

The Cry Against Nineveh: Whittaker Chambers and Eric Voegelin on the Crisis of Western Modernity

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Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah, the son of Amitai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."

—Jonah, 1:1

WHITTAKER CHAMBERS AND Eric Voegelin were born in the same year (1901); and although they had vastly different personal experiences—the one as a university professor and refugee from Nazism, the other as a left-wing journalist and Communist spy—they were both in their mature years to adopt a nearly identical position on what they saw as the crisis of Western modernity. Somewhat surprisingly in view of the great similarities between them, the ideas of these two men have rarely been compared. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to present their two assessments of Western modernity and to show how both men stood within a common mystic-prophetic line of protest that sought to judge man and his world *sub specie aeternitatis*.

I

ERIC VOEGELIN BEGAN his academic career in the 1920s as an instructor at the University of Vienna, where he was able to view first-hand the social, political, and intellectual disintegration of central Europe in the period between the two world wars. The rise of the modern political mass movements, beginning with the victory of Bol-

shevism in Russia, the meteoric ascent of fascism in Italy, and finally, the victory of national socialism in Germany were clearly the most important events in his life, at least insofar as his intellectual development was concerned. Beginning with his 1933 publication *Rasse und Staat* (Race and Nation), all Voegelin's intellectual efforts over the last fifty years of his life were attempts to come to grips, in one way or another, with what he perceived to be a civilizational crisis of truly epoch-making proportions.

Perhaps the most important insight Voegelin gained into the nature of modern radical politics came in the late 1930s at the time he conceived his little book *Die Politischen Religionen* (The Political Religions, 1938). There had been a good deal of literature before this time that dealt with the modern mass movements of fascism and revolutionary socialism from a moral, intellectual, and socio-economic point of view. Voegelin, however, while not disagreeing with this literature, found it seriously flawed insofar as it missed the deeper appeal of the movements, which he saw as essentially religious. "Political collectivism," Voegelin said—and here he had in mind both Marxist-Leninism and fascist nationalism—"is not only a political and moral phenomenon; more important it seems to me is the religious element in it."¹

The religious element in the mass move-

ments, Voegelin believed, though it was of a perverted variety, had a powerful appeal to Western man owing to the general spiritual impoverishment of modern Western culture. The death or atrophy of the historical religions in the Western world, he felt, had created in modern man a state of such intense spiritual forlornness that masses of human beings, in their desperation, could turn to Marxism and fascism as attractive religious substitutes. "There is no important thinker in the Western world today," Voegelin wrote in *Die Politischen Religionen*, "who doesn't realize that the West today finds itself in a serious crisis, in a process of internal decay whose cause is to be seen in the secularization of the Spirit, and who furthermore doesn't realize that health can only be brought about by religious renewal, whether this renewal is within the framework of the historical churches or outside this framework."²

The spiritual crisis of the West had come about, Voegelin would explain elsewhere, largely as a result of Western man's overemphasis on the material-sense-perceivable aspect of reality to the neglect of the human spiritual dimension. This neglect, he held, was a concomitant of the rise of modern natural science and technology. "The magnificent advance of science in Western civilization," Voegelin declared in an important article on "The Origins of Scientism," is paralleled by an unspeakable advance of mass ignorance with regard to the problems which are existentially the important ones."³ The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fascination with the "new science" of mathematized physics, he contended, led to the point of "underrating and neglecting the concern for experiences of the spirit" and "developed into the assumption that the new science could create a world view that would substitute for the religious order of the soul."⁴ From the seventeenth century onward, according to Voegelin, the spiritual impoverishment of Western man progressed at an increasing rate; it reached an unprecedented level in the nineteenth century, setting the stage for the moral and spiritual anarchy of the

twentieth.⁵

An important theme in many of Voegelin's works is the idea that man cannot live in a fully secularized universe, since such a universe provides no orientation for his life and no satisfaction for his deeper spiritual hunger. Human nature, Voegelin believes, abhors a spiritual vacuum, and when the older, transcendent God has fallen from view or become discredited, new objects of worship will inevitably emerge whose content in the modern period is usually drawn from the innerworldly arena studied by the various sciences. The eclipse of the heavenly God must inevitably lead, according to Voegelin, to the creation of various earthly divinities:

Men can allow the contents of the world to grow to such an extent that the world [*i.e.*, as a whole] and God disappear from view, but they cannot eliminate the problems of human existence. These problems live on in the individual soul and when God has dropped out of sight behind [the contents of] the world, then the contents of the world become the new gods; when the symbols of the transmundane religiosity are prohibited, there appear in their place new symbols that have been developed out of the innerworldly language of science.⁶

Among these new symbols of innerworldly religiosity Voegelin includes the Marxist notion of "scientific socialism" and the Nazi idea of scientific racial-biological theory.

The new innerworldly religions of fascism, national socialism, and Marxist-Leninism all seek, according to Voegelin, to divinize one or another innerworldly collective, and in so doing, he says, they distort the actual relationships which exist between man and God, between man and man, and between man and the world. As he writes in *Die Politischen Religionen*:

The innerworldly religiosity which experiences the social collective—be it humanity, the people, the class, the race, or the state—as *realissimum* [ultimate reality] is to be seen as a falling away from God . . . the innerworldly religiosity and its symbolism

veils the most important parts of reality. It blocks the path to the reality of God and distorts the relationships which exist between the realms of being below God.⁷

Because of his attack on the secularized religions of the modern period and his obvious sympathy for certain Greek and Christian writers, many have assumed that Voegelin's own orientation in life derives from a rigid adherence to certain ancient traditions, both political and religious. And there are a few passages in his writings, particularly in *The New Science of Politics*, which might seem to confirm this assumption. Nevertheless, the assumption is wrong, as the only mode of existential orientation which Voegelin accepts, at least for himself and for anyone who seeks to be a philosopher, is that of the "open soul" (the term is Bergson's) and of a personal meditative attunement to the divine-transcendent reality which manifests itself in the soul's inner depths. Indeed, rigid adherence to religious tradition, if by tradition one has in mind a codified system of symbols, dogmas, and beliefs, is seen by Voegelin as a "symptom of spiritual and intellectual sterility," which a philosopher must reject.⁸ In questions of religion, the accent in Voegelin's philosophy is thus always upon personal meditation and first-hand religious experience.

Voegelin is equally critical of traditionalism as a political stance. The conservative traditionalism of European Christian democrats and American Burkeans, for instance, he characterizes as a "secondary ideology"⁹—that is, as an ideology which has been constructed as a defense against the primary ideologies of positivism, Marxism, and fascism, and which takes over from these ideologies their dogmatic-uncritical mode of belief. Voegelin in this regard has gone so far as to characterize political traditionalists, at least those in Germany, as "retrograde idiots" (*sitzen-gebliebenen Dummköpfen*). "Between the retrograde idiots of Tradition, and the apocalyptic idiots of Revolution, it is very difficult in Germany to work oneself spiritually and intellectually free."¹⁰

The great inspiration for Voegelin's own

work comes from the "mystic-philosophers" of Greece, particularly Heraclitus, Parmenides, Xenophanes, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus; from the Hebrew prophets, the Gospel writers, Philo, and Paul; and from the great mystics of historical Christianity, especially Augustine, the pseudo-Dionysius, and Bodin. Voegelin, however, does not repeat in parrot-like fashion what any of these men may have said, but has tried in his own life, under the concrete conditions of the modern world, to seek the same unmediated contact with the divine that these other men have sought. The Greek mystic-philosophers, he says, discovered the human soul as the site and sensorium of the divine—as the place, that is, where man reaches out to God and God reaches out to man; and the historical process of revelation in which the divine is manifested to human consciousness is seen by Voegelin as a continuous or ongoing one in which man participates through meditative activity. Voegelin's personal meditative exploration of the psyche, in fact, is the basis of all his philosophizing,¹¹ and nothing could be further from his own view than the Orthodox Jewish contention that revelation ended with Malachi, or the conservative Christian view that it ended with Paul and the Apostolic age (and never, of course, even began in ancient Greece). The great mystics, philosophers, and prophets of the past are seen by Voegelin not as figures of worship, but as inspirational guides and role models whose life and activity can set an example for sensitive men today.

The term "meditation" is a key one in Voegelin's thought, and he means by it pretty much what the great religious contemplatives of all ages have meant by it. In an important letter to his friend Alfred Schutz written in 1943, Voegelin describes the purpose of meditation in Augustinian terms: "The annihilation of the contents of the world *per gradus* from the physical to the spiritual in order to reach the point of transcendence in which the soul, in Augustinian language, turns in the *intentio* to God, is the purpose of meditation."¹² In the same letter he also quotes a sentence

from the anonymous author of the fourteenth century *Cloud of Unknowing*, a sentence, he says, which well formulates the classical theme of meditation: "It is needful for thee to bury in a cloud of forgetting all creatures that ever God made, that you mayest direct thine intent to God Himself."¹³ At the heart of Voegelin's view of meditation is the belief that man participates in many levels of reality; that he can turn his attention towards one area and away from another; and that by directing his attention away from the sense-perceivable world he becomes conscious of his participation in a space-time-matter transcending realm which reaches into the infinite and the ineffable. The structure of human existence, Voegelin often says, is "metaxic" or in-between in nature, by which he means that man participates in both a temporal and an eternal order, each of which is at least partially illuminated by human consciousness.

Voegelin sees the great ideologies of the modern period—and in addition to the political religions of communism, fascism, and national socialism, he would include under this category such intellectual movements as positivism, behaviorism, and Freudian psychoanalysis—as various attempts to contract human consciousness by denying one or more aspects of the total reality which man experiences in his existence. In particular, the tendency in the modern period, according to Voegelin, has been to ignore the transcendent dimension of the soul and to deny or turn away from those religious experiences of transcendence which historically have given meaning to man's existence within the world. Voegelin singles out Comte and Marx in this context, both of whom he says were well aware that human consciousness reaches into a transcendental dimension but deliberately chose to ignore this fact because it would have called into question the validity of their respective philosophical constructions.¹⁴ Marx and Comte, Voegelin says, were "intellectual swindlers" who were in demonic revolt against God. They were not atheists but "logophobes," who knew full well

what mystics and philosophers have meant by the term "God," but rebelled against the divine Presence which they sensed in their own being because they found it threatening to their respective projects. Voegelin often describes these consciously constricted world views in terms of Schelling's category of "pneumopathology" (a pathology of the spirit) or Heimito von Doderer's concept of an *Apperzeptions-Verweigerung*—a refusal to apperceive reality. The founders of modern positivism and revolutionary socialism, Voegelin says, were fully aware of the dishonesty of their constricted reality-pictures, though many of their followers were not.

II

WHITTAKER CHAMBERS FIRST became interested in social and political questions as a student at Columbia University in the early 1920s. He had entered the university with a fairly conventional, even conservative, outlook on politics and religion, but by his junior year he had become a full-fledged Communist and decided to quit school in order to devote all his energies to the revolutionary cause. What attracted Chambers to Communism, as he would explain years later, was that it seemed to offer a way out of the meaningless hedonism and materialism of modern Western culture.

The forces of revolution in the West [he wrote in *Cold Friday*] are an intellectual proletariat, disinherited, not in this world's goods with which they are often incongruously replete, but disinherited in the spirit. The revolt of the intellectuals of the West almost without exception begins as the frantic thrashing of those drowning in the materialism of the West, a convulsive struggle against the death of the spirit. This is the answer to the fatuous, reiterated question why men like Arthur Koestler or Whittaker Chambers became Communists. For the differences in background . . . are trifling compared to that convulsion of the drowning spirit which carried us, and men like us . . . into Communism.¹⁵

Elsewhere in the same work he writes:

... a civilization which supposes that what it chiefly has to offer mankind is more abundant bread—that civilization is already half-dead. Sooner or later it will know it as it chokes on a satiety of that bread by which alone men cannot live. . . . For it seems to be a law of life and of history that societies in which the pursuit of abundance and comfort has displaced all our pursuits in importance soon cease to be societies. They fall to whatever power can rally the starving spirit of man even though the rallying faith is demonstrably worse than the soft complacency that would suffocate the spirit in abundance.¹⁶

Chambers says that in his years at Columbia he learned not Communism, but despair, and it was as a revolt against this despair that he decided to join the Communist party. Communism, he came to believe, was a substitute religion that gained adherents among the Western intelligentsia primarily because of the decline of the Christian religious faith. A man, he believed, cannot live without faith in something greater than his own individual existence, and the hedonism, materialism, and careerism which he saw rampant in modern society did not provide such a faith. Communism, he says in *Witness*, “offered me what nothing else in the dying world had power to offer at the same intensity—faith and a vision, something for which to live and something for which to die.”¹⁷ “Communism is never stronger than the failure of other faiths.”¹⁸ It is “the great alternative faith of mankind.”¹⁹

Chambers was to throw himself into his new substitute religion with a passion and a degree of commitment that were truly extraordinary, especially for an American Communist. Lionel Trilling, who knew Chambers during his Columbia days, says that he was the first person he ever met “whose commitment to radical politics was meant to be definitive of his whole moral being.”²⁰ During the period he was a Communist, Chambers’s role models were not only Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but those self-sacrificing anarchists and Narodnik who in pre-Bolshevik days had laid down their own lives in order to kill

the most monstrous representatives on the Tsarist regime. Throughout his life, in fact, Chambers was to retain a certain fascination for the figure of the martyr,²¹ and a willingness to die for one’s faith was seen by him as a necessary prerequisite for the revival of Western society.

Chambers’s eventual disillusionment with Communism was due partly to the Stalinist reign of terror during the purges of the mid-1930s. He had always been struck by the acrimony and viciousness of intra-party disputes, but initially he chalked these up to growing pains which a mature Communism would someday outgrow. The Stalinist tyranny, however, led him to suspect that the evil which he saw within Communist party circles was not something extrinsic to Communism, but something inherent in its very nature. Chambers’s final break with Communism, however, was due more to his personal religious experience than to any external political events. Although he doesn’t give us a full account of his religious awakening, in *Witness* he describes the following incident which, in retrospect, he was to see as the beginning of his break with Communism:

... I date my break [with Communism] from a very casual happening. I was sitting in our apartment. It was shortly before we moved to Alger Hiss’s apartment in Washington. My daughter was in her high chair. I was watching her eat. She was the most miraculous thing that had ever happened in my life. I liked to watch her even when she smeared porridge on her face or dropped it meditatively on the floor. My eye came to rest on the delicate convolutions of her ear—those intricate, perfect ears. The thought passed through my mind: “No, those ears were not created by any chance coming together of atoms in nature (the Communist view). They could have been created only by immense design!” The thought was involuntary and unwanted. I crowded it out of my mind. But I never wholly forgot it or the occasion. I had to crowd it out of my mind. If I had completed it, I should have had to say: Design presupposes God.²²

Here we have an instance of a fairly

common experience of the harmony and wonder in nature, in this case, the harmony and wonder of a child's ears. Such experiences touch our higher aesthetic and religious sensibilities and stimulate our awareness to reach into areas of reality beyond those areas treated in materialistic philosophies, whether positivist or Leninist. Since such experiences would call into question the very foundation of materialist philosophy, they must be systematically excluded from view if such philosophies are to be maintained. Here in Chambers's account we have a perfect example of what Eric Voegelin means by a "refusal to apperceive"—a concrete experience, which is apprehended as very meaningful, must be crowded out of awareness lest it undermine the constricted world-view or an irrationalist ideology. Elsewhere in *Witness* Chambers writes on the same theme:

I do not know how long there had existed, side by side with my militant acceptance of the implication of Communism, an uneasiness, an anxiety, which I would now call spiritual, but which in the past I would never willingly have admitted to my mind. If ever it slipped out, I would have crushed it back as a weakness, a base token of my inadequacy as a Communist, of my immaturity as a revolutionist.²³

In time, of course, Chambers's growing spiritual awareness would come to assert itself with overwhelming force and assume a place at the very core of his being. "There tore through me," he writes in *Witness*, "a transformation with the force of a river, which, dammed up and diverted for a lifetime, bursts its way back to its true channel."²⁴ "The torrent that swept through me in 1937 and the first months of 1938 swept my spirit clear to discern one truth: 'man without mysticism is a monster.'²⁵ "Man cannot organize the world for himself without God; without God man can only organize the world *against man*."²⁶

After his conversion from Communism, Chambers was to see himself as having a mission to warn the West of the disaster towards which it was headed. He was to

see himself, in fact, cast in a role similar to that of the biblical Jonah.²⁷ Like Jonah, Chambers believed he had been called by God to proclaim to a sick and decaying society that it was indeed sick and decaying, and that in its disease, it had given birth to a monster, which now threatened to destroy it. Chambers's hope, of course, was that the West, like the biblical Nineveh, would turn from its evil ways and save itself before it was too late. Throughout his life, however, he remained very pessimistic on this score.

Chambers's growing spiritual awareness was to lead not only to his break with Communism and his public testimony against it, but to his eventual entrance into the religious Society of Friends. He was attracted to the Quaker faith, he says, because it combined a practical and communal sense with an emphasis on personal mysticism and silent meditation. He seems to have been particularly influenced by the writings of George Fox, the seventeenth century founder of the Quaker movement. "My need," he says in *Witness*, "was to be a practicing Christian in the same sense that I had been a practicing Communist. I was seeking a community of worship in which a daily mysticism (for I hold that God cannot be known in any other way) would be disciplined and fortified by an orderly, and even practical, spirit and habit of life and the mind. Some instinctive sense of my need . . . drew me powerfully to the Quakers."²⁸ Concerning George Fox he writes:

. . . I opened the *Journal* of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism. Fox's *Journal* is still less a book than a voice that spoke peculiarly, as Quakers say, "to my condition." It summoned me to a direct daily experience of God and told me that His revelation is continuous to those who seek to hear his voice in the silence of all distractions of this world. It summoned me to know the Inward Light, that of God within myself, as within all other men without exception. It enjoined on me a simplicity of the spirit whose first commandment is compassion, which is expressly commanded not to judge. . . . In short, it summoned me to the most difficult

of vocations—to be a Christian as in the first century.²⁹

After the Hiss case and the publication of *Witness* in 1952, Chambers was to develop a very close friendship with William F. Buckley, Jr.; and for a time he was an editor of *National Review*. But he was never comfortable with the magazine's attempt to delineate a political orthodoxy, and he stood far removed from Buckley's own Roman Catholic religious orthodoxy. Orthodoxy, for Chambers, be it political or religious, was alien to his basically poetic-intuitive type of mind, which craved intellectual freedom and abhorred conformisms of whatever variety.³⁰ As his friend Duncan Norton-Taylor once remarked, "he never felt at home with any kind of orthodoxy, political or religious, after the betrayal of his spirit by the appalling orthodoxy of Communism."³¹

Chambers frequently spoke of himself as a counter-revolutionist or man of the Right, though he explicitly rejected the title of conservative. Though he does not explain the matter with great clarity (at least in any of his letters and writings published to date), his reasons for rejecting the conservative label seem to have been three-fold. First, he rejected the traditionalist variety of conservatism, such as that represented by Russell Kirk and Frank Meyer, as an antiquarian irrelevance that could provide no orientation for the modern world.³² His second reason, which is closely associated with the first, was his belief that conservatism in its traditionalist form was incapable of coming to grips with the reality of technological change and the dynamic of capitalist production.³³ The modern age, Chambers held, was the product of the machine, and only a philosophy which could keep pace with changes in technology and economic organization could have a chance of redeeming what was valuable in the West. Traditionalist conservatism, he believed, could never do this since it looked to the past for its model. His final reason for rejecting the conservative label seems to have been his strong opposition to the libertarian-indi-

vidualist strain in American conservative thought, as this was represented, for instance, by Frank Chodorov. Chambers himself, of course, was something of an individualist, but apparently he saw the state in modern societies as having a greater role to play than the libertarian wing of American conservatism would concede to it.³⁴ Of the persons he associated with at *National Review*, James Burnham alone seems to have been a thinker whose thought he held in high regard, apparently because of the latter's non-ideological pragmatism and aggressive pursuit of an anti-Communist *Realpolitik*.

III

SUMMING UP THE similarities between the views of Chambers and Voegelin in regard to the crisis of the modern West, one could say the following: At the heart of Eric Voegelin's and Whittaker Chambers's views of Western modernity is the belief that Western culture has reached a stage of acute crisis that has been brought on by an overemphasis on science and technology to the neglect of man's spiritual dimension. Both reject materialism, in the philosophical sense ("matter is the primary reality in the universe"), no less than in the popular sense ("the good life is the life of material abundance"). Both stress that man cannot live by bread alone and that the spiritual impoverishment resulting from modern man's preoccupation with innerworldly rationality and technics leads to a sense of forlornness and despair, from which arises the great attractiveness of the modern radical political movements. Both see Communism as a substitute religious creed, but one which is demonic because it deliberately attempts to cut man off from his rootedness in the divine.

Voegelin and Chambers both found their own orientation in life through a personal spirituality, and their criticisms of the decadence and degeneration of Western society stand within the tradition of Plato and the Hebrew prophets. Although both men were eagerly embraced by American conservatives and shared

with American conservatism a loathing for Communism, neither was fully at home in the American conservative movement. Both Voegelin and Chambers shied away from all dogmatisms and orthodoxies, whether political or religious, and both sought to judge men and ideas on the basis of their own reason, common sense, and inner spiritual sensitivities. Both men can be described as mystics, and their political position might be seen as a theocentric humanism or pragmatism which found all forms of totalitarianism abhorrent.

¹*Die Politischen Religionen* (Stockholm, 1929), p. 8. ²*Ibid.* The thinkers Voegelin had in mind in this context probably included the Webers (Max and Alfred), Max Scheler, Henri Bergson, Stefan George, Karl Jaspers, Etienne Gilson, and Paul Valery. ³"The Origins of Scientism," *Social Research*, 15 (1949), p. 462. ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 491. ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 492. ⁶*Die Politischen Religionen*, p. 50. ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 65. ⁸*Anamnesis: Zur Theorie der Geschichte und Politik* (Munich, 1966), p.

58. ⁹*Ibid.*, p. 329. ¹⁰*Muenchner Abendzeitung*, February 15-16, 1969, p. 11. ¹¹On this see Voegelin's "Remembrance of Things Past," in Gerhart Niemeyer's English translation of *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame, 1978), p. 4. ¹²*Anamnesis*, p. 33. ¹³*Ibid.* ¹⁴For Voegelin's treatment of Marx see "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," *Review of Politics*, 12 (1950), pp. 275-302; *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 22-28, 34-40, 44-46, 64-67; and *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (Durham, 1975), pp. 240-73, 298-302. For his treatment of Comte, see *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, pp. 136-66. ¹⁵*Cold Friday* (New York, 1964), p. 44. ¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 14-15. ¹⁷*Witness* (Chicago, 1952), p. 196. ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 193. ¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 9. ²⁰"Whittaker Chambers' Honor," *New York Review of Books*, April 17, 1975, p. 20. ²¹See, for instance, the remarks in *Witness* on Eugen Levine and Sazonov (p. 6); and on Ragozinikova in *Odyssey of a Friend* (New York, 1969), p. 77. ²²*Witness*, p. 16. ²³*Ibid.*, p. 81. ²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 83. ²⁵*Ibid.* ²⁶*Ibid.* ²⁷See *Odyssey of a Friend*, p. 61; *Cold Friday*, pp. 265-68. ²⁸*Witness*, p. 482. ²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 483-84. ³⁰See his very important letter to Buckley in *Odyssey of a Friend*, pp. 222-30. ³¹*Cold Friday*, p. xii. ³²On this see *Odyssey of a Friend*, pp. 191, 216, 229. ³³*Ibid.*, p. 246. ³⁴See *Ibid.*, p. 138; also *A Tribute to Whittaker Chambers* (Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 19.