

# Foreword

It may sound ironic to devote an issue to the question of peace while the world at large is going through a period of turmoil, unprecedented by its magnitude since at least the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Not only is the Middle East struggling with sectarian violence and foreign interventions in the chaos left by the Second Iraq War and the Arab Spring but also a haven of peace such as the European Union is facing major security as well as political challenges. To many observers, it seems that it is the entire international system, built upon the premise that neoliberal globalization would open a new area of peace and prosperity, which is collapsing.

Needless to say that the neoliberal vision, now rapidly eroding, is based on the denial of some of the fundamental insights brought by the Axial Age revolution, namely that no political order can last without deep spiritual roots. War and disorder on an unprecedented scale not only call into question what was left of the "secularization theory" – the idea that, with progress, religion will slowly die out – but also create paradoxically the conditions for a return to the "theologico-political question". The dream of building a "neutral" culture (to use the terminology

of Carl Schmitt), that is to say a culture in which religious and political conflicts would be replaced by socio-economical problems, has turned into a nightmare. It could not be otherwise because the neoliberal *utopia* is resting on a faulty anthropology that ignores the existential thirst for transcendence at the heart of human nature. As René Guénon foresaw, the "death of God", the "disenchantment of the world" have only managed to prepare the ground for a "great parody" that disfigures traditional religion and spirituality.

In the face of the contemporary crisis, many authors including Karen Armstrong but also more recently Jürgen Habermas are inviting us to draw from the "transcendental visions" that have taken shape during the Axial Age, this great spiritual and civilizational revolution that swept across Eurasia between the 8th and the 2nd century BC and gave birth to the best of the world we live in. What the Axial sages discovered was that the Sacred Reality was radically transcendent and yet accessible through an inner experience, through the narrow gate of the human soul. They also came to realize that the inner or spiritual order and the outer or political order were fundamentally in a state of creative

tension. On the one hand, religious worship requires a stable political order, which sometimes must be secured through war. On the other hand, the experience of faith frequently conflicts with the contingencies and intrinsic violence of political life. This tension lies at the heart of the Hindu epic called the *Mahabharata*, which teaches that *dharma*, the socio-cosmic law, can never be divorced from the prospect of *moksha*, deliverance, but sometimes must be defended through the use of immoral political means. A fundamental consequence of this state of tension is that the political order can never be fully secularized. The very idea of justice always presupposes, if only implicitly, a transcendent norm. At the same time, all attempts to build a theocratic order (except maybe during the enchanted parenthesis of prophetic times) have failed, ending in hypocrisy and sometimes in bloody nightmares. The truth of a divine Revelation can never be incarnated into a concrete political society.

Some of these perennial insights about the human condition have been partially lost with secular modernity but may find a new relevance today, especially as we are witnessing what Habermas recent-



ly characterized as a "post-secular turn" at the global level.

In the present issue, alongside the contributions of contemporary scholars, we have chosen to reprint a text by a religious and political philosopher, Eric Voegelin. His work is still little-known in the Middle-East but can potentially illuminate the religious dimension of the contemporary crisis and the rise of an apocalyptic and millenarian ideology that pretends to establish the "city of God" on earth but would destroy religion from within if it were to succeed. In the lineage of Plato who could declare that "the City is the soul writ Large" (*The Republic*), Voegelin believed that political dis-

order is always the expression of a deeper *spiritual* crisis at the level of the individuals who form a particular society. Voegelin himself mostly focused on the religious roots of totalitarian movements of his life time (Nazism, Fascism, Communism etc.) and died in 1985. But his thought remains inspirational for those who seek to understand the relationship between religion and politics in the contemporary world, how religion may contribute to peace but be also a cause of war and violence on a genocidal scale. For Voegelin, at the origin of many bloodthirsty movements, lies the delusion that through the "magic of violence", man could not only free himself from his personal state of spiritual alienation, but also establish a perfect order in society *here and now*. The dream of creating paradise on earth, of "immanentizing the *eschaton*" and bringing an end to history looms behind the contemporary jihadist ideology, which largely distorts the traditional understanding of *jihad*. This type of delusion is also part of the fabric of the American neoconservative discourse which, breaking with classical American conservatism, with its solid tradition of "common sense", did more than its share in destabilizing the contemporary Middle East and the entire world.

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