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Nazism and Eric Voegelin's Politische Religionen: An Approach to Exploring Nazism's Roots in Modern Thought

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Nazism and Eric Voegelin's *Politische Religionen*: An Approach to Exploring Nazism's Roots in

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"All humanity is alienated when too much trust is placed in merely human projects, ideologies and utopias." (Pope Benedict XVI)

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THe certainty that humanity is marching towards a better earthly existence and that a radiant future is just over the horizon IS Well, kind of, mantra of Modernism

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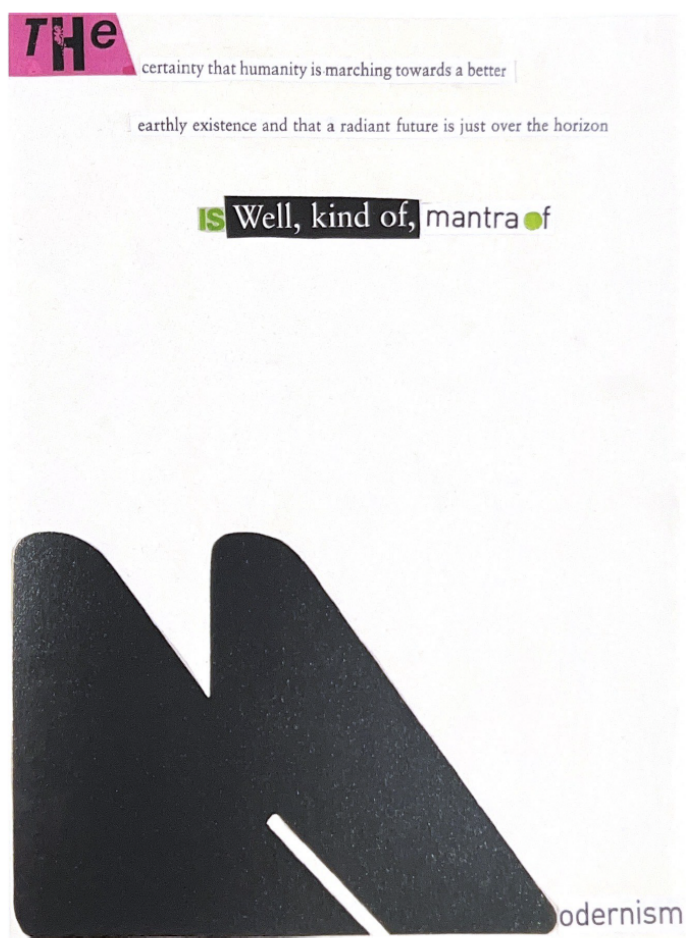
[1] Muntean and Rosenblum. *Untitled (At a time when…),* 2004, collage, inkjet print on paper, 40 x 30 cm

Abstract:

The Holocaust shook the core assumptions many held regarding human progress and human nature. This paper seeks to track how the ideas of modernist philosophers may have laid the fundamental political and moral assumptions that allowed the Holocaust to occur. I will offer an analysis of 20th century German-American political scientist and philosopher Eric Voegelin's theory of *Political Religions* to assess whether philosophy emerging from the Modern era led Germany to eschew Christianity, a world-transcendent religion as the source of the West's "first principles," and adopt the world-imminent religion of Nazism in its place. If this proves to be the case, with Nazism showing the problem of rights derived from the State, then Voegelin's work can help us understand the shortcomings of modern thought through a novel philosophical and anthropological lens.

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Introduction

Why is it wrong to kill an innocent stranger walking down the street? One might answer that morality dictates we do not do any harm to an innocent person, let alone take their life. As preposterous as this example might be, it is an obvious way to demonstrate how natural our contemporary moral code is to us; we have been inculturated with it and grew up with it being taught to us throughout our lives by our parents, our superiors, our society, and our institutions.

There have been other cultures, times, and societies where innocent individuals in fact had their lives taken. Certain Mesoamerican cultures practiced human sacrifice.[2] The Mongols would rip open pregnant women to slaughter the child they were carrying.[3] More recently and much more present in the contemporary psyche is how the Nazis rounded up and murdered Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, and others deemed unworthy to live.

To fully understand how such a civilizational breakdown is possible, we have to recognize the role that so-called *first principles* play within the moral (and more generally, philosophical) framework of a culture and society.

The last Nazis example above may evoke a special sense of curiosity and confusion to the contemporary mind. After all, Nazi Germany was much more recent than the Mongols, the Spartans, or the Mesoamericans. The philosophical advances of modernity that earlier societies could not claim, especially in the area of morality, seemed to be absent in the Nazi regime which acted in stark contrast to the values held by surrounding western cultures. One can go further and assert that the Nazis emerged from a previously moral culture and had moral individual agents

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[2] Anawalt, Patricia R. "Understanding Aztec Human Sacrifice." Archaeology 35, no. 5 (1982): 38–45. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41727796.

[3] Lane, George E., ' The Mongols in Iran', in Touraj Daryaee (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History, Oxford Handbooks. https://eprints.soas.ac.uk › 13395 › 3 › Mongols_in_Iran.pdf

living within the regime's borders, which makes its very existence scandalizing. Yet the question nonetheless remains: *how could this ever happen, especially in modern times?*

The events of National Socialist Germany and the second World War have shaped decades of philosophy. Psychologists, political scientists, artists, religious men and women have all weighed in (and continue to do research) on the causes, effects, and nature of Nazism. Writers with a more philosophical bent, like Ámery, Levinas, Adorno, or Fackenheim, both participated in this discussion and manifested from a school of thought that was to some extent predicated on the fact that something as barbaric as Nazi culture emerged after the Enlightenment and the intellectual advances of the Modern era.

Writing contemporaneously with the aforementioned intellectuals is a man named Eric Voegelin. Voegelin was born in Germany and fled Nazi persecution in 1938, moving to the United States of America. He went on to become an influential philosopher and political scientist; with stints at Louisiana State University, the University of Munich, and Stanford University. While the above philosophers pondered the effects of the Holocaust and argude to varying degrees that the Holocaust is a historical refutation of Enlightenment thought and modern ideals, Voegelin more so focused on trying to understand how the Nazis were ever able to arise in the first place. In an insightful analysis of philosophy and human nature, Voegelin takes a variety of socio-philo-poli-cultural factors and harmonizes their respective and interrelated effects to offer a theory that explains how, even in our times, we could see such horror. The theory is that of political religions.

Voegelin orders overarching systems of belief into two different kinds: world-transcendent religions and world-immanent religions. He argued that Nazism fell into the latter category and was an instance whereby a western society was no longer ultimately subject

to a Christian worldview. I will argue there is sufficient reason to suggest that the philosophical and historical trends of the modern era led western cultures and societies - and specifically for our sake, Germany - to eschew Christianity as the source of "first principles" and adopt the world-imminent religion of Nazism in its place.

I will offer instances in modern intellectual history that show the developments in our philosophical system that may have made it possible for Nazism to develop. Next, I will analyze Voegelin's philosophy in light of other historical, aesthetic, and political perspectives to see if his theory of political religions is useful in understanding the Holocaust. If his theories prove to be helpful, I will draw the conclusion that Voegelin's thought shows that immanent (secular) religions lack the ability to provide the basis for an absolute moral value system.
I will make my point in steps.

1. Productive philosophy needs an external basis or foundation on which things like morality can securely rest. (premise)

2. If Eric Voegelin's theory of *Political Religions* is correct, it can help us identify the roots of Nazism back to philosophies from the modern tradition. (premise)

3. If *Political Religions* is correct, it can also illustrate the process by which these ideas evolved into Nazism. (premise)

4. By design, Nazism does not have any means to provide an immutable source of morality or authority since the source of morality under Nazism is the State. (IC[4] 1)

5. If Nazism shows the problem of rights being derived from the State, then Voegelin's work can help us understand the shortcomings of modern thought through a novel philosophical and anthropological lens. (MC[5] 1-4)

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[4] Intermediate Conclusion.
[5] Main Conclusion.

There are a few things I wish to note before I begin:

My argument depends on the existence of truth, including relative but principally absolute truths. The existence of truth can be ascertained quite simply by looking at the statement "there is no such thing as truth." If it is true that there is no truth, then either 1. The statement is false, thus refuting itself, or 2. The statement is true with one exception: there is no truth, except for the one truth that there is no truth. With the latter, we find ourselves in a situation where we must admit two truths, not just one. This chain reaction continues to infinity, thus refuting the statement.

This second point also holds in the context of morality, and more specifically in regards to a universal, unchangeable truth. By that I mean that something may be intrinsically or always immoral, regardless of where, when, or with whom it occurs. A clear example of this is slavery. My argument takes the position that slavery is always immoral, regardless of the time, place, manner, or even the benefits of the practice. Even if people in the confederate south of the United States of America lived in a time where slavery was accepted, it was never moral, just as slavery remains immoral today and will remain immoral in the future. I will touch on and substantiate this position later on in my paper.

One: The Essentiality of First Principles

In order to understand philosophical reasoning in general, we must begin at the beginning, which for this paper means having a basic understanding of the actual mechanics of philosophy.

Philosophy draws on logic as its systematic language. Just as engineers rely on math to build bridges and don't construct shapes or deploy certain materials randomly, so also do philosophers rely on logic for substantiating their reasoning.[6] Logic uses a variety of quantifiers, letters, and symbols to denote relations, conditions, and ultimately the truth function of an argument or statement. When given a set of premises, the rules of logic will help determine its validity, equivalency, and potential implications of the argument *on the bases of the given premises.* One can also use rules associated with employing assumptions in dealing with a logical proof, but a completed proof of a valid argument must only rely on the given premises and not on any of the assumptions.[7] A theorem is something that is proven on the basis of assumptions only, and is thus reliant on no premises.

If we are given a logical sentence with the very simple premise of *P & Q*, where the ampersand is the logical language's symbol for a conjunctive statement, we can use the rules of logic to know that we can derive *P*, and we can derive *Q* from *P & Q*. In a word, we have proven an argument on the basis of the premises given. As mentioned above, a theorem is also bound to the same logical rules and mechanics, but has no premises; We must first assume logical sentences before we can begin to subject the theorem to the rules of logic. If we assume *P & Q*, we can still derive *P* just as we can also derive *Q*, but our derivation tells us nothing of substance; Rather, we have just proven that *P* and *Q* are both derivable from the theorem *on the*

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[6] Logic is substantiated by metalogic.
[7] There are ways within a logical language where these assumptions can be discharged.

sole basis of the assumptions assumed. That is to say that *P & Q* "works", but only within the scope of itself.

Another, more practical way to illustrate the above example is as follows: Let's say that *P* means "Human rights are inalienable" and *Q* means "All human beings are entitled to human rights." If we are given the starting statement that "All human beings are entitled to human rights and human rights are inalienable," then we can represent this as *P & Q*. We can then deduce from the statement above that 1. All human beings have human rights, and 2. These rights are inalienable. Regarding the latter instance of theorems, when we apply the examples of human rights to how a theorem functions, we come out with the following: "I assume that human rights exist and I assume these human rights are inalienable." Thus, we can assume that human rights exist on the basis of the assumption that we must assume. If this sounds convoluted, circular, and problematic, that's because it is. Herein lies the nuance: If we have steadfast and true premises, then philosophy becomes an incredible tool for arriving at knowledge. If we do not have steadfast premises, then we can only have isolated systems of philosophy that rely on assuming that our assumptions are true.

If we are to do high-quality philosophy, then we need to know the difference between an assumption and a premise. One could make the argument that there is no difference between premises and assumptions, but that is evidently not true when looking at pure logic. A premise is the bedrock of an argument and is in effect unshakable. It is the starting point that has been justified already, and the justification has been justified, et cetera, all the way back to The Beginning. It cannot be questioned because it is true by necessity. If a premise does not reflect the nature of reality or being, then it cannot be correct. Assumptions can be assumed at will,

which in effect means that a theorem can be true *provided we assume that the assumptions are true*.

Someone might argue that it does not matter that we make assumptions that are "obviously true." This is a problematic statement because time and time again, we can look at the events of history to substantiate that this is not the case. For example, slavery was and is never moral. A more contemporary social discussion that is particularly active today, which also illustrates the apparent "unclarity" of morality, is the topic of abortion. I will not digress into discussing this issue, but I find it a useful illustration in how our culture and society absolutely continues to struggle ascertaining morality in certain situations. To put it simply, although human rights seem evident or true in of themselves, *this is not the case.* There are too many counterexamples of human rights being negated by certain moral systems. Just one example is that of consequentialism. The University of Texas' *Ethics Unwrapped* resource nicely summarizes an example:

> [L]et's suppose economists could prove that the world economy would be stronger, and that most people would be happier, healthier, and wealthier, if we just enslaved 2% of the population. Although the majority of people would benefit from this idea, most would never agree to it. However, when judging the idea solely on its results, as classic consequentialism does, then "the end justifies the means."[8]

Ends-oriented action proves incongruent with our culture and society.[9] Action that permits some measure of evil in cases where it is proportional to good (proportionalism) is incongruent with universal human rights. Hedonism, which places pleasure as the highest good, offers yet another framework of human rights. As do the theories of (but not limited to): deontology, stoicism, anarchism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, and nihilism. Human rights are connected to metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology, for what we believe to be true about the world, how we regard

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Another problem and glaring philosophical flaw of consequentialism is that we humans cannot *know* that our actions will in fact bring about the positive ends that we seek.

human beings, and how we understand the characteristics of knowledge to be must inform how we regard ethics. If we cannot know morality, our whole ethical calculus must change. If we do not know what constitutes a person or what characterizes human rights, we can neither apply them to the proper entities nor apply human rights correctly. If we cannot understand the nature of reality, we cannot understand ourselves in relation to other things.

Millions of people take their own positions on an issue and find themselves holding seriously different moral standpoints, values, and solutions. Just as we look back with incredulity at those who may have been torn over slavery or the treatment of Jewish people throughout periods of European history, thinking to ourselves *how could they have ever not seen the obvious moral solution?*, so also is it extremely likely that future generations will look back at our age and ponder how it was ever possible that a significant portion of our culture and society held some viewpoints.

Having abstractly discussed the difference between premises and assumptions, it is useful to use a real-world example. In the world in which we live and for approximately the past seventeen hundred years, the religion of Christianity has served as the grounding of base principles, or starting premises, from which our moral code has developed. "Thou shalt not kill" or "Thou shalt not steal" are prime examples of steadfast base premises, from which we scaffold our morality. The belief that God has made these truths known has been the external justification for our philosophy. One of David Hume's biggest contributions to modern philosophy is his realization that "[a]ll inferences from experience, therefore, are effects of custom, not of reasoning."[10] Applying this fact to morality, this argument has two ways of manifesting. First, I

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[10] From The Philosophical Works of David Hume, T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, eds. (London: Longman's, Green, and Co., 1898), 4 vols., English, modified, taking into account variations from numerous editions. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gvKl3anaKALBZIh_wDBAq3VrgeuHlght/view

will show the situation where we have our first principle, and then I will illustrate what the same process looks like without first principles.

1. $P \rightarrow Q$ (premise)

2. P (premise)

3. Q (conclusion)

Now, if we do not have our first premise, the best approximation that one can give via induction looks like:

1. $P \rightarrow Q$ (premise)

2. $P \rightarrow Q$ many times (let's say, 100,000,000,000,000,000 times) (premise)

3. (It is likely that) the future will then conform to the past - that $P \rightarrow Q$ (IC, 1-2)

4. Thus, we can admit that the future will conform to the past. So, Q (Conclusion)

The problem here, though, is we can not truly ascertain the truth value of P, so we cannot hold P nor Q to be conclusively true. Another issue is that, even if one could derive P by way of an infinite number of steps, we would fall prey to the problem of infinite regression. It seems we cannot do productive philosophy without justified premises.

Likewise, if we want P to be in a conditional relationship with Q (a conditional relationship is: if P, then Q), we can assume Q and introduce P (or vice versa) to get $P \rightarrow Q$, but we can only posit that $P \rightarrow Q$ is true *insofar as we assume our premises to be true.* This leaves us without a conclusive way to justify our argument. The only alternative is to put faith in one's premises and believe them to be true, on the basis of faith. As we will come to see, the premises we need for a coherent worldview need to be justified externally, that is, from outside the system, or those with power become the arbiters of what theories are admissible and thus what morality is normative.

I will mention throughout the paper that "culture is the manifestation of creed" because of how essential this truth is to the topic at hand. Applying Christian Scripture and Tradition for close to two thousand years shaped our culture and society, pushing it towards what we have today. I will later discuss in greater detail how this trend has changed, but for the time being it is simply important to mention that the reason we have "Judeo-Christian" values in the west is because Christianity has been the contextualizer and starting point for our philosophy.

Even though Christianity has been in existence for a very long time, we see times in history where a culture, group, or society has fallen short of the maxims of Christianity. The fact of the matter is that if it isn't people that behave badly and cause incredible amounts of damage and horror; a lot of problematic viewpoints can arise by way of poor philosophy, bad actors exploiting "philosophical loopholes," asserting something that in fact has no basis in first principles (that is, it is an assumption) for some kind of gain, point, or advancement (or also due to mental illness, corruption, or the like).[11] Slavery in the United States is an apt example. Although the United States was founded by Christian people, it allowed the exploitation of persons who were kidnapped or sold into slavery, under the justification that something made the slaves sub-human. Whereas improper reasoning on the basis of scriptural passages taken out of context was exercised to justify slavery, proper exegesis of Christian Tradition and Scripture leads to the conclusion that slavery is wrong. However, plenty of individuals, both academics and regular people, assert that "Christianity justified slavery" when this is not the case. The more precise and nuanced viewpoint, that people used Christian terminology and non-contextualized scripture to propagate a belief that was in fact not Christian (but rather something done in the name of Christianity), emerges as true. In other words, Christianity makes it possible to measure

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[11] It is an important thing to note that although we are inculturated with values and most peoples' moral compasses keep them adherent to these values (to varying extent), people are able to act in ways that are not congruent with their moral stances.

a person's actions against a universal, unchanging, and absolute moral code, regardless of who that person may be.[12]

Regardless of the abuses done in the name of Christianity[13] or its utility as an objective moral reference, it seems that in contemporary times we are transitioning from a Christian culture and society to a post-Christian culture and society. The intellectual and cultural elites are less and less Christian, and as non-Christian or post-Christian ideas percolate down into popular culture and the common mind, the base premises on which we have relied is contested. This includes the base premises on which we base our universal morality. I will not speak in detail as to whether Christianity is the Truth or not; it is important to mention, though, that our concepts of truth, morality, and value are challenged.[14] Other propositions and arguments have been and are being put forth, and we will see the fruits of popular philosophy manifest in contrast to Judeo-Christian culture and in the justice or injustice of culture and society.

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[12] In response to the Euthyphro dilemma, which is over 2000 years old, apologist JP Nunez simply states that if God's nature simply is existence itself, so He is in the purest sense the ground and basis of everything else that exists. He has not created an arbitrary morality, nor is He subject to a morality above Him; rather, morality flows from His very being

[13] The diminishment of Christian adherence may be partially attributable to the widely held perspective that much that was committed in the name of Christianity during the age of discovery and colonialism amounted to abuse and exploitation. It seems that there are a few things at play:

1. Religion is becoming more of a cultural thing (like not going to church but celebrating Christmas), which naturally disinclined persons to rigorous or total adherence to a religion's set of values.

2. As mentioned above, people are equating the actions of individuals with principles of religion, which are different.

Moreover, the intersection of colonialism and Christianity is somewhat more textured and complex because different Christian traditions were at work in different parts of the world and the colonial powers adhered to different denominations. In addition, we have pro-slave Christians and anti-slave Christians. For example, Pope Paul III released an encyclical in 1537, "Sublimis Deus," which affirmed the dignity of the persons living in the Americas Pope Eugene IV's Sicut Dudum from the 1400s has similar exhortations of the esteem and equality of non-Europeans and non-Christians. On the other hand, we have the Southern Methodists who in 1874 affirmed their acceptance of slavery on the basis of scriptural exegesis. Because of the scope of Christianity, this assertion proves to be more complex.

[14] Funnily enough, if one does not put his or her faith in religion, one puts faith in the theories of science or faith in one's very own intellect. Faith in transcendent things, faith in imminent things, faith in the self, or faith in nothing, are the four levels of faith. I guess we have to have faith in *something*, for to have faith in nothing would be self-refuting.

The atheist, however, is not afforded this luxury of an objective moral reference because the atheist denies the existence of external justification for its morality. The consequence of this implication must mean that justification must come from within the minds and reasons of human beings. The problem with this is that different humans have come up with different ethical systems that are reliant on positing various (and often conflicting) aspects of human existence. Who gets to decide which ethical system is, well, the most ethical? The mere possibility of determining the ethicality of ethical systems implies an objective and external thing (or things) against which ethical systems can be compared. Different ethical systems stemming from human beings may hold power, human nature, sentience, or nothing at all for being the superlative determinant of morality. At that point, with humans being the brutish creatures we are, if one cannot convince others of the primacy of his or her atheistic ethical system, the one with the most power determines which ethical system is implemented. This is a scary thought, for if the ones in power have an ethical framework that denies the rights of some, it is possible that your rights will be denied.[15] The fear that this consideration provokes is by no means consoled by the fact that all things considered, this scary ethical system could be completely congruent with a greater, overarching set of beliefs. This is what I believe to be a central lesson of the Holocaust. As Ivan said in The Brothers Karamazov, "without God everything is permissible."

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[15] Yes, I am talking to you, the reader.

Two: The Modern Roots of National Socialist Thought

Before we can truly deal with the potential problems of western culture and society becoming progressively less Christian, let alone we need to have an understanding of how we got to where we are today. Although the classification of the current intellectual era is sometimes contested, enough people accept the term "postmodernity"or "the postmodern era" for me to be comfortable using it. As such, I accept the fact that we are living in the postmodern era. Since I assert postmodernity, it begs the question of what Modernity itself was.

Modernity as an era of intellectual tradition spans centuries, languages, and societies: from Europe immediately after the Protestant Reformation to the beginning of the First World War. If it was the Protestant Reformation that planted the seeds of the thing that would blossom into Modernity, the work of Descartes was the first fruit of that intellectual event. Descartes was a revolutionary figure. His *cogito ergo sum* argument - that one can affirm his or her existence on the basis that things that do not exist are incapable of thought, and we are thinking things - was the first of many breakthroughs of the Enlightenment period. The end of the modern era is a bit blurrier. While there are varying positions on if and when Modernity came to an end, I believe that World War II was the clear and final end of the modern era. As such, I argue that the character of much intellectual work done after the Second World War belongs to the category of Postmodernity. In short, World War II was such a traumatic event that probed the core assumptions we have made about ourselves and the world that the whole of Western thought was thrown into question. Nevertheless, Modernity remains the defining influential intellectual tradition in the world, with Postmodernity's effects still slowly manifesting, starting first in the late 1980s and continuing into today.

In order to understand Modernity as a whole and how it led to the postmodern era, it is necessary to spend some time discussing the history, development, and most influential ideas of Modernity.[16] I will highlight the following: 1. The effects of the Protestant Reformation, 2. Consequences of Empiricism and Idealism, 3. Political Philosophy, and 4. The end of Modernity.

Before I begin, there is one thing I have to note that is expedient for understanding my argument to the fullest. Regardless of the truth of the ideas a person holds, ideas and the way we understand the world and ourselves to be are essential to how we live and act. A basic way to see this concept in action is to think of someone who is absolutely terrified of flying. It doesn't matter that statistically speaking, flying is significantly safer than driving. A person who is seriously afraid of flying will exhibit behavior that corresponds to his or her perception of reality, which in this case would manifest itself in him or her avoiding plane travel at all costs. While this is an example relating to contemporary life, an example drawn from the past might be the belief that bloodletting was a legitimate and helpful medical treatment. It led to people, well, bloodletting. The most pertinent and profound example is the way we think about ourselves. Therapists often work with people to uncover and change underlying beliefs about the person's self-image or understanding of the world to better equip an individual to flourish. A person with depression might hold the inner belief "I am worthless." Another person might treat others poorly because he or she does not believe the other has value. Yet another individual might engage in risky behaviors because he or she either believes that it is safe when it isn't or that the point of life is to feel pleasure at whatever cost. A lot of these attitudes and dispositions can be

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[16] Books have been written on tiny fractions of this era, let alone the entire thing. As such, I cannot touch on every single aspect and influential person in this era or detail every nuance about the intellectual history of Modernity. For the sake of time and focus, I will highlight certain individuals and ideas that left a particular impact on the way we see the world or played a particularly vital role.

culturally present and thus inherited. This is all to say that *what we believe is true affects our behavior.* As such, we can gain a lot of insight from asking "why" someone holds some piece of information to be true. If someone says that they believe euthanasia is immoral, when asked *why*, they might reference their Christian background, finding it completely normal and acceptable to hold their belief. This makes sense, because he or she was either inculturated with this belief or found it to correspond to a moral system he or she believes to be true. Likewise, if some German living in the late 1930's asserts that Jewish people, or Gypsies, or homosexuals are threats to the country and we ask *why*, he or she might cite national socialist thought, finding it completely normal and acceptable to hold this belief. This *might* also prove to make sense, provided that he or she was either inculturated with this belief or considered the proposition and believed it to be true. A lot of our contemporary attitudes and beliefs come from the premises and arguments that philosophers of the Enlightenment and modern era have put forth. Keep this fact in mind as we progress through the intellectual history of Modernity.

Three: The Protestant Reformation

It is in our interest to begin at the beginning. For Modernity, its roots lie in the Protestant Reformation. In the sixteenth century, various clerics and thinkers throughout Europe began to resist certain practices of the Catholic Church and teach a theology that was different from what the Catholics taught. Names like John Calvin of Geneva (1509-1564), Martin Luther of Wittenberg (1483–1546), and Ulrich Zwingli of Zürich (1484-1531) are just some of the more well-known individuals associated with this era and intellectual movement. Although each had his own position on a variety of aspects of both theology and philosophy, all of these thinkers broke with the Catholic Church in offering their own beliefs regarding things such as (but not limited to) the Eucharist, free will, predestination, and the economy of salvation.

Their influence materialized in many aspects of life, from more obvious areas like philosophy and theology, but were notably also reliant on the politics and cultural situation of the time (areas which protestant thought also went on to affect). A combination of regents protecting these thinkers or acting in defiance to the Catholic Church allowed protestant thought to take root and be adopted by millions of people throughout Europe. The effect of certain ruling individuals allowing different flavors of protestantism to establish themselves within their domain lead to something that is both wholly profound and appearing too simple to merit naming it: Christendom shattered. What it meant to be a Christian in Europe took on multiple meanings, and the sudden emergence of two competing belief systems both of which espoused the truth meant that - to some extent - *laypersons had the opportunity to decide what to believe*. Many simply followed the faith of the ruler (cuius regio, eius religio), but a considerable number of people made the conscious decision to remain Catholic or become Protestant.

As great as the historical effects of the reformation are, the reformation also marked a turning point in the western psyche. The attitude towards Church authority changed as Protestants saw it as null and void. The fact that there was a sizable amount of the European population who rejected the Church as the one source of teaching authority must have also affected the psyche of those who continued to adhere to the Catholic Church, for the reformation marked the first time in many centuries where there was a sizeable amount of Europeans who did not submit to the Church. The mere existence of a plurality of opinion must have made the fact that other belief systems might be true more salient in the mind of the Catholic. It thus becomes clear that "[t]he rise of Protestantism…played a role [in kick starting modernity]. With its rejection of hierarchical Church authority, this new form of Christianity emphasized subjective inwardness and created a unique social configuration grounded in principles of individualism, freedom, and self-reliance."[17] These attitudes of individualism and self-reliance would be core aspects of both the process of modern philosophers and the philosophy of modernity itself.

The second aspect of modernity I wish to highlight are the philosophical developments on which the Nazis most heavily relied: namely, the consequences of empiricism and idealism and the modern understanding of the State, which in turn shaped our understanding of power, truth, and progress.

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[17] Aho, Kevin, "Existentialism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/existentialism/

Four: Modern Political Philosophers

I would be remiss to not at least mention some of the modern political philosophers and their work, for the issue of Nazism is an issue of the State just as much as it is an issue in metaphysical and epistemological theory. Hobbes Rousseau are particularly important and relevant modern philosophers to the issue at hand. Each had their own theories on the function and form of the state, and all affected the concept of the state to varying levels.

The first of these three political philosophers I wish to discuss is Thomas Hobbes, who wrote earlier than Rousseau. Hobbes (1588-1679) was an English philosopher who was one of the first to unite the scientific method with philosophy. He was a materialist, believed that religion was the product of human fear, and believed that the human conquest of nature was both violent and necessary. All three of these things inform his political philosophy. His materialist convictions were brought on by the scientific method being only useful in discerning, well, material things, which leads to an uncommon (at that time) viewpoint of the state. Hobb's entire philosophy is deeply influenced by fear, and as such, his political philosophy contains both an implicit and explicit goal: to minimize the brutality of this world and protect man against both nature and his own peers, all in the context of a purely naturalistic world. The product of his thought is the concept of a state that was led by a sovereign who commands absolute loyalty. As a consequence of the absolute power of the sovereign, morality and "what is good" becomes that which the sovereign decrees as good for the wellbeing of the state.[18]

The second pertinent philosopher is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a French philosopher whose political philosophy is yet another example of modern thinkers bending morality to fit the authority of the state. There are two particularly important things to know

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[18] Kreeft. Section 70 of *Socrates' Children* (Volume III).

about Rousseau's thought: 1. His concept of the General Will, and 2. His theory's intersection with totalitarianism.

First I will address the General Will. Like Hobbes, Rousseau's state is both a modern agglomeration of individuals connected through institutions for the good of those in the state, and one that holds primal authority over morality and good. His theory demands that the individual renounce all of his or her rights in order to enjoy the benefits of the state. The General Will is a zeitgeist, so to say, that emerges from the State as the "personification" of its spirit. It is the entity that steers morality and the common good. Because the General Will is collective of the society and the individuals who are subjects to the state agreed to subject themselves to the state, Rousseau concludes that it is the people who are ruling over themselves. Also due to the collective nature of the General Will, it is what the majority decides that becomes correct. In other words, Rousseau's political philosophy suggests that morality is subjective, changeable, and determined by a society. Furthermore, it leaves no room for a plurality of positions, for the General Will is the spiritual manifestation of the thought of the majority, and the General Will is absolute in its power. A final and important note is that Rousseau believed it was the responsibility of the state, not the family, to educate its children and citizens. This makes sense, at least within the context of his theory, because the General Will is embodied by the state, and the state holds the key to directing and achieving the common good.

This consideration has the considerable consequence that what Rousseau has described is, on paper, the core principle of a totalitarian state. Under this framework for totalitarianism, because it is in the interest of the state to protect itself and the General Will has the ability to steer morality to its liking, there remains no tolerance for anything that threatens the essence of the state or its majority. Rousseau himself noticed the potential for conflict baked into his theory,

but he responds that the issue we see here poses no threat because everyone would have been educated to love it. Rousseau writes that "[t]hose who control people's opinions control its actions." He goes on to assert that from birth until death, all citizens of the state must "consider themselves only in their relationship to the Body of the State."[19]

Rousseau's concept of the state parallels the totalitarian character of Nazi Germany, and although he never came to know and articulate the true character of a totalitarian state (as Hannah Arendt and others have), we now recognize the problems of leaving total power in the hands of the state and blindly renouncing personal positions for the sake of what majority prefers.

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[19] Kreeft 239

Five: Empiricism

On the opposite spectrum of the rational epistemological school was that of empiricism. Empiricists relied on sense information as the means of coming to understand reality. The most famous of the empiricists is arguably David Hume, a Scottish philosopher whose epistemological arguments have shaped the direction of modern philosophy. Like Descartes, it may not have been the entirety of Hume's philosophy that ebbed down into the masses (for rarely do we hear people on the street discussing "relations of ideas") but rather bits of attitudes, presuppositions, and relationships between things for which his philosophy advocated. Allow me to elaborate: It is true that billions of people will go from cradle to grave without ever picking up a work of David Hume. However, the consequences of his philosophical positions suggested a worldview that was significantly different from those that preceded it. The most obvious instance of Hume's work changing our attitude towards morality and knowledge is in his critique of morality. In the third volume of *Socrates' Children*, Peter Kreeft details how Hume argued against the existence of a natural law on the basis of his empiricist first principles. In short,

> All societies, cultures, and religions in history have believed in what is traditionally called the natural moral law, i.e., moral principles that are universal… absolute… and objective. There is only one exception: modern western civilization. Denial of any natural moral law has increased each century from the "Enlightenment" onward, and has spread from intellectuals and philosophers to the masses. Hume is one of the most influential philosophers in this development.[20]

Kreeft goes on to establish that by way of the fact-value distinction Hume posits as true, his framework provides no room for the existence of morals as we have classically thought of them. It is by the fact that there is no neat place for morality in Hume's framework that Hume declares the existence of morality as illusory and nothing more than emotional reactions. In other words, morals are not rational. Hume seems to have no problem with this conclusion; he even continues

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[20] Ibid 98.

to advocate for it, going so far as to assert that human beings cannot make moral judgments and that our world is in truth value-free.

The consequences of this viewpoint are enormous. It is not just the ideas that, when printed on paper, cause the reader to shudder. Hume's philosophy entails attitudes and propositional beliefs about anthropology, sociology, psychology, and more. I am sure to act differently if I believe that there is no such thing as morality, or that my experience is simply a mosaic of sense impressions through which I can derive no orderly picture of reality. This is exactly the effect of his theories: the idea that morality might not exist changed the way we thought about what it means to act morally and resulted in our concept of morality to appear more flexible (that is, not universal, absolute, and objective).

Six: (German) Idealism

According to Kreeft, Hegel is the summit of modern philosophy. Those that come after

Hegel have stopped fashioning new ideas, but rather work by critiquing them or moving towards

skepticism and subjectivity. He is one of the most difficult philosophers to read, and his

conclusions serve as the height of German Idealism. Hegel's thought would be taken by the

Nazis for their advantage, and the pantheistic conclusions of Hegelian idealism opened the doors

of religious fervor for Nazism and for the idea of Germany.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770-1831) work is a rare instance of extensive

metaphysical thought developed over his own lifetime. While it is the Hegelian Dialectic for

which he is most famous today, Hegel's entire philosophy has affected the whole of modern

thought. For our purposes, I will focus on the particular conclusions at which Hegel arrived that

are most pertinent to the development of Nazism as an immanent religion. There are three things

in particular on which I will focus: 1. His ideas of historicism and progress, 2. Absolute idealism,

and 3. The State as being the "divine Idea" on earth.

Hegel's ideas of historicism and progress were some of the biggest changes in

philosophy in the history of the world. Kreeft writes "as Kant made truth relative to the mind,

Hegel made it relative to history."[21] The context of this consideration is doubly important, for

Hegel believed optimistically in human progress, something "inevitable, long-term, [and]

ubiquitous."[22] Hegel was sure that he was living at an inflection point in intellectual history (he

was correct). Hegel writes "[a] new epoch has arisen… it seems that the World-Spirit has now

succeeded in freeing itself from all alien objective existence and is apprehending itself at last as

absolute Spirit."[23] The so-called World-Spirit Hegel mentions is what he sees as an imminent and

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[21] Kreeft, *Socrates' Children*. 158
[22] Ibid.
[23] *Socrates' Children*. 159

evolving God that manifests through the progressive and increasing consciousness of the human race. When Hegel mentions "alien objective existence," he is talking about Christianity. Hegel recognized that philosophers were departing from Christian thought and principles in their thinking, and these new and emerging ideas painted an extremely different picture of man and the world. The notion of sin in Christianity seemed to Hegel as an obstacle in the way of achieving true happiness and blessedness (to borrow a term from Baruch Spinoza). Hegel also thought of dogmatic statements as detracting from freedom of thought and thus obstacles to truth. Third, Hegel saw Christianity as not being Germanic with its origins in the Middle East from a non-Germanic *Volk*. This last point is rather interesting because Hegel called himself a Christian, despite his denial of the divinity of Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the literal Incarnation. In spite of his Christian identity, he believed that philosophy was the ultimate source of knowledge and followed his conclusions to arrive at the position that it is philosophy, not religion, that allows humans to unlock truth. The one difference, which Hegel wholly accepts, is that this notion of truth does not allow for a universal truth; rather, Hegel believed that truth must emerge relative to the culture and history of the time. To Hegel, historicism is the fact that truth changes relative to history and culture, and progress is the process by which these changes happen.[24]

The second point of focus is the concept of Hegel's absolute idealism. Hegel, who writes after Kant, benefits from having a retrospective viewpoint of his philosophical predecessors. Revolutionary as it was, Kant's idealism was demonstrated by Fichte to be flawed. Whereas Kant alleged a difference between appearances and things-in-themselves, Hegel argues that metaphysics and logic are one in the same, and that ultimately, metaphysics is about

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[24] Kreeft, Section 67 of *Socrates' Children* (Volume III)

consciousness itself.[25] He uses this as the launching point for thinking about epistemology. To

Hegel, there seems to be an issue with how Descartes approached knowledge. To analyze and

question knowledge is to admit that one knows knowledge, for Hegel remarks that"the critique

of knowledge can only be done by an act of knowledge."[26] He continues to observe that "to seek

to know before we know is as… not to venture into the water until you have learned how to

swim."[27] Hegel observes the pattern in the thought of his predecessors that none of them seem to

be able to form a solid connection between the subjective mind and objective reality. Up until

this point, modern European philosophers came to be bound to the mind, mental states, or ideas.

Hegel's solution is profound. He concludes that these things must be one in the same and all that

exists. Since Kant's concept of things-in-themselves proved to be flawed, the idea of was all that

consciousness remained. As such, Hegel concludes that it is the Absolute Spirit (Thought

Thinking Itself) itself through nature and man.[28] There is nothing outside of this Absolute

Consciousness. Thus, the progress of man towards an unspecified telos is in fact the

manifestation of all that is real, that is, the manifestation of Absolute Spirit. In one fell swoop,

Hegel unites the concepts of the coherence and correspondence of reality. Reality corresponds

with itself because there is nothing outside of it, and so truth becomes that which is coherent with

itself and with other ideas.[29] In other words, Idealism can be summarized as the philosophy

which argues that being and knowledge must be the same. The consequences of this are

immense. The way we understand the world works, how humanity progresses, and what the

nature of reality is, has all been changed, and we must redevelop our relationship to knowledge

and being in order to live rightly. Hegel's theory means that the world is pantheistic - that is, all

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[25] Kreeft 162
[26] Kreeft 163
[27] Kreeft 163
[28] Kreeft 163
[29] Kreeft 164

is God and God is one - and God manifests itself (thinks itself) by way of man and nature. Humans are thus provably autonomous, for Hegel has shown that man is God and God is man.

Third, using his conclusions, Hegel argues that if God manifests through man and nature, then the State is the highest manifestation of God. He therefore espoused that the "divine Idea" on earth was the state. While not a totalitarian himself, the consequences of this thought did manifest in totalitarian states. This makes perfect sense, for what Hegel has done by deifying the state is legitimizing all of its actions. By combining Hegel's ideas of historicism, progress, and the State as if it were God, we can see a new understanding of the State as an entity through which God manifests itself as it perpetually actualizes towards some telos. Morality becomes legitimized relative to the actions of the State, and the assertion that the State is in a state of constant progression towards this undefined telos is the metaphysical backing to this moral claim. History, morality, being, and authority are all interrelated. This means the State becomes the wielder of power, and is thus justified in struggling towards its telos in a single act of constant and perpetual revolution.

One consideration, however, that Hegel failed to mention is the potential that we humans would not be able to reach the telos at the end. If he considered the possibility that the Hegelian dialectic has an end for humanity not in the resting of the final synthesis, but at the walls of that which remains inaccessible to us, he did not mention it. The terminus of the dialectic might be a question of inflationism versus deflationism, ie. whether the patterns and meaning we ascribe to the world even exist or not. If they do, we may continue; but if they don't, then the dialectic must be revised lest we find ourselves at skepticism. However, moderns that came after Hegel have not seemed to be able to philosophize its way out of this, and so although we may be philosophy stuck, we push on, reliant on axioms that we ourselves have not proven. That is to say, ironically,

that the transcendent-religious and the imminent-religious are - in their own ways - living out the saying: faith begins where reason ends.

With these three points, Hegel epitomizes the modern project and thus reaps the fruits of modern philosophy. His historicism reduced morality to something that is not universal, his idealism created a pantheistic worldview where man is God and God is man, and his argument that the State was the highest manifestation of God decapitates God as the west has understood Him and replaces man (in the form of the State) in His place.

Seven: The End of Modernity

The fourth and final group of philosophers that I wish to mention, albeit briefly, are those who worked at the end of the modern era called "existential philosophers." The existential school of philosophy largely picks up where Hegel left off, but instead of pioneering new concepts, it busies itself reforming and refining previous ideas in addition to exploring the consequences of modern thought. Although existentialism really took off in the early 20th century, its roots can be traced back to the late 19th century with the crisis of meaning.

Not long after Hegel's era, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and then Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) began to sound the alarm bells. Although Schopenhauer arrived at this conclusion before Nietzsche (and after studying Eastern philosophies and religions), Nietzsche was the one to more-eloquently articulate the consequence of Hegelian and modern philosophy: we humans no longer had any way to derive meaning outside of ourselves. Schopenhauer became convinced that human existence is meaningless and burdensome, but Nietzsche's viewpoint - that the assertion of human existence is meaninglessness - regarded this conclusion to be simplistic. It makes sense that the nihilistic stance was the most first conclusion, for it is rather obvious: if God does not exist, or if we humans are really all there is out there, then there is no external canon of meaning. While some philosophers elected to stop right there, other nihilists took a softer stance: that we humans could fashion our own meaning that originates from within ourselves. Others prodded on to ponder whether there were other ways that we humans could derive meaning from our own existence. Thus the school of existential philosophy arose and with it emerged the implicit conclusions of Hegelian metaphysics: that human beings could fashion reality and do what it pleased, specifically through culture, society, and the State.

Interestingly enough, and although Modernity was outgrowing its own skin, it was not another new school of thought that naturally emerged and ushered in a new intellectual era; it was, rather, war. It is true that psychology and late 19th-century thinkers were pushing the limits of Modernity by way of existentialism and psychology, but the linear change occurring in academic departments pales in comparison to the whiplash philosophy experienced due to the world wars. The first and second World Wars caught humanity by utter surprise. Each was horrible for its own reasons; World War I was the first large-scale conflict to be fought with modern technology like tanks, aircraft, and chemical weapons, and was responsible for the death of empires and millions of individuals. If World War I was the first instance where we saw modern technology at play, World War II coincided with the first instance where we saw technology being used to bring about the systematic extermination of a people: the Holocaust. This decade was a direct example of the fruits of modernity: it was clear that from the Catholic worldview preceding the reformation, western humanity arrived at the incarnation of "modern science and its cold mechanistic view of the world as a valueless aggregate of objects in causal interaction."[30] While both wars changed the psyche of the time and threw into question the beliefs the west held around progress and human nature, the events of the Holocaust affected the world in such horrible and profound ways that we still have yet to completely understand. The optimistic attitude of progress and advancement of the Enlightenment (whether or not this attitude was merited is a different question) was seriously challenged, if not shattered. We as a society and culture have spent the past century asking ourselves: *how could the events of the Holocaust happen?* This beginning of this question marks the end of Modernity.

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[30] Aho, *Existentialism.* Syntax edited for clarity.

Eight: Eric Voegelin

We still grapple with the question of how the Holocaust could ever have happened. Many

of the most well-known intellectuals of the past century have offered their interpretations, from

Hannah Arendt to Emmanuel Levinas. Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) is one of these thinkers.

Voegelin's concept of political religions - allows for a deep dive into a layer past that of the

mechanics of a situation that could cause the Holocaust. He goes right to the nexus of philosophy

and culture (remember, culture is the manifestation of creed) to ascertain and name the problem

he perceives in modern philosophy: that modern philosophers' incorrect anthropologies failed to

account for the religious impulse in man and consequentially led to Nazism . In the translator's

note for Voegelin's *Political Religions* (originally written in German), translators DiNapoli and

Easterly state that

> "[*Political Religions*] views the rejection of the transcendental as the source of order in
> political society and history (what Voegelin sometimes expresses metaphorically as the
> 'decapitation of God'), as the ideological basis for the Marxist, Nazi, and Fascist excesses
> occuring in Europe during the 1930s. This process of rejection explains much of the
> essentially religious character of these radically secularized political movements. Inherent
> in this rejection is the distinction between 'spiritual' religions which partake in the divine
> BEYOND, and 'political' religions which locate the divine within the contents of the
> world. The portended results of the distinction and the processes involved, prompted
> Voegelin's passionate refutation of the political religions at that time."[31]

Voegelin's theory of political religions is a rather novel way to analyze and understand the

atrocities of the twentieth century. It may help us better understand the emotional character of the

Nazi regime and what the manifestation of totalitarian states looks like. Particularly because of

its novelty, it must be critically analyzed in light of cultural studies, social studies, and history.

To understand Voegelin's entire argument, one has to understand what exactly he means

by "political religions." In short, Voegelin draws a distinction between "world-transcendent

religions" and "world-immanent religions." The former is the more classic understanding of

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[31] Voegelin, Eric. *Political Religions* (1936). Translated by T.J. DiNapoli and E.S. Easterly III (1986). xlii- xliii

religion, which is a system of belief that describes the structure of reality, ultimate primacy of a higher power, morality and aesthetics, all of which *transcends* the human realm and material world. The pertinent example of a world-transcendent religion is Christianity, which has been the dominant world-transcendent religion today. We see Christianity offers answers to questions of authority, morality, and the nature of reality. Voegelin argues that "world-immanent religions" share the same function as world-transcendent religions and serve as the ultimate reference for everything from ethics to aesthetics, but locate the locus of power and primacy of authority in the world, of the State, or among human beings. If, according to a world-immanent religion, primacy is truly in the hands of the State, then it naturally follows that it is the State that determines morality, mediates interactions of power, and subjects its people to its will.

Voegelin argues that Nazism is a prime example of a world-immanent religion. He himself recognizes that regarding Nazism as something akin to a religion is potentially controversial, but pushes on with this definition for his exploration of this concept on the basis of the similarities in structure, principles, and character Nazism has to religious frameworks. Charles Embry and Glenn Hughes note that "*Die politische Religionen*… reflect Voegelin's efforts to understand the rising influence of ideological fanaticisms in his political milieu, and his recognition that they involve substituting world-immanent objects, such as the race or the nation, for divine reality."[32] Voegelin justifies his engagement of the religious question by criticizing the fact that to seriously entertain a religious character of Nazism or suggest Christianity as being a part of the answer to Nazism is "taboo for the secularizing minds. And to pose it seriously and radically seems suspect to them – perhaps even a barbarism and a return to the Dark Ages."[33]

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[32] Charles R. Embry, and Glenn Hughes. 2017. The Eric Voegelin Reader : Politics, History, Consciousness. Columbia: University of Missouri. https://search-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=1589005&site=ehost-live&scope=site. xi.
[33] Voegelin, Eric. *Political Religions*. 3

Indulging his desire to contextualize National Socialism as religious in nature remains useful to

us living today, for considering the Nazism through the lens of his theory may be useful to our

understanding of this part of German history.

Voegelin's theory of political religions is very complex, and so I find it more expedient to

heavily quote his book, *Political Religions*, at first, so as to offer a comprehensive depiction of

what he means.

> The political collective is not just a political and moral phenomenon. The religious element in it seems to me to be much more significant… It [the struggle against National Socialism] is simply not being conducted radically enough, in my opinion, because the radix, i.e., the root in religious experience, is missing.[34]

> Man experiences his existence as a creature, and therefore, as doubtful. Somewhere in the depth, at the umbilicus of the soul, there where it touches the cosmos, it strains.[35]

> There is no significant thinker in the world today who does not know - and has not expressed it - that the world finds itself in a severe crisis, in a process of decay that has its origin in the secularization of the spirit and in the separation of a therefore merely worldly spirit from its roots in religious experience; and who does not know that the remedy can only be arrived at through religious renewal, but it within the framework of traditional churches or outside of this framework.[36]

> On this point, however, politicizing intellectuals fail completely. It is always dreadful to hear that National Socialism is a regression to barbarism, to the Dark Ages, to the time before the more recent advances towards humanism, without the speaker's sensing that the secularization of life, which the concept of humanism brought with it, is precisely the soil in which anti-Christian religious movement such as National Socialism could grow.[37]

> A textbook definition, which no one has suspected until now of making religious claims, says that the State is a federated union of settled people, endowed with primal ruling power… 'Primal' can signify simply that the power has no source other than the State itself and that it is derived from nowhere else, that it is absolute… An absolute, primal

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[34] Voegelin, Eric. *Political Religions*. 2
[35] Ibid. 11
[36] Ibid. 3
[37] Ibid. 3

power is a power above all powers; it has no power beside or above it and lower powers exist only by its grace.[38]

Supremacy is asserted solely on the basis of empirical judgment, plus a claim to accuracy. The completely articulated, created order is thereby decapitated; the divine head is struck off, and, in place of the world-transcendent God, the State appears as both the ultimate condition and the source of its own being… The assertion of primality turns us away from the path of ordered thought; it sets us above the rules of reasonable inspection of empirical matters; it rejects rational discourse.[39]

That the power of the State is primal, or absolute, is no longer a judgment of the person who submits to the State, but rather the dogma of" someone who believes in what the state espouses.[40]

The gigantic structure of the strictly ordered system spans an abyss of human nihilism, consuming itself in a search for fulfillment of reality through a collective."[41]

"The essential re-orientation from the natural to the divine results in a sacred and value-oriented recrystallization of reality around that which is recognized as divine. Worlds of symbols, linguistic signs, and concepts arrange themselves around the divine center, coalesce into systems, become imbued with the spirit of religious stimulation, and become fanatically defended as the "right" order of Being."[42]

It seems like Voegelin's argument can be more or less summarized as the following:

1. Man, experiencing his existence as doubtful, has historically relied on the framework of

    the state.

2. In a secularized world, the State asserts itself as the source of power.

3. Man, in his need for structure, meaning, and hope, employs his faith in what the State

    says is true. As such, Man's normative understanding of reality is articulated by the State.

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[38] Ibid. 6-7
[39] Ibid. 7-8.
[40] Ibid. 9
[41] Ibid. 9
[42] Ibid. 13

4. This normative understanding leads to man concluding that the state is divine, elects to follow it, and permits even reason to fade in the background to adore the state, submitting his very being unto it.

5. Man submitting wholeheartedly to the state acts as the fuel that propels the State to dominate others, as those who have submitted believe that actualizing the state is a virtuous act of revolution to achieve the "right" state of Being.

This is a profound understanding of how Nazism develops, and if true, allows deep and simultaneous insight in man's personal search for meaning and how a State uses the fervent actions of its leaders and adherents to manifest itself into something so unspeakably devastating as Nazism.

A key nuance in Voegelin's thought for which his theory is notable is his connection of philosophy with anthropology. There is plenty of historical precedence of philosophers who have put forth an anthropology based on their own philosophy. Baruch Spinoza's philosophy leaned heavily on anthropology in the process by which he believed humans achieve "blessedness," which is similar to fulfillment, by coming to understand reality and live in accordance with it. Karl Marx also envisioned an anthropology of humans where people were malleable by the state and most responsive to the exertion of power. Interestingly enough, part of how Voegelin arrived at characterizing ideologies like National Socialism as a political religion is because he believed modern philosophers have overlooked or misunderstood anthropology and thus the human being. Embry and Hughes note that

> "Modernity, then, for all its blessings brought by technological invention and political and legal reforms, and its huge advantage in research into history and human development, remains in Voegelin's view overshadowed by a fundamental and stunting misinterpretation of the human condition. The key problems are the eclipse of transcendent meaning and the efforts of many of the best philosophical minds of recent centuries to, in one way or another, apotheosize immanence and divinize humanity. The

upshot, as Voegelin sees it, has been personal and political disorientation on an unprecedented scale. For evidence he points again and again to the grandiose political dreams, born of the modern Western re-theoretization of human nature and reality, that have inflicted death and misery on millions around the world in the twentieth century."[43]

As such, Voegelin makes the notable (and even necessary) step of explaining the intersection of anthropological and philosophical errors by connecting philosophy with anthropology. He also has a point to recognize the *psychological* function of aspiring towards something "greater" in the future, something which humans regularly do, in addition to noting the disorientation that plagued this particular era of history. Voegelin suggests that by moderns' efforts to argue away religion as baseless, subject to philosophy, or as a desperate attempt to attribute meaning to an otherwise meaningless world, the ensuing philosophy and worldview left human minds consciously or unconsciously discontented with the state of the world. From this reasoning, it would make sense why the solutions that were grasped at, then, were that of political religions, as the people who believed the moderns and accepted the imminent character of reality thought it was natural to seek solutions in the form of government and ideology.

An issue emerges with this line of thought, though, for if Voegelin wishes to assert that political religions were responsible for the "inflict[ing of] death and misery on millions around the world in the twentieth century," then he has to substantiate why other events of large-scale death and misery may not fit his categorical construct.[44] For example, the religious wars after the reformation would likely not fit Voegelin's theory and would actually be a possible counterpoint to it. The counterexamples of the religious wars of early modernity were due, at least in part, to the varying interpretations of a world-transcendent belief system: Christianity. Furthermore, if

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[43] Charles R. Embry, and Glenn Hughes. 2017. The Eric Voegelin Reader : Politics, History, Consciousness. Columbia: University of Missouri. https://search-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=1589005&site=ehost-live&scope=site. xxi.

[44] Many philosophers of the 20th and 21st century believe that the Holocaust cannot be compared with other historical instances of evil.

Christianity is subject to the same shortfall of Nazism, our whole system of belief collapses. A more nuanced position arises: Voegelin himself *seems* to succumb to some level of ideological thinking (by raising one aspect of the truth to be the fullness of the truth) and fails to recognize the possibility that things other than philosophy may be at play. Philosophy *did* play a role in the decision making of State leaders in both Nazi Germany and post-Reformation warring Europe, but there were other political, cultural, and social aspects at play. As such, we cannot reduce explaining the Holocaust to the field of philosophy. This confusion seems to arise as he attempts to avoid the possibility of verbal or written "ideas" being "torn loose from their experiential moorings and used without a genuine understanding of their original or proper meaning and of their relation to the experiences from which they emerged."[45] In other words, a historical approach based on the "history of ideas" does not penetrate to the heart of human experiences. I think a more charitable account of his theory permits the interpretation that though the spirit of National Socialism *was* born out of the ideas of modernity, the intellectual evolution of modernity itself is not sufficient to explain what would morph into the experience of National Socialism. Voegelin seems to argue here that the religious character of National Socialism is the natural product of humans having to experience it, built on corrupted maxims of State primacy and perpetual "revolution,"[46] something that historical analysis can never rigorously account for. This distinction is useful and seems to put to bed the suggestion that Voegelin's theory demands a purely philosophical-anthropological account of the Holocaust.

When supplementing Voegelin's theory of political religions with a more nuanced and multi-disciplinary approach, we can derive new levels of insight. Socio-cultural, economic, and

[45] Charles R. Embry, and Glenn Hughes. 2017. The Eric Voegelin Reader : Politics, History, Consciousness. Columbia: University of Missouri. https://search-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=1589005&site=ehost-live&scope=site. xii.
[46] Hannah Arendt's *Origins* notes of the perpetual revolution occurring in the totalitarian state.

political considerations are particularly useful. The era in which Nazism occurred coincided with mass levels of societal disorientation and change in German identity (cultural). In addition to the shock of the first World War, the Nazis preyed upon the material desperation of the German people in the wake of intense hyperinflation and the sense of resentment many held against the demoralizing Treaty of Versailles (social and economic). Although the Nazis did garner a progressively larger percentage of the vote from the late 1920s and into the early 1930s (political), it seems too strong-handed to assert that the fact that a state being secular in nature and modern in its genesis was sufficient to both raise the State to the secular equivalent of the Church *and* lead to the events of the Holocaust.

Voegelin's theory suggests, by naming Nazism as a world-immanent religion, that a core part of engaging with this religion would be politically. Just one counterargument against this point is the fact that, generally speaking, not everyone participates politically. That being said, even today we see politicians promising to turn a nation around and convincing a significant portion of the population, all while affecting socio-cultural and economic change for the better. Millions of Americans *do* believe in and *are* enamored by Donald Trump's vision for the United States, just as other Americans wholeheartedly throw themselves behind the left's own vision of the future, with some devoting years of their lives to these sects and others plastering the back of their cars with these slogans.

The strongest response that I can imagine Voegelin giving is by countering the accusation that his focus is just philosophical. The best way for him to do so would be to show how the philosophies and maxims of Nazism imbued *everything* we have just considered and more - not just politics, but also economics, social life, culture, art, and religion. In other words, it had to infect everything with which the Germans interacted on a daily basis.

The arts and culture of Nazi Germany may be the most simple place to start. If culture really is the manifestation of creed, then it should be cultural institutions, architecture, and cultural products like art that would be the most obvious manifestations of Nazi ideology. In the twelve years of Nazi primacy in Germany, the Nazis absolutely shook up all of the above. The character of films morphed from instances of Weimar indulgence and creativity (like Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*) to propagandistic films centered around Nazi themes, as epitomized in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, which Susan Sontag describes in her 1975 *Fascinating Fascism* as "a film whose very conception negates the possibility of the filmmaker's having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda."[47] Furthermore, Riefenstahl opened this film with a description that described her film as depicting "the redemptive culmination of German history," which does have both the undertones of a religious event and the Hegelian State.[48] Architecture of this time was also heavily influenced by fascist aesthetics, with Albert Speer designing government buildings and other important structures for the Nazis. The design language was one of harsh geometric and epic circular shapes, great proportions, and chiseled beauty. Buildings were designed to convey the power and prestige of the state and its institutions, and when visitors entered, its dimensions were deliberately designed to make human beings feel akin to ants walking down long and massive hallways. Art took a particular role subservient to state maxims, with "degenerate" artists - those who either created non-Nazi approved art, were "racially impure," or held ideas that the Nazis deemed dangerous - being excluded from the Nazi German art world. The art that was produced in this time conformed to strict notions of whatever Nazis glorified, be it the perfect human body, the German *Heimat*, or pure propaganda.

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[47] Sontag, Susan. *Fascinating Fascism*. New York Review of Books February 6, 1975 (original) https://marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/classes/33d/33dTexts/SontagFascinFascism75.htm
[48] Ibid.

German society was also progressively directed towards conforming to Nazi ideals. The Hitler Youth, for example, was just one of many social organizations that first at first showed a person's status as a particularly committed individual to the Nazi project. It, of course, later became compulsory to join. Academic chairs were filled with pro-Nazi professors and curriculum, from higher education down to kindergarten, became particularly engrained with Nazi ideals and mandatory indoctrination lessons. Nazis tried to, albeit unsuccessfully, unite Protestant churches under one pro-Nazi national church, and any Christian denomination or cleric that resisted or publicly rebuked Nazi ideas was severely oppressed.

Where the political dimension of Nazi Germany is glaringly obvious, the economic dimension of the Nazi project is generally less-discussed. The official 25-point Nazi statement of goals, published over a decade before Nazis gained full control of Germany, includes some economic demands the Nazis held. They include, but are not limited to, the abolition of incomes unearned by work (point 11), the nationalization of all businesses which have been formed into corporations (13), profit-sharing in large industrial enterprises, (14) and the extensive development of insurance for old age (15).[49] Professor Otto Nathan also noted that subordinated the economic system to a predetermined objective, the creation of a war machine," and that "no institution in the economy remained unaffected by the fundamental change that German Fascism brought about."[50] The characteristics of caring for its citizens while also being ultimately directed towards creating a war machine suggests that even economics was affected by Nazi ideology.

All of these considerations seem to work in Voegelin's favor, for the wealth of cultural, social, and artistic relics the Nazis created and left behind exhibits the success of their

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[49] *Nazi Party Platform.* Holocaust Encyclopedia.
https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-party-platform
[50] Nathan, Otto. *The Nazi Economic System* Nazi War Finance and Banking. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Gleichschaltung by the emotional character and "religious" function the relics possess.[51] From

art, to architecture, to the pronouncements of hatred against Jews and other "undesirables" in

Hitler's speeches, relics of Nazism have an emotional character or demonstrate a worldview that

admits being totally willed, pronounced, and sanctioned by the State. The books tracing genetic

lineage for "Aryan" Germans was an almost talismanic example of a social object that

demonstrated a person's purity, and the various symbols the Nazis forced Jews, homosexuals,

and others to use to identify themselves were incarnations of the irrational hatred the Nazis held

against these groups. All of this was from only 12 years of power! To imagine if the Nazi death

machine had lasted much longer boggles the mind, for if they were this successful at

transforming German culture and society into something that would epitomize human violence,

two, three, or ten times the amount of time would have very likely yielded even more extreme

results.

The more I look into how Nazism affected life in Germany, the more I notice the level to

which so many of these parts of daily life were co-opted and made almost totally subservient to

an ideology. At the same time, I am reminded of the many scholars I have read in my studies of

the Holocaust, especially of those with Jewish backgrounds. Many of them, some in stronger

words than others, ponder and allege the fact that, as Saul Friedländer put it (he was among the

most gentle and eloquent), "one may wonder about the question of the possible limits to the

historicization of National Socialism, limits in no way linked to any taboo but inherent in the

phenomenon itself."[52] Freidlander throws into question our ability to discuss the Holocaust in

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[51] The *Gleichschaltung*, which can be translated as "coordination," was the Nazis' concerted effort to shift all facets of public life into a state which fully embraced and conformed to Nazi ideology.
[52] Friedländer, Saul. "SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORICIZATION OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM." *German Politics & Society*, no. 13 (1988): 9–21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23735050.

classical historical fashion, but others - like Primo Levi - would go on to affirm the position that

parts or the entirety of the Holocaust is beyond any explanation, historical or otherwise.

Nine: The Utility of Voegelin's Thought

It is essential to name here that we have to recognize the following: When having this

discussion, we have to play by the rules of the modern thinkers in order for it to be productive. It

is fruitless to use a philosophical argument that the other party will not accept. What this means

practically is that when discussing things like "first principles," "reason," "morality," and the

mechanics of philosophy, certain modern thinkers will place more limits on what they consider

as admissible to arriving at truth. Those operating closer to skepticism allow very few things in

our pursuit of knowledge, and when dealing with these writers, we either have to work on their

own terms or refute the terms themselves. We also know, from the history of modernity, that the

further we progressed in the modern era, the more and more skeptical modern thinkers generally

became, especially of arguments that did not rely on empirical or scientific methods. The

scientific method, thus, has become that which is sometimes applied to philosophy and

sometimes used as the litmus test of what could be used in philosophy. The more normalized use

of empirical methods became more accepted and regarded as the highest standard of evidence,

the more prevalent positivism became and the more adherent its followers became to the its

tenets. Positivism

> in the social sciences or philosophy maintains that the world of physical phenomena
> explained by the modern mathematical sciences is the only world that exists; that reality
> only includes what is susceptible of clear and precise quantification; and that truth is to
> be defined strictly in terms of the conclusions and judgments yielded by such
> "value-free" analysis.[53]

Embry goes on to note that "Voegelin's critique of positivist assumptions began early, spurred by

the political events that surrounded him, and widened into a lifelong attack on all forms of

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[53] Charles R. Embry, and Glenn Hughes. 2017. The Eric Voegelin Reader : Politics, History, Consciousness.
Columbia: University of Missouri.
https://search-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=1589005&site=ehost-live&scope=site. xvii.

reductionism—all interpretations of reality that attempt to explain away, usually through one or another version of philosophical materialism, human experiences beyond those of sensory perception."[54] Voegelin's experience and theory developed from the awareness that the costs of purely materialist philosophies were extremely high. He recognized that with each theory of epistemology that reduced man's ability to reason, the more prone our philosophy and anthropological structures (politics, social net, culture, et cetera) became to being regulated by that, those, or whoever had the greatest amount of power or ability to exert power. This tracks on to the consequences of epistemological thought as the field of epistemology developed and progressed throughout modernity.

If we allow the premise of positivism that the philosopher only has what science can detect at one's disposal, instances of human power, primacy, and dominance in the physical world become more central to our understanding of the world, for that which positivism is able to see with the most clarity is that which is the most powerful. More nuanced, unrecordable, unmeasurable, and non-normative, human phenomena fade as the focus of positivism naturally shifts our attention to the strongest demonstration of power; The State becomes the obvious embodiment of human power with it being the strongest opponent of the natural world and the most salient manifestation of human authority, for any spiritual authority is disqualified by the positivistic method. Positivism suggests the primacy of the state on the very basis that it is the most salient manifestation of human authority. Voegelin is not the only one to allege this and recognize the consequences. Hannah Arendt noted this in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, staying that

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[54] Charles R. Embry, and Glenn Hughes. 2017. The Eric Voegelin Reader : Politics, History, Consciousness. Columbia: University of Missouri. https://search-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=1589005&site=ehost-live&scope=site. xvii.

[t]he declaration of the Rights of Man at the end of the eighteenth century was a turning point in history. It meant nothing more nor less than that from then on Man, and not God's command or the customs of history, should be the source of Law… [I]n the new secularized and emancipated society, men were no longer sure of the social and human rights which until then had been outside the political order and guaranteed not by government and constitution, but by social, spiritual, and religious forces. Therefore throughout the nineteenth century, the consensus of opinion was that human rights had to be invoked whenever individuals needed protection against the new sovereignty of the state and the new arbitrariness of society… The second loss which the rightless suffered was the loss of government protection, and this did not imply just the loss of legal status in their own, but in all countries.[55]

If the rights of man spring from the State, then the state becomes primal. Voegelin expands on a similar principle, saying that

[i]t was Hegel who proposed the theory that the *Volk* as the State was the spirit in its immediate reality and therefore the absolute power on earth. His forceful intellect does not stumble over details; he draws firm conclusions. If the state is absolutely powerful, then it may not have any internal bounds. The mechanical aspects of order and duty therefore belong to it, as do total obedience, the renunciation of personal opinions and debate, the denial of a personal spirit, and, at the same time, the intensive presence of the spirit, which resides in the State. The courage of the individual in the State is not personal, but rather mechanical, not that of a particular person, but rather that of a member of the whole. The mechanical means of killing were therefore invented not by accident, but rather by the spirit that has become the state, in order to transform the personal form of courage into the impersonal. This homicidal urge is directed against an abstract foe, not against a person.[56]

Hannah Arendt echoes Voegelin's conclusion when attempting to articulate the characteristics of the totalitarian State, for where Voegelin chose the term "not hav[ing] any inner bounds" to describe the seemingly-endless adaptability of the totalitarian State, Arendt elected to call this aspect of the State its "formlessness." Here we see the convergence of philosophy with the technological products of modernity, which is just another consequence of human progression being applied to the epitomizing force of man, the State.This tracks on well to the monstrous character of the totalitarian death machine, for the arbitrary designation or revocation of rights *is*

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[55] Arendt, Hannah. 1979. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* New ed. with added prefaces ed. Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 290-291, 294
[56] Ibid 8-9.

the right of the State if its power "is primal, or absolute," and its pronouncements must be adhered to by its subjects.[57] Technology will be used to annihilate whatever stands in its way. Within the context of National Socialism, if this phenomenon exists, it would suggest that positivism and divinizing of the State both result in a human machine with an insatiable appetite for progress, purity, and primacy. The State exercising its great power is understood as an anthropological effort to progress towards its undefined but apparently existent final human telos in the manifestation of the utopian State.[58] The level of horror increases, however, as Voegelin points out that the mechanization of murder makes sense when considering the relationship between the individual and the state. We saw just how intolerant totalitarian states are of plurality in Rousseau's framework with the existence of the General Will by its nature demanding adherence. In the context of Nazism, we can conclude that the use of machinery was the manifestation of the homicidal urge of totalitarianism and Nazism, for modern machinery was the most powerful way for the State to increase its omnipotence and more efficiently eliminate anything or anyone that stood in the path of its pursuit for manifesting itself most purely.

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[57] Voegelin, Eric. *Political Religions*. 9
[58] Immanentizing the eschaton.

Conclusion

The question of whether we will see a resurgence of totalitarianism in the future remains to be seen. Nonetheless, it is important to not allow the Holocaust overshadow the totality of modernity, for although it is a significant part - or even the culmination of modern thought gone wrong - the Holocaust is still but a part of what shapes how we see and think about the world and our systems of knowledge. The crisis of meaning still remains, and we must seek to understand the relationship between Christianity and modernity, but it is just one of so many things humanity has on its plate.

Friedrich Nietzsche argues that the crisis of meaninglessness is precisely because of the collapse of Christian morality. In one of his notebooks he writes:

> We are no longer Chrristians; we outgrew Christianity, not because we lived too far from it, rather because we lived too close, even more because we grew out of it. It is our strict and over-indulged piety itself that today forbids us still to be Christians.[59]

Nietzsche's claim is compelling, but ultimately holds less weight than appears.

First, Nietzsche is correct in saying that Christian thought and Christians were responsible for modern thought. However, Nietzsche overlooks the fact that the majority of modern thinkers were Protestant at first, and then deists, and then nothing (or atheists). Whereas modernity developed into a distinct worldview with some basis in Christian principles, it only started that way. By the end, with Kant and Hegel and Marx, it would be fallacious to assert that these men were Christians, let alone were working on Christian principles at all. Their thought did not *grow out of* Christian principles; they *discarded* Christian principles. This makes perfect sense because the further these thinkers moved away from the prior conception of the Judeo-Christian God, the less they were able to rely on the arguments that were reliant on God. A

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[59] KSA 12:2 [200]. Excerpted from Carr, Karen Leslie. "The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness" (1992). SUNY Press. Page 40.

simple glance at the school of Hegelian idealism, for example, illustrates a worldview and understanding of God that is totally incompatible with Christianity, from its substance, to the nature of the divine, to the relationship between God and man.

Second, Christianity is an overarching term for all schools of Christianity, the likes of which include Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Assyrians, Protestants, and more. Modernity was not Orthodox, nor was it Assyrian. Though the Catholic Church did have its role in the Protestant Reformation - and thus the sowing of the seeds of modernity - most of the philosophers who espoused a belief in God had Protestant backgrounds, and many of those that asserted a belief in God had theological beliefs that were in stark contrast to what was considered within the realm of orthodoxy.[60] As such, to say that Christianity has refuted itself as a belief system is hasty and imprecise.

The final consideration to be had about this theme is about how we discuss the Holocaust. Some would say that there are no words adequate to talk about the Holocaust. Nevertheless, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and, of course, philosophers have all contributed to the conversation. The Nazi regime and the Holocaust are both multidimensional, and it is precisely because history, philosophy, and culture all connect to each other to varying degrees that we cannot use just history, or just philosophy, or just one other section of academia to understand it. By no means do I wish to suggest in my paper that philosophy is the only way.

My goal was to demonstrate the applicability of Eric Voegelin's theories of political religions to Nazism and trace the roots of Nazism back to the intellectual developments of modernity. After all of this, the crisis of meaning still remains.

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[60] We have examples of philosophers who were, on paper, Catholics or Christians. Just because Rousseau converted to Catholicism does not mean he believed in its tenets or practiced the faith; rather, religious affiliation could bring benefits that these philosophers desired - be it money or protection.

P.S. - Whatever you do, do NOT immanentize the eschaton!

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