

This Terrible Century

To us, who are enjoying a life in relative wealth, the educational and artistic offerings of a flourishing culture, and, yes, *in peace*, this century may appear to provide full reason for self-congratulation. To the future historian, however, it may rank as one of the worst centuries of human history. That is, it may so appear to an historian who can discern between good and evil spirits, who is sensitive to the needs of the soul and skillful in reading between the lines of official texts. He may raise the question of why in this century of highly developed culture a new kind of war occurred, the world war, and not just one of them, but one after another. He may wonder at the phenomenon of totalitarianism, again, a novelty in history, and at government by ideology that produced *general slavery*, while formerly only private slavery had occurred. Again, this kind of thing happened not merely once but three times, with considerable pauses in between, pauses that might have been used for reflection on these novel evils. They were novel in that they stemmed not from a new conception of the state, but rather from a demotion of the state to a mere instrument in the service of ideologi-

cal adventures of the mind, the entire phenomenon to be called *ideocracy*. Novel also was the fact that human reason was thus distorted not merely in countries where ideological movements set up this new kind of despotism but equally in those countries that appeared to have traveled a road of sanity and sobriety under representative governments. These various points need to be more fully discussed, one by one.

It has taken about half a century to develop a deeper and broader understanding of the First World War as this century's worst and key catastrophe. It came about from two forces of the nineteenth-century, nationalism and imperialism, that had engendered, among others, four wars before 1914: the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5), the Tripolitan war between Italy and Turkey, (1911); the first Balkan War, (1912); the second Balkan War, (1913): all of brief duration and manifestly suitable for political settlement. The outbreak of war between Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and France, on August

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1, 1914 seemed to all participants to be something of a similar character, so that everybody expected the matter to be over by Christmas. For a while, indeed, it appeared as another of what one might call "conventional" wars. Then, however, it mutated into an unprecedented and unimagined type of warfare: during four years, millions of soldiers existed in trenches and dug-outs, endured indescribable artillery duels, every once in a while advanced a few hundred yards of utterly devastated terrain only to lose that gain a few days later. Millions of lives were lost

in this seemingly meaningless contention for positions. Millions of survivors found themselves bereft of their sense of meaning. The ensuing cultural impoverishment of the homeland

to which they returned manifested itself in all kinds of cultural and political disorder. Socialism and Communism, it is true, already had found considerable acceptance among the working population before World War I, but it did not generate open fighting politics until after the end of that war. Fascism was a direct product of homecoming soldiers in the first five years after that. Nazism found its creator and leader in the resentments and hatreds of a World War I non-commissioned officer who had not learned anything else in life. The following conversation in Dorothy Sayers' *The Documents in the Case* occurs in the room of a man named Perry, a priest:

"So here we all are. I never thought you'd

stick to it, Perry. Which has made your job the hardest—the War or people like us?"

"The War," said Perry, immediately. "It has taken the heart out of people."

"Yes. It showed things up a bit," said Matthews. "Made it hard to believe in anything."

"No," replied the priest. "Made it easy to believe in everything in a languid sort of way—in you, in me, in Waters, in Hoskyns, in mascots, in spiritualism, in education, in the daily papers—why not? It's easier, and the various things cancel out and so make it

unnecessary to take any definite steps in any direction."

World War I terminated four pre-war empires: Austria-Hungary, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Germany. From their demise arose a number of "succession states": Poland, Czech-



AMERICAN MEN IN THE 23RD INFANTRY OF THE SECOND DIVISION FIGHTING IN FRANCE DURING WWI.

slovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Albania, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and so on. To this day most of these nations continue to produce troubles that essentially come from not being prepared for independent political unity, for constituting a unified state. With some trepidation one may call this a new force, to be added to the nineteenth-century ones, of nationalism and imperialism: national political immaturity.

The most destructive novelty, however, were the political ideologies, above all, Communism, Fascism, National Socialism. These three were, first of all, political movements, the movements rooted, how-

ever, in a body of ideas that could be mistaken for philosophy, since the ideas transcended the political reality and claimed to apply to being as a whole. Being, of course, is the object of philosophical thought, as it addresses itself to the basic reality of God, nature, existing things. In other words, to philosophize means to raise questions about the meaning of individual or social existence in the larger reality of what is common to all mankind. Political societies are not monadic, and philosophy proceeds to raise questions about their meaning in terms of a higher encompassing reality. Early on, in Greek classical philosophy, this meaning was recognized as the "order of the soul."¹ Voegelin here defines "theory" as "an attempt at formulating the meaning of existence by explicating the content of a definite class of experiences." These are experiences of being, such as the love of wisdom, the experience of the just as "right superordination and subordination," the experience of friendship, of death, of the depth and the height of the soul.² Basically, these experiences serve as evidence of what is given, in terms of the cosmos as well as the soul.

Ideology is the name for that kind of disorder which consists in substituting for philosophical questions about what is given a set of assertions about what is not given. What is not given includes the historical future, particularly when one "inquires" about it in order to control the "destiny of mankind." What is given but not accessible to the type of knowing suitable for *things* in this world is the divine reality, above and beyond that of the cosmos and of human history. When speculation of the mind begins to criticize being as such, when it aims not at understanding the "constitution of being" but at its control by the human will, the result is not philosophy but ideology. The Fascist, the National Socialist, and the Communist ideologies were such bastard

children of the human mind in the West. Philosophers may have contributed to it. Hegel, for instance, made "states of consciousness" the prime states of history both past and future, so that his abstractions replace real actors, either men or God. Gobineau was another nineteenth-century thinker, the first to declare race to be man's essence, a claim one should compare with Aristotle's sober ranking of human nature by comparing human being with animal being, vegetative being, and inorganic being. That difference consisting in reason, he found reason to be the core of human nature. Marx, who was well aware of this philosophical heritage, insisted that labor is man's essence, an assertion which enabled him to describe the division of labor as something that is wrong with being. Marx had to subject humanity to economic determinism in order to make this claim. Freud's reduction of human consciousness to determination by the subconscious created another premise on which human control over future history could be seemingly secured. All these developments belong to the general sphere of human consciousness of reality and its own nature.

The three ideologies mentioned concerned the sphere of government and public order. In each case we find the creation of a "party" that is unlike all previously existing parties. Political parties of the modern type began to exist in seventeenth-century England. It was not until the French Revolution, however, that one political party claimed to be the possessor of transcending truth and that therefore it could tolerate no disobedience or even criticism. These were the Jacobins. Since they appeared on the historical scene for only a very short time, they were gladly forgotten after their demise. While the Jacobins were a group formed in the vicissitudes of the turbulent French Revolution, with regard to twentieth-century ideologies the respective par-

ties existed long before they actually seized power. In the case of Russia, that meant fifteen years, ten years for Hitler's party, and two or three years in the case of Mussolini's Fascists. These periods of pre-existence enabled the three movements to define themselves as something other than previously existing parties. The word, "party," they could not shake, but they would not consent to operate as one of several competing parties. What is more, these ideological groups, or movements, saw themselves not as part of the state, but as ranking above the state and its institutions. In various ways each of these ideological "parties" succeeded in assuming powers to govern that outranked political institutions of any kind, including the state itself. Nor did their leaders permit themselves to be classified with any type of ruler known in history. In all three regimes, a previously non-political term was created: *Vozhd*, *Führer*, *Duce*. Stalin's prime title was "Secretary of the Communist Party." Mussolini, supposedly under the higher authority of the king, used the king as his puppet. Hitler, likewise, assumed a somewhat unnamed transcendental character of his position. In all three cases, the result was that "politics became religion," to use the words of Camus. Now, religion is always worship of something or some being higher than man. Insofar as politics is human order without any direct divine participation, confusing it or merging it with religion is what Voegelin calls "fallacious," or, in everyday language, impermissible.

Thus we find, first, confusion of philosophical concepts or their derivatives; second, impairment of perception of political institutions and their interrelations; third, confusion regarding what is worthy to be worshipped and what is not so worthy. The soul that finds itself thus bereft of the most important means of orientation is a soul subject to incapacity of moral judgment.

The capacity of such judgment depends on clarity of the mind regarding ontological premises.

We Americans might now claim a right to congratulate ourselves: we never were tempted by ideology, we never had an ideocratic dictatorship, we never set up a Gulag system, we never enslaved human minds. But are we distinguished by good order of public and private lives? Let us see what our own newspapers say about this matter:

"The oft-debated 'social issues'—abortion rights, school prayer, gay rights and Murphy Brown plot lines—miss the wider calamities of life in the U.S. today. Cold statistics give the essence of the story: In the past three decades, the percentage of children born outside of marriage has risen fivefold, from 5% to 25%. Today a stunning 63% of black children are born out of wedlock. At the same time, the divorce rate has tripled. The net result is that almost a third of U.S. families now are one-parent households. During the past 30 years, a 560% increase in violent crime, a jump of more than 200% in the teenage suicide rate, an 80% drop in SAT scores."

"The conditions of black ghettos today reveal as much about the disintegration of urban black society as they do about the indifference, hostility or racism of white society. Everybody also knows that other barriers have grown up within the urban black milieu in these last decades that are profoundly debilitating. The effects are manifest in patterns of behavior involving criminality, unwed childbearing, low academic achievement, drug use, and gratuitous violence."

"In Washington D.C., there was a man who drove up to pedestrians, said 'Have a nice day,' and fired a shotgun in their faces. Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco, Mia and

Woody, the Glenridge, N.J. gang rape. Michael Griffin and David Dunne. Somalia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The World Trade Center bombing. Zoë Baird's and Kimba Wood's nannies. Spotted owl vs. loggers. Judges, journalists, politicians, professors, university presidents, heads of professional associations, foundations, and clergy, have for a long time been afraid to uphold traditional standards. They not only entertained nearly any crackpot idea, theory, or social grievance that entered their ken, but *embraced and legitimized a lot of them*. Where are the people in American life who used routinely to point out that some ideas, some complaints, some movements are in turn weak, insupportable, or false?"

Such reports could be multiplied by the hundreds. These samples suffice. Who would not recognize our social and cultural existence at this time?

As we turn from journalism to the analysis of scholars, we encounter a different kind of description of our crisis. Eric Voegelin writes of

[the] apocalyptic enthusiasm for building new worlds that will be old tomorrow, at the expense of old worlds that were new yesterday; its destructive wars and revolutions spaced by temporary stabilizations on ever lower levels of spiritual and intellectual order through natural law, enlightened self-interest, a balance of powers, a balance of profits, the survival of the fittest, and the fear of atomic annihilation in a fit of fitness; its ideological dogmas piled on top of the ecclesiastic and sectarian ones and its resistant skepticism that throws them all equally on the garbage heap of opinion; its great systems built on untenable premises and its shrewd suspicions that the premises are indeed untenable and therefore must never be rationally discussed; with the result, in our time, of having unified mankind into a global madhouse bursting with stupendous vitality.³

In the same article Voegelin passes from the heavy sarcasm of the above description to a sober analysis of what is wrong:

To the people who live in it, the sub-field is a closed world. [The 'subfield in the philosopher's larger horizon of reality.'] As a consequence, the point has come into view on which hinges a philosophical understanding of history: that truth experienced is excluded from the subfield, while the larger field is characterized by its inclusion . . . Truth experienced can be excluded from the horizon of reality but not from reality itself. When it is excluded from the universe of intellectual discourse, its presence in reality makes itself felt in the disturbance of mental operations. In order to save the appearances of reason, the doctrinaire must resort . . . to such irrational means as leaving premises inarticulate, as the refusal to discuss them, or the invention of devices to obscure them, and the use of fallacies. He does no longer move in the realm of reason but has descended to the underworld of opinion, in Plato's technical sense of *doxa*.

A little later, Voegelin further mentions "the persuasive trick of carving history into ascending phases or states of consciousness, for the purpose of placing the carver's consciousness at the top of the ladder," which trick "can be performed only under the assumption that man's consciousness is world-immanent and nothing but that; the fact is that man is capable of apprehending the point of intersection of the timeless with time . . ."

"The doctrinaire segmentation of history" he says, "has found its climactic expression in the formula: 'We are living in a post-Christian age.' . . . the neat trick of turning the 'post-Christian' of the Christians in to the 'post-Christians' of the ideologues."⁴ Voegelin's analysis is aimed not only at increased understanding of what it is that constitutes our crises, but also of an awareness of what it is that was lost in the process.

"No one is obliged to take part in the spiritual crisis of a society; on the contrary, everyone is obliged to avoid this folly and live his life in order. Our presentation of the phenomenon, therefore, will at the same time furnish the remedy for it through therapeutic analysis."

As David Walsh has observed, Eric Voegelin's work is focused on the question of what, for example, do the "chiliastic visionaries of Puritanism, the rational progressivism of the Enlightenment, the speculative transfiguration of Hegel, the radical activism of Bakunin, the revolutionary messianism of Marx, the religious positivism of Comte, the opaque racism of the National Socialists or the psychoanalytic reductionism of Freud all have in common? The answer is their root inspiration within Gnosticism. In one way or another they arise from a sense of alienation and revolt at the human condition, which they seek to overcome by abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action."²⁵

These few quotations from Voegelin and Walsh may suffice to indicate what kind of scholarly analysis is capable of penetrating to the root of the crisis and thereby effecting philosophical therapy. They also will enable us to throw some light on the question how it comes that we, the victors in two world wars, the nation that did not need to overthrow an ideological regime, the possessors of an enviable economic system and a normally functioning government, should all the same have to struggle with downright catastrophic symptoms of crisis.

As long as the ideocratic regimes and their totalitarianism existed, the tension of this political polarization sufficed to impose some minimal order on international politics as well as the domestic politics of the

democracies. This external compulsion now gone, we find that in the time of the Cold War nothing happened to slow down our own cultural deterioration, so that today its symptoms strike us as undeservedly massive and profound. In other words: what makes this century of ours uniquely terrible is that we, the victors in the war against ideological disorder, the representatives of an exemplary economy and a model type of government, are now becoming aware that we, too, have lost the erstwhile concepts of man, being, meaning, divine reality, and creation. It is from lack of metaphysics that we wallow in fundamental disorientation, unsure of standards and purpose. We who look on ourselves as strongest in this world of nations cannot help admitting that, as self-reflecting beings we are now blind, deaf, and mute. We are patients needing help rather than leaders capable of guiding helpless patients. We have suffered a diminution, as well as a distortion of reason which will render us increasingly less able to perceive the requirements of order in our own ranks. As a result, our policies may well appear as increasingly arbitrary acts of power in the world. It is unlikely that these or similar ideologies will begin to rule our political system. Our disorder seems likely to continue as sheer oblivion of norms of order, of insights into what Voegelin calls the "constitution of being," of appropriate language for divine reality and presence in our world.

The work of Eric Voegelin was prompted by the strong experience of ideological totalitarianism. It consists in the in-depth analysis of philosophic and spiritual confusion and obliteration, which analysis, as Voegelin said, has also the character of therapy. Rather than celebrating Voegelin's insight as weapons suited to take care of "them," our ideological enemies, we should gratefully begin to accept them as our own medicine. This presupposes a process of

learning to understand Voegelin and his methods of analysis. The purpose of such study would be to be able to “return to the reality of experience which originated the symbols . . .” Which symbols? The symbols of our own lost order which we ourselves have decided to abandon because the people around us so strongly claimed to find no more meaning in them.

Once we have made up our mind to turn to Voegelin’s work not only for intellectual curiosity but for therapeutic purposes, we will find that other authors are available to the same end. Some may be found in Voegelin’s footnotes. Among them we find Stanley L. Jaki. Jaki, a physicist who also has a doctorate in theology, has long been interested in the relation between the teaching of the Bible and the origin of science in Western civilization, including the question of why there was no viable birth of science in Egypt, Babylonia, China, or ancient Greece. Any one of these could boast of astonishing achievements in a few of the sciences, as well as in the techniques derived from them. China had invented the magnet, paper, the stirrup and the horse-harness. The Aztecs built marvels of religious architecture, and possessed a precise calendar. Egypt is renowned not only for its pyramids, but also for its medical knowledge and practices. The Babylonians had a remarkable chemical technique, as well as their famed mathematics.

How can one explain that such beginnings did not develop into an equivalent of the Western enterprise of science? The only way to an answer leads through a close critical analysis of the leading minds in each of these civilizations, a work that Jaki has undertaken with exemplary thoroughness. The result of this work he himself has put in the following paragraph:

The history of science, with its several stillbirths and only one viable birth, clearly shows

that the only cosmology, or view of the cosmos as a whole, that was capable of generating science was a view of which the principal disseminator was the Gospel. It was the Gospel that turned into a widely shared conviction the belief in the Father, maker of all things visible and invisible, who created all in the beginning and disposed everything in measure, number, and weight, that is, with a rigorous consistency and rationality. That belief in His creation is the ultimate perspective with respect to origin . . . While one’s account of the rise and progress of science can fragment the image of science through the application of a fearless though mistaken logic, the same account can turn into a worn-out cliché if the perspective of the Christian origin of science is evaded for some extraneous motivation. Some such motivation must have been at work when the result is the absence of any reference to the Christian faith of so many from Copernicus to Newton.⁶

Of particular interest for Western readers is the question why Aristotle’s natural philosophy did not stimulate something like an ancient Galileo. Without trying to follow the complex account that Jaki has produced, let us look at one of his remarks about Aristotle, and Jaki’s argument from this particular point:

Aristotle’s seemingly innocuous dictum that ‘time itself is regarded as a circle’ had indeed been pregnant with momentous implications for the ultimate fortunes of the Greek Logos. For all its brilliance, for all its spectacular initiatives, it remained trapped within a spacious labyrinth where every move and enterprise led in the final analysis back to the same starting point. The possibilities within such a framework had become exhausted within a relatively few generations, and in the end nothing remained except to write commentaries on the great classics of the truly creative phase of the Greek intellectual endeavor.⁷

From there Jaki moves on to Simplicius, “the last great figure of ancient Greek philosophical tradition. His commentaries on

Aristotle's cosmology, physics, and metaphysics reveal in stark direction the predicament of the Greek Logos, its lonely wanderings, and its strange shunning of a new light which unexpectedly came to diffuse over the confines of its mighty labyrinth." Jaki later quotes Simplicius "as he held up to ridicule the mind that 'could conceive of such a strange God who first does not act at all, then in a moment becomes the creator of the elements alone, and then again, ceases from acting and hands over to nature the generation of the elements one out of another and the generation of all the rest of the elements.'" Jaki characterizes this passage as "also an implicit reference to the notion of a universe created out of *nothing* and *in time* . . . What this implied was the all-important concept of an autonomy which could be accorded to nature only by a rational Creator, remaining forever consistent with His creative plans and decisions."⁸ Here is the great problem of many human civilizations, among them the most brilliant ones, such as the ancient Greeks: They saw no possible way out of a universe that was destined ever again to turn upon its own past, returning and returning and returning.

Jaki is no fundamentalist. He considers a "fundamentalist attachment to the perspective of creation just as fatally mistaken as hostility towards a theistic perspective of the cosmos."⁹ Nor does his work in any way aim at the removal of the difference between revelation and reason. The two belong to different reaches of human consciousness, as well as to different approaches of our mind. He does argue that the problem of the cosmos belongs to both contexts, and, because it does, it was possible for one civilization to escape from the sadness of eternal return.

Jaki's work, then, essentially demonstrates the enormous consequences of a collaborative side-by-side of Christian faith

and Occidental reason. It makes clear that this neighborly togetherness did not make for distortions of either faith or reason. It generated a "robust confidence of an overwhelmingly Christian ambience for which the once-and-for-all process of human and cosmic existence was almost as natural a conviction as the air one breathed."¹⁰ That the same conviction could also generate a temptation "to assume the role of God" is a fact to which Jaki will not close his eyes. Yielding to this temptation, however, results "in a hapless oscillation between two extremes: the mirage of absolute certainty and utter skepticism."¹¹ Against this kind of derailment, Jaki reminds us, the remedy is "metaphysical realism, the only safe ground between the abysses of an absolute certainty bordering on tautology and a no-certainty-at-all provoking despair."

In conclusion, a warning may be in order that our civilization is not in good shape, furthermore, that awareness of this fact and analysis of the disorder are among the foremost obligations of intellectual leadership. Both require a return to basic questions, such questions as are usually answered at the beginning of things. A thinking person should examine his own underlying assumptions, anxious to discover whether the will to power or deference for being may be at work in his soul. He should also shoulder responsibility for strengthening the metaphysical ground of our discussions about order. It is this kind of turning around that could eventually bring about a degree of sanity to our common existence.

Notes

1. Cf. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 1952, p.63 f. 2. *Ibid.* 3. "Immortality," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 60, no.3, p.238. 4. *loc.cit.* p.257. 5. David Walsh, "Voegelin's Response to the Disorder of the Age," *The Review of Politics*, vol.46, no.2, p.271. 6. *The Origin of Science and the Science of Its Origin*, 1978, p.99 f. 7. *Science and Creation*, 1974, p.130f. 8. *Ibid.* p.132. 9. *Op. cit.* p.23. 10. *Science and Creation*, p.237. 11. *Cosmos and Creator*, p.141.