even if she denies having fallen in sentimentalism or moralism. In France in particular, Raymond Aron in a review he gave of her book, reproached the parallelism she made between the Soviet system, which ended with labour camps, and the nazi system, which ended with extermination camps. To characterize totalitarianism, Raymond Aron distinguished five components: it is a government which grants the monopoly of political action to one party; this unique party rests upon an ideology which gives it absolute authority and which becomes the State's official truth; this State monopolizes in its turn all the means of communication and of persuasion ; the State controls the economical and professional life; and finally, terror becomes the rule, each mistake becoming an attack against the ideology. More important for our point here, R. Aron also reproached H. Arendt's assertion that there is an „essence“ of totalitarianism which consists of a particular combination of ideology and terror.¹² He questioned whether it is a contradiction to „define a government which functions through an essence which implies, so to say, the impossibility of functioning.“¹³

As a matter of fact, in looking for the essence of totalitarianism, Arendt looked to Montesquieu who, in *L'Esprit des lois*, introduced an entirely new distinction between the nature of the government and its principle. The nature or „essence“ of a government is what makes it what it is, that is the permanent element in it, whereas the principle is what makes it act and move, what inspires action, what sets the

into totalitarianism“, „A Reply to Eric Voegelin“, in *Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 403)

¹² This essay replaced from 1958 onward, that is since the second edition of the *Origins*, the „Concluding Remarks“ of the first edition. This text was published in 1953: first in German in the *Festschrift* for Karl Jaspers, then in a revised version in the July issue of the *Review of Politics*. It became in 1955 the last chapter of *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*.

¹³ „L'essence du totalitarisme selon Hannah Arendt“, in *Critique*, 1954. This text was again partly published in R. Aron, *Histoire et Politique, Textes et témoignages, Commentaire*, Julliard, 1985, 416-425.

masses in motion. Laws for example, prescribe what we should not do, they set limitations to our action, but they do not tell us what we should do, they do not inspire our action. In other words, the principle of a government is its „guiding criteria“ by which all action is judged: virtue in a republic, honor in a monarchy, fear in a tyranny.¹⁴ Therefore, states H. Arendt, „If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror, is the essence of totalitarian domination.“¹⁵ Contrary to tyranny, which is characterized by lawlessness, totalitarianism is not left to anarchy but follows a law: the law of Nature in the case of Nazism, the law of History in the case of Bolchevism. Nonetheless, the function and the definition of laws have changed: laws are no longer the stabilizing forces, the boundaries which Plato invoked, but instead they have become laws of movement, an accelerator of the historical and natural forces. „Terror executes on the spot the death sentences which Nature is supposed to have pronounced on races or individuals who are “unfit to live”, or History on “dying classes”, without waiting for the slower and less efficient processes of nature or history themselves.“¹⁶ However, what distinguishes fear in a tyranny from terror in totalitarianism is „space“. If the chief characteristic of tyranny is indeed to prevent man’s action by isolating him from the others, it is important to note that not all contacts between men are broken, only the political ones. This means that there remains a space for freedom, that is, „the whole sphere of private life with the capacities for experience, fabrication and thought.“ On the other hand, the „iron band“ of total terror pressing men against each other, „destroying the plurality of men and making out of many the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature“, destroys this space between them.¹⁷ Violence in a totalitarian system aims, beyond opposition, to eliminate its own supporters and reaches its climax

¹⁴ H. Arendt, „Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition“, in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn, Schocken Books, New York, 2005, 63-69.

¹⁵ *Id.*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *op. cit.*, 464.

¹⁶ *Id.*, *ibid.*, 466.

¹⁷ *Id.*, *ibid.*, 466.

when it attacks only innocent people: „Terror is the realization of the law of movement ; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action“¹⁸, writes H. Arendt. In other words, whereas fear in tyrannies comes to an end when it „has imposed a graveyard peace in a country“, no peace at all can ever be reached under totalitarian rule because „There is no end to the terror, and it is a matter of principle with such regimes that there can be no peace [...] everything will remain in permanent flux.“¹⁹

Having identified the essence of totalitarianism as terror, in what consists now its „principle of action“ in the sense of Montesquieu? In other words, how does totalitarianism put the masses in motion? Since the aim of terror is precisely to eliminate the spontaneity, the capacity of man to act, there cannot be strictly speaking a principle of action under totalitarian domination: „No guiding principle of behavior, taken itself from the realm of human action, such as virtue, honor, fear, is necessary or can be useful to set into motion a body politic which no longer uses terror as a means of intimidation, but whose essence is terror.“²⁰ There can only be a „substitute“ for the principle of action: „What totalitarian rule needs to guide the behavior of its subject is a preparation to fit each of them equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim. This two sided preparation, the substitute for a principle of action, is the ideology.“²¹ By „ideology“, H. Arendt means „quite literally what its name indicates : it is the logic of an idea...“, and this idea is neither the eternal essence of Plato, nor Kant’s regulative principle of reason, but „an instrument of explanation“²². This idea in Nazism’s

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁹ H. Arendt, „Mankind and Terror“, Speech, in German, for RIAS Radio University, March 23, 1953. English translation by Robert and Rita Kimber, in *Essays in Understanding*, 299.

²⁰ *Id.*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *op. cit.*, 468.

²¹ *Id.*, *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, 467.

²² *Id.*, *ibid.*, 469. As soon as March 1952, H. Arendt, on her way to Europe, wrote in a note of her *Denktagebuch*, Heft VIII [23]: „Ideologie = Logik einer Idee. Die Logik als ein Prozess bringt die Idee in Bewegung und zer-

ideology is the idea of „race“ which pretends to explain the movement of history as a consistent process, that is to say the struggle of races as law of Nature. In Bolchevism, the idea is that of the „working class“, and the struggle of classes pretends to explain the whole law of History. However, ideologies are not in themselves totalitarian. If racism and communism became totalitarian, it is because of the conjunction in them of three totalitarian elements : first, their claim to explain not only the present, but also the past and to prophesize the future ; second, and as a consequence, the complete emancipation from the experience of reality, ideology pretending to discover an other reality which is concealed and only accessible through a sixth sense ; third, having cut itself from reality and therefore from common sense, which is the sense of the political par excellence, ideology proceeds through a logical or dialectical procedure of deduction from an axiomatically accepted premise. „An argument of which Hitler like Stalin was very fond is : You can't say A without saying B and C and so on, down to the end of the murderous alphabet“²³, which means you cannot make an omelette without breaking the eggs.²⁴ In other words, a „dying class“ is condemned to death, races „unfit to live“ must be exterminated: „Here, the coercive force of logicity seems to have its source ; it springs from our fear of contradicting ourselves.“²⁵ This means that Hitler and Stalin were not so much interested in the ideological „idea“ –the struggle of classes or the struggle of races –but more so „the strait jacket of logic“ which could be developed from it and which replaces the human capacity to think: „According to Stalin, neither the idea nor the oratory but “the irresistible force of logic thoroughly overpowered [Lenin's] audience.”²⁶ Thus, H. Arendt has identified the

reibt dabei die Substanz. Dieser Substanzverlust ist grundsätzlich [...] „Die Idee ergreift die Massen“...“.

²³ *Id., ibid., op. cit.*, 472. See also *Denktagebuch*, XII [6] December 1952 among others.

²⁴ In German: „Wo gehobelt wird, da fallen Späne“, this formula appears repeatedly in the *Denktagebuch*.

²⁵ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism, op. cit.*, 472-473.

²⁶ *Id., ibid., op. cit.*, 472. See also her *Denktagebuch, op. cit.*, VIII [23], März 1952. In the same way, Eric Voegelin insists on dogmatism, that is to say the prohibition to think and to ask any question, identifying Auguste

two sides of totalitarian dominion, „the self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroying man’s capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action.“²⁷

Is secularization responsible for this new evil?

We may now ask, but how did this form of totalitarian government manage to dominate a non-totalitarian world? Is the loss of faith of Western men responsible for what happened? This was precisely what Eric Voegelin argued in his review of H. Arendt’s *Origins*: since the secularization of the modern world, the masses needed to find a substitute to guide their lives, and therefore adhered to these ideologies. For him, there was no doubt that Nazism and Bolchevism were but the continuation, under a secular form, of the gnostic and messianic trends. We are confronted with political religions, and this was precisely the title of the book published in 1938²⁸ wherein he

Comte and Karl Marx to the Auschwitz’s commandant, Rudolf Höss, who, when asked why he didn’t rebel himself against the extermination order, replied: „At that time I didn’t abandon myself to such reflexions; I received an order and I had to obey it [...] Such a thing was impossible“, *Le Commandant d’Auschwitz*, Paris, Julliard, 1959 (my translation).

²⁷ *Id.*, *ibid.*, 474.

²⁸ E. Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, *op. cit.* This book was confiscated by the Gestapo. Through their Manichean vision, through their will to build society with the wave of the magic wand, both Socialism and Nazism prophesize a millenarian realm: in one case the realm of the classless society, in the other the realm of the Third Reich with the domination of the elected race, the Aryan Race. According to Voegelin’s essay „Religionsersatz. Die gnostischen Massenbewegungen unserer Zeit“ – where he gathered under the same name not only the political mass movements such as Communism, Fascism and National Socialism, but also the intellectual movements such as Progressivism, Positivism, Marxism, and Psychoanalysis –, gnosis presents six chief characteristics: 1) a dissatisfaction towards the present world, 2) a wrong organization of the world is responsible for that bad condition, 3) the belief that it is possible to deliver oneself from the evils of the world, 4) history has to transform the bad world into a good one, 5) anyone can achieve such a liberating change in the course of the world, 6) to know how to proceed is the task ascribed to the gnostic, in *Wort und Wahrheit*, no. XV/1, 1960, 5 / *CW*, vol. V, *op. cit.*, 295.

described what he will later call the slow „egophanic revolt“ of the West in order to designate „the concentration of the epiphany of the ego as the fundamental experience that eclipses the epiphany of God in the structure of Classic and Christian consciousness.“²⁹ In other words, this revolt is characterized by man’s movement away from theophanies and his concurrent turn to his ego. Further, it is a phenomenon which has reached its climax with the advent of absolute knowledge and the celebration of a man who became God – a phenomenon which Voegelin characterizes under the term of gnosis. In *The New Science of Politics* (1951)³⁰ Voegelin uses this concept in order to interpret the „disorder“ of modernity. Gnosticism, from the greek gnōsis, „knowledge“ or „science“, is, as Hans Jonas defined it in his book *Gnosis und spät antiker Geist* the mean to obtain salvation and the fact of pretending to possess this knowledge in a particular doctrine. This theoretical category which goes back to the Marcionit heresy of the 1st century, to Johannes Scotus Eriugena in the IXth century and to Joachim of Fiora in the XIIth century, seemed to him more appropriate in order to interpret modern ideologies than those of „neopagan movements, of new social and political myths, or of mystiques politiques.“³¹ To some of his „colleagues“, such as Carl Joachim Friedrich who disagreed, Voegelin replied that he had been assured by his readings of Hans Urs von Balthasar, as well as that of Hans Jonas that this use of gnosis to describe modernity was appropriate, which also Charles Puech, Gilles Quispel et Rudolf Bultmann confirmed to him.³² Antic gnosis, cosmological

²⁹ *Id.*, *Autobiographical Reflections*, *CW*, vol. 34, ed. with Introductions by Ellis Sandoz, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2006, 94. This expression appears in the fourth volume of *Order and History, The Ecumenic Age*, *CW*, vol. 17, ed. with an Introduction by Michael Franz, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2000.

³⁰ E. Voegelin, *CW* 5, *op. cit.*

³¹ *Id.*, *ibid.*, „Science, Politics and Gnosticism“, 252.

³² *Id.*, Letter 180 to Carl Joachim Friedrich, April 12, 1959, in *CW*, vol. 30, *Selected Correspondance*, *op. cit.*, 387. „Variation on a fairly common view: modernity is secularized Christianity – at first glance, plausible – but why gnosticism in particular? objected for his part Leo Strauss, see *Glaube und Wissen. Der Briefwechsel zwischen Eric Voegelin und Leo Strauss von 1934*

gnosis, existed before Christianity in the Syriac area of civilization as well as in Persia where the anthropological and monotheistic differentiation of a god completely transcendent was not yet accomplished. The internal struggle between good and evil was interpreted as a struggle between two divine substances inside the cosmos: the evil god of this world, which was felt as a „prison“ from which man had to escape, waiting for the delivery through the intervention of a good god, „alien“ and „hidden“ which will send his messengers.³³ Thus the gnostics are those who „know“, the messengers, the saviours who reveal to the mass of people the unknown god who may deliver them from this mundane prison. According to Voegelin, modern gnosis distinguishes itself from antic gnosis through the fact that modern man does not wait for any divine intervention, but pretends to accomplish his deliverance and to reach a world of perfection through his own power³⁴, such an arrogance being the evident sign of God's death, of the closeness of the soul to transcendence, of the secularization of spirit. An other difference between antic gnosis and modern gnosis consists in that the man who denies God knows very well who is God as well as that he himself is not God.³⁵ Eric Voegelin interprets then this attitude as a spirit's „pathology“, a soul's „degeneration“, and according to him this kind of modern gnosis reached its climax through Hegel's, Comte's and Marx's philosophies of history.

Therefore, instead of looking for the origins of totalitarianism in the bankruptcy of the Nation-State and in the „superfluous“ character of the individual, as she does it, Hannah Arendt ought rather have recognized in totalitarianism the climax of a long historical process. As a matter of fact, according to Eric Voegelin, the modern mass

bis 1964, hrsg. v. Peter J. Opitz unter Mitwirkung von Emmanuel Patard, München, Wilhelm Fink, 2010, Anmerkungen, 133.

³³ *Id.*, Letter to A. Schütz, January 10, 1953, in Alfred Schütz/Eric Voegelin, *Eine Freundschaft, die ein Leben ausgehalten hat. Briefwechsel 1938-1959*, hrsg. v. Gerhard Wagner und Gilbert Weiss, UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, Konstanz, 2004, 34.

³⁴ *Id.*, *CW 5, op. cit.*, „Science, Politics and Gnosticism“, 255.

³⁵ *Id.*, Letter to A. Schütz, January 10, 1953, in *Eine Freundschaft die ein Leben ausgehalten hat*, 470-471.

movements have recaptured the four symbols of Joachim of Flora. According to that Calabrian monk of the end of the 12th century, history unfolds along three great sequences : sequence of the Father, sequence of the Son and sequence of the Holy Spirit who is to follow him in 1260 through the advent of a headman, the dux ex Babylone. We find again this ternary sketch in the three stages of Marx's and Engel's philosophy of history, in the National Socialists' Third Reich or in the Third fascist Rome. We also find again the symbol of the guide or of the Führer with Hitler or Mussolini, and the symbol of the „prophet“ with Marx and Engels as Lenin's and Stalin's forerunners. And finally, the „orders of the new empires in the communist, fascist, and national-socialist association and élite groupings as the core of the new imperial organizations.“³⁶ As we see, the two authors disagree concerning the origins of totalitarianism: whereas for Hannah Arendt this form of government is completely new, unprecedented, Eric Voegelin considers it as a recurrent mental structure.

Conforming himself to the usage of a literature that interpreted ideological movements as a variety of religions – such as Louis Rougier's volume *Les Mystiques politiques contemporaines et leurs incidences internationales*³⁷ –, E. Voegelin first baptized this secular development as „political religions“.³⁸ This is also the expression used by Waldemar Gurian in his essay „Totalitarianism as Political Religion“ (1953).³⁹ Raymond Aron, however, in an essay written in July 1944 in London⁴⁰, spoke of „secular religions“: „I suggest to

³⁶ *Id.*, *The Political Religions*, *op. cit.*, 52

³⁷ *Les Mystiques politiques contemporaines et leurs incidences internationales*, Recueil Sirey, 1935. In his „Bibliographical Sources“ to the *Political Religions*. Voegelin also quotes Étienne de Greeff's essay „Le drame humain et la psychologie des 'mystiques' humaines“ in „Foi et „Mystiques Humaines“, *Études carmélitaines*, 1937.

³⁸ *Id.*, *Autobiographical Reflections*, *CW*, vol. 34, ed. with Introductions by Ellis Sandoz, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2006, 78.

³⁹ Waldemar Gurian, „Totalitarianism as Political Religion“ (1953), in Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *Totalitarianism*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1964.

⁴⁰ Raymond Aron, *L'Âge des empires et l'avenir de la France*, ed. Défense de la France, 1946, 288. Julien Freund speaks of „salvation politics“, Jean

call secular religions the doctrines which replace in our contemporaries' souls the place of the vanished faith and which situate here below, in the distant future under the form a social order to be created, the humanity's salvation." At the end of his life, dictating his *Autobiographical Reflections*, Voegelin confessed nonetheless : „...I would no longer use the term religions because it is too vague and already deforms the real problem of experience by mixing them with the further problem of dogma or doctrine.“⁴¹ As soon as 1938 he recognized that interpreting modern ideologies as not only political but also religious was not obvious and he suggested to draw a linguistic distinction between „the spiritual religions which find the *Realissimum* in the Ground of the world [Weltgrund]“, which should be called „trans-worldly religions [überweltliche Religionen]“, and all others, that is those that find the divine in subcontents of the world, should be called „innerworldly religions [innerweltliche Religionen]“. ⁴² By elevating the State, the Science, the Race or the Class to the rank of *Realissimum*, those systems prove to be political religions which immanentize the meaning of existence, and which dispense an absolute certainty as to the order of things.

Voegelin's originality consists in that he identifies those contemporary religions of the gnostic streams contemporaneous of the beginnings of Christianity, and he justifies this use somehow unusual by the fact that „Europe had no conceptual tools with which to grasp the horror that was upon her“. ⁴³ Thus, modern political ideologies, which postulate a kind of historic salvation through the establishment of a perfect society, only pick up the millenarist script in a more or less secularized mode: initial perfection, fall and decay, violent rupture, restoration of the original purity. As a matter of fact, National Socialism postulates the original perfection of the aryan race, explains its progressive degeneration through the mixture of

Séguy of „analogic religions“, and Arnold Toynbee of „post-christian ideologies“, as reminds us J. P. Sironneau, in his lecture „Eschatologie et décadence dans les “Religions politiques”“. <http://www.ubourgogne.fr/centre-achelard/confdoctorales.htm>.

⁴¹ E. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, *op. cit.*, 78.

⁴² *Id.*, *The Political Religions*, 32.

⁴³ „Science, Politics and Gnosticism“, in *CW*, vol. 5, *op. cit.*, 252.

racism, promotes a violent revolution and dreams to establish a millenarian Reich which will restore the power of German people. Communism for its part postulates a primitive communism followed by a degradation through division of labour and the antagonism of two social groups, the owners and the non-owners of the production means. Economic alienation reaches its climax with the capitalist regime and an era of violence will precede the reign of the millenarist realm of justice. Having diagnosed the serious crisis of the modern world as the secularization of the spirit and not as a „return to barbarism, to the Dark Ages“, the struggle against National Socialism, this „satanical substance“, must be led by attacking the evil at his root. Neither morality nor humanity’s feelings are sufficient to come to terms with it. We therefore need a counterforce as mighty as the evil, which is, according to Voegelin, „religious renewal, be it within the framework of the historical churches, be it outside this framework.“⁴⁴

Arendt did not agree with that kind of explanation, as we can see in her „Reply“ to Eric Voegelin. First, such an explanation, which argues the existence of a continuous „need of religion“ in humanity, seems blind to the novelty of totalitarian government.⁴⁵ Second, this explanation, which pretends that „the spiritual disease is the decisive feature that distinguishes modern masses from those of earlier centuries“, avoids to confront oneself with one of the strangest characteristics of modern masses, that is, what she calls the social atomization of society, corresponding to the loss of any tie between men, the loss of any common interest.⁴⁶ In other words, what Arendt

⁴⁴ E. Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, 24.

⁴⁵ H. Arendt, „A Reply to Eric Voegelin“, in *Essays in Understanding*, *op. cit.*, 405-406: „Numerous affinities between totalitarianism and some other trends in Occidental political or intellectual history have been described with this result, in my opinion: they all failed to point out the distinct quality of what was actually happening [...] I would doubt Voegelin’s own theory that the “rise of immanentist sectarianism” since the late Middle Ages eventually ended in totalitarianism.“

⁴⁶ *Id.*, *op. cit.*, 406: „To me, modern masses are distinguished by the fact that they are “masses” in a strict sense of the word [...] they do not have common interests to bind them together or any kind of common “consent” which, according to Cicero, constitutes the *inter-est*, that which is

rejects here is that atheism could be a „cause“ of totalitarianism. If there is a link between the two phenomena, it is only a negative one: „this is at most a condition sine qua non, nothing which could positively explain whatever happened afterwards. Those who conclude from the frightening events of our times that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons seem to me to show just as much lack of faith in God as their opponents.“⁴⁷ According to her, the decisive fact concerning the moderns is not secularization, but rather the suppression of the idea of hell⁴⁸, an image she uses both literally and not allegorically: „It seems rather obvious that men who have lost their faith in Paradise will not be able to establish it on earth: but it is not certain that those who have lost their belief in Hell as a place of the hereafter may not be willing and able to establish on earth exact imitations of what people used to believe about Hell.“⁴⁹ Now, the origin of the belief in Hell is political and not religious.⁵⁰ Several times in her work, and especially in her essay „Religion and Politics“, Hannah Arendt refers to the Platonic origin of the medieval representation of hell, interpreting Plato’s myth of the beyond – especially in *The Republic* – as a „political tool“ meant to compel the majority, who is not interested in truth, to recognize the existing order. Thus, if this representation of hell has disappeared among the moderns, to talk about „political religions“, about the totalitarianisms of our time, is therefore nonsense.

Hannah Arendt refuses any assimilation of political ideology to religion, even if she recognizes that the crisis of the contemporary world results from the breakdown of authority and tradition: „The long alliance between religion and authority does not necessarily prove that the concept of authority is itself of religious nature. On the contrary, I think it much more likely that authority, in so far as it is based on tradition, is of Roman political origin and was monopolized

between men, ranging all the way from material to spiritual and other matters....“

⁴⁷ *Id.*, *op. cit.*, 407.

⁴⁸ *Id.*, *Denktagebuch, 1950-1973, op. cit.*, vol. 1, Cahier XVI [2], Mai 1953.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, *Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 404.

⁵⁰ *Id.*, *Denktagebuch, 1950-1973, op. cit.*, vol. 1, Cahier XVI [2], Mai 1953.

by the Church only when it became the political as well as spiritual heir of the Roman Empire.⁵¹ While she was sure that the loss of fear of the medieval doctrine of hell, „the specifically political element in traditional religion“ was responsible for what happened⁵², since everything not only became allowed, which characterizes the situation of nihilism, but also possible, she nonetheless argued, „There is no substitute for God in the totalitarian ideologies – Hitler’s use of the “Almighty” was a concession to what he himself believed to be a superstition. More than that, the metaphysical place of God remained empty.“⁵³

In the notes of her *Denktagebuch* from April to June 1953⁵⁴, we find again this same opposition against the explanation of totalitarianism in terms of „secular religions“ or „totalitarian religions“, as well as in the article written that same year 1953, „Religion and Politics“. There, she remarks that two trends of thought have adopted this expression of „political or secular religion“ First, is „the historical approach for which a secular religion is quite literally a religion growing out of the spiritual secularity of our present world so that communism is only the most radical version of an “immanentist heresy”,, and here she means explicitly Eric Voegelin. The second approach is due to the social sciences, according to which „Communism (or nationalism or imperialism, etc...) fulfills for its adherents the same “function” that our religious denominations fulfill in a free society.“⁵⁵ Compared with the social sciences’ approach, the historical one has, indeed, the advantage to recognize that „totalitarian dominion is not merely a deplorable accident in Western history“, but it nonetheless fails to understand „the nature of secu-

⁵¹ *Id.*, „Religion and Politics“, in *Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 372.

⁵² *Id.*, *ibid.*, 379. See also: „Religion and Politics“, 125 and „Religion and the Intellectuals“ in *ibid.*, „What is Authority?“ in *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, London, Faber & Faber, 1961, 133; *On Revolution*, New York, Penguin, 1962, 191.

⁵³ *Id.*, „A Reply to Eric Voegelin“, *op. cit.*, 406.

⁵⁴ See in particular: *Denktagebuch, op. cit.*, Heft XV [29], XVI [2], and [16].

⁵⁵ H. Arendt, „Religion and Politics“, in *Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 372.

larism and the secular world“.⁵⁶ For, if spiritually our world is a secular one, since it is born from doubt, that is from the rise of the natural sciences in the seventeenth century, „politically, secularism means no more than that religious creeds and institutions have no publicly binding authority and that, conversely, political life has no religious sanction.“ From the approach of the social sciences, which identifies ideology and religion as having the same function, it amounts to assert that „Hitler and Jesus were identical because they fulfilled the same social function. It is obvious that such a conclusion is possible only for people who refuse to listen to what either Jesus or Hitler said.“⁵⁷ That is to say, for people reducing man to a mere function. In other words, the term „secular religion“, besides being nonsensical and blasphemous, does not take into account the fact that „recent history has demonstrated how weak and helpless organized religion is when confronted with the new totalitarian forms of government– and this despite the good will and frequent heroism of great parts of the clergy of almost all denominations...“⁵⁸ Totalitarianism being a political evil, religion is of no use against it. Once the political element in religion, that is the fear of the Last Judgment and Hell, has disappeared, this loss is definitive and there is no chance to revive it. „This seems inevitable if secularity of the world involves separation of the religious and political realms of life ; under these circumstances religion was bound to lose the religious sanction of transcendent authority.“⁵⁹

In 1950, answering a questionnaire in *Partisan Review* concerning „the new turn toward religion among intellectuals and the growing disfavor with which secular attitudes and perspectives are now regarded“, H. Arendt warns against what she considers „puffs of the *Zeitgeist*“, which appear every twenty years or so and are but an all too normal reaction against „some “naturalistic” (or positivistic, or

⁵⁶ *Id., ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Id., ibid.*, 378.

⁵⁸ *Id.*, „Religion and the Intellectuals“, in *Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 230.

⁵⁹ *Id., On Revolution, op. cit.*, 135.

dialectical-materialistic, or pragmatistic) attitude“⁶⁰. At that time, she seemed convinced that „an overwhelming majority has ceased to believe in a Last Judgment at the end of time [...even if the masses] are quite willing to believe — well, just anything.“⁶¹

Are we presently facing a third totalitarianism?

Today, it seems as if we are confronted with such a revival of religion.⁶² With almost two billion Muslims and with a growth rate of 6,40% per year, Islam is the second largest religion in the world. We may then ask whether H. Arendt was right and if the place of God really remained empty. Wondering at the end of her essay „Ideology and Terror“ whether totalitarianism may last or not, H. Arendt warned us, „the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which as a potentiality and an ever present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on...“⁶³ As for E. Voegelin, noticing in 1939 the decomposition of the Churches, he seemed very pessimistic and predicted a period of disintegration which might last during one century or even more.⁶⁴ Ten years later however, he took into consideration the fact that almost all the important philosophers of these last thirty years felt concerned with the „restoration of the intellectual order in the sense of christian tradition.“ He himself recognized he had been influenced by Catholic philosophers such as Father Sertillanges, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson and Henri de Lubac⁶⁵, and he wondered about the chances for an international Catholic

⁶⁰ *Id.*, „Religion and the Intellectuals“, in *Essays in Understanding*, 229-230.

⁶¹ *Id. ibid.*, 230.

⁶² In an interview by Anissa Barak, Féthi Benslama states on the contrary: „I think that what is at stake with islamist ideology is not a revival of religion, but a decomposition of religion, in as much as these societies enter the modern world [...] what we call ‘islamism’ is a new identity myth whose roots are to be found in the modern world; <http://www.mediasetdemocratie.net/Religion/Terrorisme-islamiste.htm>.“

⁶³ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *op. cit.*, 478.

⁶⁴ *Id.*, Letter 84 to Ruthilt Lemche of January 26, 1939, in *CW*, vol. 29, 206.

⁶⁵ *Id.*, Letter 434 to Russell Nieli of Mai 22, 1973, in *CW*, vol. 30, 766.

renewal before new totalitarian catastrophes might struck the world. This optimism continued to grow and in 1952 he wrote that since humanity had reached its lowest point, it could but convert (*periagogê*) in order to begin its ascent from the cave towards the light.

Terror has become the daily fate everywhere in our world⁶⁶; therefore, we may also wonder, in the light of H. Arendt's and E. Voegelin's analysis of totalitarianism, whether with the rise of fundamentalist Islamism, we are facing a third type of totalitarianism, the „green“ one, „founded on the battle of religions and civilizations“⁶⁷, as many commentators defend it nowadays.⁶⁸

„After having overcome Fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism, the world faces nowadays a new totalitarian global threat: Islamism“, proclaimed, for instance, the French manifesto, published March 1, 2006, after the controversy regarding the cartoons of the Muslim prophet Mahomet.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Whether we speak of national, international or even global terrorism.

⁶⁷ This is among others, the thesis of Alexandre del Valle in his book *Islamist Totalitarianism. Attack on Democracies*, [http : //www.alexandredelvalle.com/publications.php?id_art](http://www.alexandredelvalle.com/publications.php?id_art) „It's a religious fanaticism combined with the desire for revenge by the Arabo-Muslim world, the world claiming to be 'humiliated' by colonization, just like Germany was once humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles. To put it simply, it's a theocratic and anti-Western totalitarianism of a new kind, the first totalitarianism which has not been invented by European minds and which speaks in the name of the Third World which it would like to bring under its green banner....“ (my translation).

⁶⁸ The overwhelming success of Hamas in Palestine in January 2006, as well as the election of the „extremist“ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran in June 2005, or even the election of eighty members of the Muslim Brothers at the Egyptian Parliament in November and December 2005, confirm this tendency to radicalism in the Muslim world.

⁶⁹ See: „Together facing the new totalitarianism“ <http://www.prochoix.org/cgi/blog/2006/03/16/444-to-support-the-manifesto-together-facing-the-new-totalitarianism> .

This manifesto, signed by twelve international intellectuals, including Salman Rushdie, was published in „Charlie Hebdo“, a leftist satirical magazine, in France in March 2006 after the controversy over the cartoon

In 2002, the English historian, Bernard Lewis –to whom we owe the expression of „clash of civilizations“ which he forged already in 1964, even if it was Samuel Huntington who popularized this expression with his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* published in 1996⁷⁰ – asked, „What went wrong?“⁷¹ According to Huntington, since the end of Cold War and with the end of hostility between occidental states, the Occident is loosing its influence and importance, whereas Asiatic civilizations are increasing their economic, military and political power. For him, Islam can be characterized by its quick demographic growth combined with a revival of religion and fundamentalism, and he prophesizes the beginning of a third World War since the democratic values of freedom and equality have meaning only inside the Western civilization who in turn owe them to Christianity. This thesis contrasted with that proposed by Francis Fukuyama who, in *The End of History and the Last Man*⁷², proclaimed the forthcoming advent all over the world of the „best form of government“, that is democracy. This

drawings of the Muslim prophet Mahomet. On Saturday, March 11, a thread on the British Islamist site, ummah.net, issued a death threat against the 12 signatories of the Manifesto. In an article entitled „Is Islamism a Totalitarianism?“, published in the french newspaper „Le Monde“ August 8, 2006, that is during the war of Israel again Hezbollah, the journalist Daniel Vernet explicitly wrote: „the present war in Middle East is thought as an episode of the confrontation between democratic and liberal Occident and the islamist fundamentalism who choose terror in order to promote its totalitarian conception – in the sense of Hannah Arendt’s definition“. Since then, we witnessed also a controversy concerning comments made by Pope Benedictus XI regarding faith and reason at the University of Ratisbon, the autocensure of Mozart’s opera *Idomene* in Berlin, as well as the autocensure of a Hans Bellmer’s exhibition in a London gallery, and the *fatwah* against the french philosophy teacher Robert Redeker on behalf of an article he wrote in the newspaper „Le Figaro“. We may therefore ask if „Islam fundamentlists are [not] – asking us to renounce to be ourselves“, as stated it a journalist in the magazine „Le Nouvel Observateur“?

⁷⁰ S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996, Simon and Schuster. First published in 1993 as an article „The Clash of Civilizations?“, in *Foreign Affairs*.

⁷¹ B. Lewis, *What went wrong?*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁷² F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992.

does not mean the end of political or social conflicts, since nobody can guarantee that we won't have in the future more Hitlers or Pol Pots, but that the evil which produced the Holocaust, „can slow down but not derail the locomotive of History. In *Specters of Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida criticized Fukuyama's celebration of liberal hegemony which underrates the fact „that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.“⁷³

September 11 marks indeed a date, not only for America, but also in the history of mankind. „To mark a date“ as Jacques Derrida states it in his interview with Giovanna Borradori, „presupposes „something“ comes or happens for the first and last time.“⁷⁴ Are the words „war“ or „terrorism“ – even if we specify „international“ or „global“ terrorism – which political men as well as the media use, appropriate to this monstrous „something“ which happened on September 11? Wondering about this new form of government, totalitarianism, Arendt wrote: „Not only are all our political concepts and definitions insufficient for an understanding of totalitarian phenomena, but also all our categories of thought and standards for judgement seem to explode in our hands the instant we try to apply them here.“⁷⁵ One may wonder in the same way whether this Islamic fundamentalism is morally, ideologically and historically in continuity with the totalitarian movements of the 20th century as Paul Berman argues in his book *Terror and Liberalism*⁷⁶, or whether with September 11 we

⁷³ J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, Paris, Galilée, 2006 / *Specters of Marx, the state of the debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trsl. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge 1994.

⁷⁴ *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida by Giovanna Borradori, 2005, <http://www.press-uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/066649.html>.

⁷⁵ H. Arendt, „Mankind and Terror“, in *Essays in Understanding, op. cit.*, 302.

⁷⁶ As Benjamin Balint reminds us in an issue of „The Jewish Daily Forward“, dated October 6, 2006, in „Terror and Liberalism“, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), Paul Berman invoked totalitarianism in order to explain the strikingly modern ideology of Islamism. Joschka Fischer, then Germany's Foreign minister, spoke of a „third totalitarianism.“ In February

were confronted with some „unprecedented event“, for which we lack a new concept and a new meaning, according to Jacques Derrida.⁷⁷

Whatever this new concept might be, the analysis of our both authors concerning the totalitarian governments of the 20th century help us to consider at least the „totalitarian elements“ inside Islamism. Those are: the totalistic aspiration to control the whole life of individuals, the contempt towards the decadence of the Western World due to the progress and to the separation between State and religion, therefore the desire to go back to an intellectually more brilliant past and to restore the caliphate of the VIIth century, the displayed antisemitism, the nationalistic claims for a pan-arabic world denying precisely the human plurality which is in Arendt's view „the law of the earth“. However, all ideologies contain totalitarian elements and if it was only with Hitler and Stalin that they „crystallized“ and managed to form a totalitarian regime, it is because both of them „took them dead seriously [...] a 'dying class' consisted of people condemned to death; races that are 'unfit to live' were to be exterminated.“⁷⁸

2006, Salman Rushdie, Bernard-Henri Lévy and others published a statement calling radical Islam “a new totalitarian global threat. As for President Bush, he declared that today's Islamic terrorists are “successors to fascists, to Nazis, to communists and other totalitarians of the 20th century”. According to Berman, who does not refer himself even once to Hannah Arendt, Islamic fundamentalism, in continuity with the totalitarian movements of Nazism and Bolchevism, is but a new version of the most profound myth of the twentieth century, the one Norman Cohn analyzed in his book *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1957), whose origin is to be found in the Apocalypse of John: the people of God are under siege as well from within by the corrupt city dwellers of Babylon, as from without by the minions of Satan. After a war of extermination against the evil forces, which takes only one hour in John's Apocalypse, the people of God, in their purity, will reign.

⁷⁷ „9/11 and Global Terrorism“, Jacques Derrida. A Dialogue with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. As for Jürgen Habermas, he stated in this same interview: “only in retrospect will we be able to understand if the symbolically suffused collapse of the capitalistic citadels in lower Manhattan implies a break“ standing comparison with the outbreak of World War I and his aftermath.

⁷⁸ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 471.

Despite the number of deaths caused by suicide bombers all over the world, despite the death threat against the Hebrew State made by the Iranian President, we must state that for the moment Islamism has not created extermination camps, nor does it have at his disposal a state apparatus, even if many States support its fighters. Far from being a device against totalitarianism, we may see in this kind of revival of religion „the origins of a potential totalitarianism, a new variant, revealed, and we have crucial choices to make about how to respond to what we see“, as Elisabeth Young Bruehl, Hannah Arendt's biographer, puts it.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ E. Young Bruehl, „On the Origins of a New Totalitarianism“, in *Social Research*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2002; http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2267/-is269/ai90439545

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