

The Unity of Mankind and the Conversation of Civilizations

Eric Voegelin Studies: Yearbook

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The Unity of Mankind and the Conversation of Civilizations

Reflections on the Basis of Eric Voegelin's
The Ecumenic Age



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Obituary

It is with great sadness that we bid farewell to the founder and long-standing President of the Eric Voegelin Gesellschaft,

Prof. Dr. Peter J. Opitz

who passed away on January 15, 2025 at the age of 87.

After his habilitation in 1972 at the University of Munich, Peter J. Opitz was a professor of political science at the Geschwister Scholl Institute of the Ludwig Maximilians University Munich from 1978 to 2003. He studied political science, sinology and philosophy in Freiburg i. Br., Edinburgh, and Munich. From 1964, Mr. Opitz was a research assistant to Eric Voegelin in Munich, and in 1966/67 he was a research fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. From 1976 to 2003, Prof. Opitz was a member of the Board of Directors of the Geschwister Scholl Institute. He was also a member of the Senate and the teaching staff at the Hochschule für Politik München. He has published extensively on issues of political theory, international relations and, in particular, the history of China and its present situation. In 1989, he was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit.

Prof. Opitz founded the Eric Voegelin Archives at the University of Munich in 1990, the predecessor of today's Eric-Voegelin-Gesellschaft and the "Voegelin-Zentrum für Politik, Kultur und Religion". The aim of both institutions was to make Voegelin's works accessible to a wider readership in Germany through publications and conferences. This work resulted in the translation of numerous English-language essays and the new edition of German-language studies by Voegelin, most of which were no longer available, including, among others, the writings *The Political Religions* (1938), *The New Science of Politics* (1952/58), and the 10-volume German edition of *Order and History* (1956–87). An important initiative was the founding and continued expansion of the "Voegeliniana – Occasional Papers" series, which comprises a total of 111 individual studies by and about Voegelin and documents the international interest in Voegelin and his work.

The Eric-Voegelin-Gesellschaft owes Prof. Opitz a great debt of gratitude.

In Prof. Opitz, we have not only lost a great scholar, but also a wonderfully educated person who was always helpful and a reliable contact for many people seeking advice.

Our condolences go out to his family and all his loved ones.

The Board of the Eric-Voegelin-Gesellschaft

Introduction

Axel Bark, Harald Bergbauer

The first part of the present fourth volume of *Eric Voegelin Studies: Yearbook* contains the papers presented at the annual international conference of the German *Eric-Voegelin-Gesellschaft* held in Munich in December 2023. The topic of this event was “The Unity of Mankind and the Conversation of Civilizations. Reflections on the Basis of Eric Voegelin’s *The Ecumenic Age*”. This topic is also the title of the present yearbook. The starting point of the conference was Voegelin’s *The Ecumenic Age*, volume IV of his opus magnum *Order and History*, which was first published in 1974, just over 50 years ago.

The *Eric-Voegelin-Gesellschaft* chose *The Ecumenic Age* for three main reasons: Firstly, international politics in 2023 (or even before then) offered a scale of change that invited closer examination and discussion of the formation and transformation of great empires. After political upheavals and changes of power in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, India’s rise to a regional superpower and the increasing strengthening of the BRICS states, Russia’s attack on Ukraine marked a preliminary climax. A long-term “inevitable rivalry”¹ between the USA and China had already emerged years earlier (and seems to have intensified since then). It was plausible for many observers that the “world was in turmoil”, as the political scientist Herfried Münkler called the political situation in a comprehensive bestseller,² emphasizing that profound shifts in power on the international stage were to be expected. It was obvious to look at interpretations of (world) history and the great drafts of the philosophy of history, and this included the work of Eric Voegelin.

Secondly, the 2022 general assembly of the *Eric-Voegelin-Gesellschaft* expressed the wish to engage with Voegelin’s *The Ecumenic Age*. The arguments were that, on the one hand, the work is extremely difficult to access, so that discussing some topics at a conference could facilitate understanding. On the other hand, it was emphasized that there are good reasons to consider the work the intellectual culmination of Voegelin’s theoretical efforts and thus his actual most important work (and therefore not, as is generally the case, *The Political Religions* or *The New Science of Politics*); and finally it was known

1 See for instance the analysis by John J. Mearsheimer on The Inevitable Rivalry. America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics, in: *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2021, pp. 48–59.

2 Herfried Münkler, *Welt in Aufruhr. Die Ordnung der Mächte im 21. Jahrhundert* (E.: *World in Turmoil: The Order of the Powers in the 21st Century*), Berlin 2023.

that Peter Opitz had been dealing with *The Ecumenic Age* for years in a reading group he led³ and that he had published several independent essays on the subject in the *Occasional Papers*.

Thirdly, the expectation that the difficult access to the work and its *prima facie* confusing structure could be made somewhat more transparent by this conference, and that a number of open questions could be at least partially resolved, played a role in the selection of Voegelin's work on *The Ecumenic Age*. It is surprising (and, given the complexity of the work, not surprising) that there are currently only a few comprehensive scholarly analyses that deal with Voegelin's *The Ecumenic Age* in terms of content. Among these are the "Editor's Introduction" to the volume *The Ecumenic Age of the Collected Works* by Michael Franz⁴ and the 1998 issue of *The Political Science Reviewer*, which focuses on *Eric Voegelin's The Ecumenic Age* and deals with the work in a series of individual analyses.⁵ Also worthy of mention are several detailed analyses of the work's history by Peter Opitz, which appeared in the series of *Occasional Papers* he edited⁶. They describe in detail the multiple attempts, interruptions, and reorientations that Voegelin's work on this volume underwent over the course of 17 years, from 1957 to 1974. This laborious working process will not be discussed further at this point.

What seems more important to us is the question of what the fourth volume of *Order and History*, to which Voegelin finally gave the title *The Ecumenic Age*, as it is available to us today, is actually about. He uses the term "Ecumenic Age" to describe a period in the history of mankind in which "the cosmological understanding of reality was definitively replaced by a new understanding

3 The reading group on Voegelin (Lesekreis) held by Peter Opitz in his "Emeritus Room" at the Geschwister Scholl Institute of the University of Munich discussed various texts from the *Ecumenic Age* for at least two years; the reading group itself existed for much longer. In addition to guests (from Germany and abroad) who participated irregularly, the "hard core" which met regularly for years, consisted of Axel Bark, Harald Bergbauer, Thomas Krafft and Matthias Schmid (in addition to Peter Opitz).

4 Eric Voegelin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, *The Ecumenic Age*, ed. by Michael Franz, Missouri University Press: Columbia/London 2000, pp. 1–28.

5 Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ed.): *The Political Science Reviewer. An Annual Review of Scholarship*, Vol. XXVII, 1998, pp. 15–154. The volume contains contributions by Michael Franz, Manfred Henningsen, Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight, and James M. Rhodes.

6 Peter J. Opitz, "Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age: Die Entdeckung und Erkundung eines neuen Zeitalters. Protokoll einer Werksgeschichte*." *Occasional Papers* 104 A and 104 B, Munich: 2018, and id., "... that horrible Introduction". *Anmerkungen zur Einleitung von Eric Voegelins The Ecumenic Age*, *Occasional Papers* 105, Munich: 2019 and id., "Umbrüche und Wendepunkte – Einblicke in eine überaus verwickelte Textgeschichte. Eine Forschungsnotiz zur Entstehung des vierten Bandes von Eric Voegelins *Order and History*" in: *Eric Voegelin Studies: Yearbook* Vol. 4, Paderborn: Brill/Fink, 2025, pp. 241–269.

of reality, centered on the differentiation of the truth of existence through Hellenic philosophy and the Christian revelational experiences".⁷ This epoch began around the time of Zarathustra and the beginnings of the Achaemenid conquests and lasted until the end of the Roman Empire. It included the "imperial expansion" of multi-civilizational states, such as those of the Persians, Alexander, the Romans, the Maurya Dynasty in India, and the Ch'in and Han Dynasties in China, which altogether extended "from the Atlantic to the Pacific". The volume thus deals with the historical process and transition from the "truth of the cosmos" to the "truth of existence" in the period described, the causes at work in the process, and their symbolic forms.

This is not in itself a new topic, as this process was already dealt with, at least in part, in the first three volumes of *Order and History*, namely through the introduction of the "leaps in being" from myth to Hellenic philosophy and to the revelation of the Jewish prophets. The Christian revelatory experiences not dealt with there should have been treated in the originally planned volume IV. What is new, however, is that these events are now summarized in one epoch, the "Ecumenic Age", and no longer have to be arranged on a line of time, but can happen simultaneously. Also new are a number of other findings that continue, modify or correct the analyses of the first three volumes. Some of these are discussed in more detail here.

The starting point of the process is the truth of the cosmos. It is therefore only logical that Voegelin opens the volume with the chapter "Historiogenesis", in which he presents an expanded understanding of cosmological thinking and the process of transition to the truth of existence – compared to the first volume of *Order and History*: The underlying "primary experience of the cosmos" is newly introduced, with its "anxiety" of a groundless existence, of "existence out of non-existence". This anxiety is the force that could attack the truth of the cosmos and initiate its dissolution. Historiogenetic symbolism – the mythic equivalent of historiography – plays a role here in that it was supposed to stabilize the truth of the cosmos by tracing the historiogenetic narrative back to its cosmic origin. In fact, however, in its form as mytho-speculation, it already prepared the transition to the noetic speculation of early Hellenic philosophy. This is the one new idea.

But there is another essential thematic complex for the entire volume – and ultimately for Voegelin's philosophy of history. This was already hinted at in the 1960 study "Historiogenesis"⁸, but is now explored in more depth in the

7 Voegelin, *Autobiographische Reflexionen*, p. 125 f., CW 34, p. 128.

8 Voegelin, "Historiogenesis" in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, Alber Verlag: Freiburg/Munich 1960, pp. 419–446. Revised in id., *Anamnesis. Zur Theorie der Geschichte und Politik*, Munich: Piper

first chapter of the fourth volume and given a formula: the phenomenon of the “equivalence of symbols in different media of experience”. It was only the methodological principle of equivalence that enabled Voegelin to conclusively subsume such diverse experiences and their symbolizations as, for example, “myth” and “philosophy”, “historiogenesis” and “critical historiography” or “natural reason” and “revelation” under general categories of order – and not only in the first chapter of the volume. The principle of equivalence opened the way for Voegelin to develop a “new form” of his philosophy of history.

In the second chapter – “The Ecumenic Age” – the author discusses the concrete form of ecumenism. The spheres of power and spirit, which still coincided in the cosmological realms, initially found no direct correspondence in the ecumenic empires. So, there is no specific “truth” of the ecumenic empires and therefore no corresponding symbolization. Rather, the destruction of the cosmological societies resulted in the dissolution of cosmological truth on the spiritual level and led to the search for new truths. Even though these new truths often had a universal character, i.e., they wanted to speak for all of humanity, there is no causal link between the two spheres. The intellectual openings of the new truth did *not* arise from imperial expansion, and the empire builders did *not* draw inspiration from the prophets or philosophers of the new truth. However, they developed in parallel, which is why Voegelin had recognized an “ontological connection” between power and spirit in his earlier work on world empires (configuration thesis).⁹

However, Voegelin does not address this in *The Ecumenic Age* any more than he addresses the sometimes even successful attempts of the established ecumenic empires to establish a spiritual or religious level for their own preservation of power. Furthermore, in this chapter, he only deals with the ecumenic empires in the western part of Eurasia, i.e. the old empires in the Middle East and the Mediterranean area (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, the Roman Empire). India is only briefly mentioned in connection with Alexander, and the Chinese ecumenism of the Ch’in and Han periods is discussed in the sixth chapter on “The Chinese Ecumene”. There Voegelin raises the question of whether one should not speak of two ecumenic ages, one Western and one Eastern in China.

Verlag 1960, pp. 79–116. English in: id., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 6, *Anamnesis* ed. by David Walsh, Columbia/London: University of Missouri Press, pp. 312–337.

9 Voegelin, “World Empire and the Unity of Mankind” in CW Vol. 11, *Published Essays 1953–1965*, ed. by Ellis Sandoz, Columbia/London: Missouri University Press 2000, pp. 134–155 (135). Voegelin later added the “emergence of historiography” as a third element to his configuration thesis (alongside “imperial expansion” and “spiritual eruption”).

The following chapters three, four, and five of the volume – “The Process of History”, “Conquest and Exodus”, and “The Pauline Vision of the Resurrected” – must be considered as a unit and as the core of *The Ecumenic Age*. They were only written in the early 1970s. After dealing with the sphere of power in the ecumenic age in the second chapter, Voegelin – adhering to his configuration thesis – turns to the intellectual outbursts in Western ecumenism. It is again about the process of differentiation of the understanding of reality in the transition from cosmic primary experience to noesis – this time starting from the Ionian Anaximander via the Hellenic philosophers Plato and Aristotle to the Apostle Paul. Voegelin had not yet dealt with Anaximander and Paul in individual studies. And Plato undergoes a “radical” reinterpretation at this point, compared to the image of Plato in the third volume of *Order and History*. What is new in this radical reinterpretation? In a complex analysis that cannot be reproduced here in detail, Voegelin presents a new, more differentiated understanding of the experience of revelation, which he had already developed in 1971 in his study *The Gospel and Culture*.¹⁰ This study thus represents a decisive intermediate step towards *The Ecumenic Age*.

But while he relies there essentially on the Gospel of John, here it is solely about Paul’s experiences. The novelty is that philosophy and revelation are no longer described as distinct and independent events, but as *one* theophanic experience, which includes classical philosophy and revelation, which he now calls “noetic theophany” and “pneumatic theophany”. This is not just a change of terminology, however, but rather a convergence of both experiences under the umbrella term “theophany”. Noetic and pneumatic theophany thus represent two forms of the one theophanic experience. The difference lies in the emphasis, which in the noetic case is on the “cognition of structure” and in the pneumatic case on the “exodus from structure”.¹¹

It is understandable that the chapter on Paul, which represents the pneumatic breakthrough, does not deal with the Jewish precursors of the revelational experience, Moses and especially the prophets, since this has already been done in detail in the first volume of *Order and History*. What is less understandable, however, is why Voegelin presents the pneumatic theophany – contrary to his original intention – without its spiritual precursors in the Jewish apocalypse. For it was precisely this strand – starting from the metastatic apocalypse of the prophets (Isaiah, Daniel) via Paul and the Christian sectarian movements – that led Voegelin to modify his early Gnostic thesis of the 1950s, as formulated in *The New Science of Politics*.

10 Voegelin, *The Gospel and Culture*, in CW Vol. 12, pp. 172–212.

11 Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (EA), p. 258.

The sixth chapter on “The Chinese Ecumene”, immediately following the chapter on Paul, is probably the oldest part of *The Ecumenic Age*. It was written in 1959/60, when Voegelin was already in Munich, and – apart from a three-page preamble to this chapter – has been changed only slightly for inclusion in the volume. In this preamble, which was not written until 1973, Voegelin speaks of a “plurality of Ecumenic Ages”. The process in the West described so far is accompanied by a parallel “equivalent process” in China. The overarching “Ecumenic Age” of the book title thus encompasses several, at least two, parallel Ecumenic Ages, the Western and the Eastern. One might therefore expect the China chapter to correspond to chapter two, in which the Western ecumenic age was discussed. However, this structure is not apparent in the main part of the China chapter. Nor does one find there the terminology of the change in consciousness observed in Western ecumenism, from the “truth of the cosmos” to the “truth of existence,” as developed in chapters three to five, such as the terms “theophany” or “humanity.” This deficiency becomes understandable when one realizes that the chapter on China was written many years before chapters 3–5 and was incorporated into the volume almost unchanged.

The two ecumenic ages are not brought together until the final chapter, “Universal Humanity”. As Voegelin explains at the end of the introduction to the China chapter,¹² in this chapter he wants to deal with the philosophical problems that arise from the emergence of a second ecumene. In this respect, the China chapter and the final chapter are closely related. In the brief preamble to the final chapter, he therefore asks to what extent the two ecumenic processes are part of a single comprehensive ecumenic age.¹³ So what is the unit of meaning that connects the two processes? Or are there several humanities that are independently experiencing the dissolution of cosmological consciousness? Voegelin recognizes the origin of this conflict between a plurality of ecumenic ages and the universality of humanity in the *In-Between structure* of existence. He distinguishes between the earthly (*biophysical*) existence of man and his spiritual existence in the in-between (*metaxy*) – the intermediate realm where the divine and human spheres meet: it is not man’s biophysical existence that constitutes a universal mankind, but the experience of shared participation in *metaxy*.¹⁴

We will stop this brief summary here, without claiming that it is complete. The summary makes clear that *The Ecumenic Age* is neither in terms of time nor content a continuation of the first three volumes of *Order and History*,

12 Voegelin, EA, p. 274.

13 Voegelin, EA, p. 300.

14 Voegelin, EA, p. 304 f.

but rather – as Voegelin writes retrospectively in the “Introduction” to this volume – represents a “break” with the original program of the series. It had become clear that the five types of order originally envisaged were not sufficient to adequately grasp the diversity of empirical types of differentiating events; these five types of order were 1. the empires of the Ancient Near East and the cosmological myth, 2. the revelatory form of existence in history developed by Moses and the prophets of Israel, 3. the polis and the Hellenic myth, and the development of philosophy, 4. the multicivilizational empires since Alexander and the emergence of Christianity, and 5. the modern national state and the emergence of modern Gnosticism.

Above all, however, it proved impossible to place these types in a chronological order in order to be able to consider them as the “course” of history. Although there are temporal lines of meaning in history, his previous conception did not sufficiently take into account “the important lines of meaning in history that did not run along lines of time.” In this respect, the concept was – according to Voegelin – “untenable”. This realization led to such a profound change in Voegelin’s philosophy of history that the publication of the fourth volume was delayed by 17 years and ultimately led to the aforementioned “break”.

At the end of his introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*, in the conclusion, Voegelin expresses himself with a much-quoted formulation that the present new form of philosophy of history is definitively “not a story of meaningful events ... to be arranged on a time line”. Because: “In this new form, the analysis had to move backward and forward and sideways, in order to follow empirically the patterns of meaning as they revealed themselves in the self-interpretation of persons and societies in history”.¹⁵

This raises the question of whether *The Ecumenic Age* can still be considered part of *Order and History* in conceptual terms, or whether it would be better seen as a work in its own right.¹⁶ Voegelin also raised this question in a letter to the publisher Wentworth in December 1969, in which he once again presented a completely new draft of the fourth volume and stated that he now wanted to conclude the work he had begun, *Order and History*, under the title “*In Search of Order*” – “though I would not consider it a fourth volume, but an

15 Voegelin, EA, p. 106.

16 This question is also discussed by Michael Franz in his introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*, CW Vol. 17, on the basis of the distinction between 1. the publication program (which Voegelin relinquished), 2. the analytical conception (which Voegelin revised), and 3. the fundamental principles (which Voegelin retained), pp. 6 ff.

independent work under the title given".¹⁷ In the end, Voegelin did not decide to radically separate the volume from the first three volumes, because the volume was not published as an independent work or as the concluding volume of *Order and History*, nor under the title originally intended, but actually as the fourth volume of the series with the new title *The Ecumenic Age*. Nevertheless, it differs too much from the first three volumes in methodological and conceptual terms to form a unity with them.

Rather, *The Ecumenic Age* must be seen as a kind of second attempt by Voegelin to develop a consistent philosophy of history within his overall work *Order and History*. Another such attempt can even be seen within the volume itself in the form of the "Introduction". It was only written in 1974, as the last part of the volume. The reader should therefore not regard it as an introduction to better understand the volume. Rather, it represents a renewed examination by Voegelin of the question of what the process of history is. There he formulates the central statement that history does not take place in the temporal environment, but in Plato's *metaxy*, the intermediate area between the divine and human spheres: "History is not a stream of human beings and their actions in time, but the process of man's participation in a flux of divine presence that has eschatological direction." And in summary: "The process of history ... is not a story to be told from the beginning to the happy, or unhappy, end; it is a mystery in process of revelation."¹⁸

17 Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence 1950–1984*, CW Vol. 30, p. 630.

18 Voegelin, EA, p. 6.