

Eric Voegelin on the Early Christianity: Philosophical, Theological, and Political Implications

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I) Premises in Voegelin's Philosophy of History

One of Eric Voegelin's most important and widely regarded studies is about "The Political Religions"; it was written in 1938 and can be considered a document that shows an early gained conviction which permeates also his later thought. The treatise ends in an epilogue, in which Voegelin makes the following crucial statement: "The life of people in political community cannot be defined as a profane realm, in which we are concerned only with legal questions and the organizations or power. A community is also a realm of religious order, and the knowledge of a political condition will be incomplete with respect to a decisive point, firstly, if it does not take into account the religious forces inherent in a society and the symbols through which these are expressed or, secondly, if it does include the religious forces but does not recognize them as such and translates them into areligious categories. Humans live in political society with all traits of their being, from the physical to the spiritual and religious traits. [...] The political community is always integrated in the overall context of human experience of world and God."^[1] With these words Voegelin expresses at least two insights he gained through his widespread historical studies: first he maintains that politics never exhausts in issues like power, leadership, authority, or domination, and second, in connection with this viewpoint, he states that in order to really penetrate and understand politics the dimensions of spirit and religion play a decisive role which must be taken into consideration.

The relationship of politics and religion is best manifested in Voegelin's philosophy of history. In his "New Science of Politics", published 14 years after "The Political Religions", Voegelin elaborates a sketch of the evolution of history. He identifies "a civilizational cycle of world-historic proportions" which encompasses the pre-Christian ancient civilizations as well as the Christian and modern civilizations. With regard to this "civilizational cycle" Voegelin makes an important statement: "There emerge the contours of a giant cycle, transcending the cycles of the single civilizations. The acme of this cycle would be marked by the appearance of Christ; the pre-Christian high civilizations would form its ascending branch; modern, gnostic civilizations would form its descending branch." The connection to the above mentioned spiritual dimension is given in the following sentence: "The pre-Christian high civilizations advanced from the compactness of experience to the differentiation of the soul as the sensorium of transcendence; and in the Mediterranean civilizational area, this

evolution culminated in the maximum of differentiation, through the revelation of the Logos in history.”^[2] The civilizational cycle that Voegelin designs has its foundation in the fact that in the course of centuries the human soul gained an increasing openness toward transcendence, and that it opened itself up through increasing sensitivity and differentiation until reaching its final culmination in the revelation.

Extensive studies, especially of the pre-Christian high civilizations, enabled Voegelin to discover that the term representation can be used not only to designate certain individual politicians who “re-present” their people, but the concept is primarily to be used to characterize whole peoples which are themselves representatives of different types of transcendent truths. In this context Voegelins distinguishes between three kinds; he writes: “The first of these types is the truth represented by the early empires; it shall be designated as ‘cosmological truth’. The second type of truth appears in the political culture of Athens and specifically in tragedy; it shall be called ‘anthropological truth’ [...]. The third type of truth that appears with Christianity shall be called ‘soteriological truth’.”^[3] Voegelin underlines that these three types of truth follow one another in time and that the second and third constitute deeper insights into the transcendent truth than the first and second one; by way of so called “leaps in being” human consciousness obtained each time higher levels of insights into the order of being, which finally culminated in the so called “soteriological truth” of Christianity. Voegelin makes unmistakably clear that the “anthropological” and the “soteriological truth” are superior to the “cosmological truth”; he writes: “The maximum of differentiation was achieved through Greek philosophy and Christianity”^[4]. The consequence of this finding is that a theory, for instance of politics, “is bound to move within the historical horizon of classic and Christian experiences”. All theory not representing this level of differentiation and insight is theoretical retrogression.

II) Greek Philosophy and Christianity: Commonality and Differences

The quotations of Voegelin suggest two different interpretations: on the one side they make believe that Greek philosophy and Christianity have so strong and important commonalities that the differences between them can be neglected; actually, Voegelin speaks of the maximum of differentiation achieved through “Greek philosophy and Christianity”. On the other side Voegelin himself distinguishes between the three mentioned “types of truth” and thereby accentuates the difference between the “anthropological” and the “soteriological truth”. I, briefly, want to highlight the most fundamental commonality and then point to some differences between Greek philosophy and Christianity.

1) Commonality: The most important commonality between Greek philosophy and Christianity is what Voegelin calls “the noetic core”. Both share the same conviction that the existence of humans is characterized by a field of pulls and counterpulls and that human existence evolves in the realm between a human and superhuman sphere. Voegelin’s description of the commonality between Greek philosophy and Christianity is as follows: “There is the same field of pull and counterpull, the same sense of gaining life through following the pull of the golden cord, the same consciousness of existence in an In-Between of human-divine participation, and the same experience of divine reality as the center of action in the movement from question to answer.”^[5] The central feature of human life consists in its positioning between two different poles that

enable humans to experience their existence as located in a field of pull and counterpull, as challenged by the question of life and death, and as penetrated by the tension between human and divine reality. Voegelin discovers in the thought of Plato a host of hints that proof Plato's insight into the core of human existence. Plato, for example, has as one of its most important linguistic symbols the expressions of "methexis" and "metalepsis" which designate the mutual participation of human and divine being; he presents in his "Parable of the Cave" the picture of a man who is dragged out of the cave to a higher sphere against his own will; and Plato, finally, develops in his late work on the "Laws" the symbolism of man as a puppet made by gods which is pulled by various cords towards opposite directions. Voegelin comments this thought of Plato: "On man it is incumbent always to follow the golden and sacred cord of judgment [...] and not the other cords of lesser metals."^[6] This characterization of man given by Plato is recurrent in the thought of the New Testament. Voegelin refers to the gospel of John, chapter 6, verse 44, where John cites Jesus with his last public speech; here Jesus says: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Another passage quoted by Voegelin refers also to the gospel of John, now to Chapter 6, verse 44. Also here the motive of being pulled is very clearly articulated. The sentence goes like this: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." In both these quotations Voegelin detects not only the motive of man being pulled by a superior power, but also that the philosopher Plato and the evangelist John use exactly the same term to express their insight into one of the most fundamental features of human existence – the old Greek word "helkein = to draw". According to Voegelin classical Greek philosophy, here represented in Plato, and early Christian thought, here embodied in the figure of the apostle John, have in common the crucial insight into the existential tension toward the divine ground of being. Both agree in the core conviction that human life happens and evolves in the realm of the In-Between of a human and superhuman sphere, of pull and counterpull, of question and answer; this "noetic insight" into the deep structure of existence elevates both above the cosmological truth of earlier centuries and legitimizes their outstanding quality and reputation.

2) Differences: Between Greek philosophy and Christian thought there is not only fundamental accordance, even if the commonality of the "noetic core" is a very important one. Voegelin elaborates a number of differences which elucidate the distance between philosophy and Christianity. I am going to mention three of them which all show, beyond the difference, a certain advantage on the side of Christianity.

a) Universality: Voegelin praises Christianity because it accentuates the universality and transcendence of divinity. In contrast to the polytheism of the Greek and Roman pre-Christian world Christianity perceives itself as monotheism, even if it adopted in the course of the 4th century (325 and 380 AD) the doctrine of Trinity. A central characteristic of Christian monotheism is its universal spread. In a letter to his friend Alfred Schuetz from January 1, 1953, Voegelin gives a very clear account of the universality of the Christian idea of God. He writes: "This idea of God is radically universal; the mediating function is radically universal for all men; and its validity is universal for all times. The experience of divine help, symbolized in all pre-Christian civilizations polytheistically and in national pluralism, was reduced to its essence and made humanly universal through Christology. Christ is the god who puts an end to the gods in history."^[7] In another letter that Voegelin addressed to Leo Strauss he underscored that the man of the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy is

“the man of the polis” who is “tied to the *omphalos* of Delphi”. In distinct opposition to this Hellenic point of view which renders “a universal political science [...] radically impossible” is the Christian thought whose core conviction is that of the universality of its values. This Christian “universalization of the image of man” is, according to Voegelin, “the decisive reason for the superiority of the Christian anthropology over the Hellenic”^[8].

b) Knowledge of God: Christianity is superior to Greek philosophy also insofar as it “represents a more complete knowledge of the Unknown God”.^[9] In Plato’s thought God is delineated as a being which plays with man as a puppet; in the Christian thought God is described as a being that underwent incarnation. Voegelin: “The God who plays with man as a puppet is not the God who becomes man to gain his life by suffering his death.”^[10] In the person of Jesus a new level of differentiation is reached that transcends the insights of Greek philosophers. Voegelin says about this “leap in being”, realized in the life and thought of Jesus: “This revelation of the Unknown God through Christ, in conscious continuity with the millennial process of revelation [...], is so much the center of the gospel movement that it may be called the gospel itself.”^[11] In comparison to the rather complex and undifferentiated image of God in Greek philosophy Christianity offers through the tale of God’s incarnation, death and resurrection a narrative which is much richer and more substantial.

c) Relationship between Man and God: A third aspect which accounts for the superiority of Christianity in Voegelin’s view concerns the relationship between man and god. In order to qualify this relationship in Christian thought Voegelin first refers to Greek philosophy. In the work of Aristotle he detects the thesis that the “*philia politike*”, the political friendship, which consists in spiritual agreement between men, is possible only on the basis that men live in agreement with the nous, the divinest part in themselves. The vertical relationship to the nous, however, implies that friendship was impossible between man and god because of their radical inequality. Voegelin characterizes this impossibility of friendship between man and God as “typical for the whole range of anthropological truth”. In Christianity this relationship changes in a fundamental way: In contrast to Greek thought, where “the soul orients itself toward a God who rests in his immovable transcendence”, where the soul reaches out toward divine reality without meeting an answering movement from beyond, the Christian conception is determined by a God who turns towards man in grace. God communicates himself, sends and sacrifices his only son in order to redeem man. Voegelin on that aspect: “The experience of mutuality in the relation with God, of the *amicitia* in the Thomistic sense, of the grace that imposes a supernatural form on the nature of man, is the specific difference of Christian truth.”^[12] The “soteriological truth” that Christianity offers to man constitutes insofar a higher level than the Greek “anthropological truth” as it regards not primarily the human search of truth, but also the divine answer and, furthermore, God’s initiative to get into contact with man.

The relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian thought manifests commonalities as well as differences. With regard to the temporal evolution of both Voegelin makes the interesting remark that each of them was in a certain way dependent upon the other. In the first century AD Greek philosophy and its culture of reason “had arrived at a state that was sensed by eager young men as an impasse in which the gospel

appeared to offer the answer to the philosopher's search for truth." And on the other side it is equally true that "if the community of the gospel had not entered the culture of the time by entering its life of reason, it would have remained an obscure sect and probably disappeared from history".^[13] In this respect the pre-Christian high cultures of the Near East as well as the Greek philosophy can be seen as an enterprise that stretched across many centuries and culminated in the revelation of God in Jesus. The thesis of the "praeparatio evangelica", also mentioned by Voegelin^[14], has some plausibility.

III) The Pillars of Christianity: Jesus and Paul

In the literature on Voegelin's understanding and interpretation of Christianity it is often said that he never has been nor wanted to be a theologian or even a Bible scholar.^[15] Voegelin was a philosopher who dealt with questions of religion from a particular point of view. If we take into consideration Voegelin's description of the life and teaching of Jesus this is conspicuously confirmed. During the 1940s, when Voegelin was working on the "History of Political Ideas", he authored the most systematic account of Jesus and the rise of Christianity. The portrayal he gives of Jesus comprises entire 12 pages, and for the chapter on "The Rise of Christianity", encompassing the part of "Jesus" as well as "Christianity and the Nations", he writes entire 38 pages. These rather short accounts show that the historical events of the founders of Christianity were not of primary importance to him. An overview of the most important arguments will elucidate this.

1) Jesus: Before entering the proper interpretation of Jesus Voegelin starts his account by hinting at the peculiar feature of the first century AD. He states that at the time of the public appearance of Jesus the time was "ripe" for something to happen: On the basis of his conviction that every power organization needs a corresponding intellectual and spiritual substance^[16] he observes that exactly this spiritual dimension was lacking the Roman empire. Voegelin literally: "A world empire had come into existence as a power organization, but there was no spiritually coherent people corresponding to the vast organizational range; [...]. The Roman empire had only a population, it did not have a people. The main function of Christianity [...] was the creation of a new community substance that would be grafted, with varying degrees of success, first on the population basis of the Roman empire, and later on the tribes of the Great Migration."^[17] Beyond such rather practical considerations Voegelin swiftly turns to the founder of Christianity and the leading exegesis of the time. He concludes his readings with a sober statement: The Gospels are not historical reports that contain unequivocal information about the life of Jesus, but constitute a particular kind of literature which he calls "hagiographic"^[18]. In order to get an understanding of "the most important problem: the religious personality and its effect on the disciples"^[19] one must turn to the gospels themselves, even if they are in part incorrect and contradictory. Voegelin singles out two issues: the first deals with "The Mana of Jesus", the second with his "Messianic Consciousness". With reference to the mana of Jesus Voegelin debates the special virtue or power (= mana) Jesus can communicate to other persons and thus, for example, have healing effects for others. Voegelin maintains that the mana of Jesus has to correspond to the faith of the believer, and that therefore its effectiveness is confined to persons who believe in him. By way of this mutual relation there is not only a kind of "community substance" established, the mana conception of the community between Jesus

and the believers is, furthermore, “the basis of the later Pauline interpretation of the community as the body and the spirit of Christ”.^[20] In view of the “messianic consciousness” of Jesus Voegelin is undetermined: First he states that “the Messiah consciousness did not appear at any definite time in the life of Jesus”, then he reasons whether “his quality as the Messiah was increasing toward the end of his public life”; finally he concludes that “we feel a tension between the messianic and nonmessianic personality in Jesus: he as the man, submits to the possibility of being the Messiah”.^[21] For sure, his confession on the way to Ceasarea Philippi (Mark 8: 27-33) manifests the difficulty of identifying Jesus as the Messiah both for himself and for his disciples; but the general atmosphere of eschatological tension at his lifetime suggest that he was regarded by his disciples and followers the Messiah. It is interesting to note that Voegelin does not commit himself to an explicit position of whether Jesus was the Messiah or not.

In his later work Voegelin assumes a different access to interpreting religious and philosophical phenomena; as James Rhodes says, “Voegelin’s mature work begins with a decision to elaborate a ‘process theology’”, which is clearly expressed in Voegelin’s treatise “Anamnesis”.^[22] In the case of Jesus this means a less systematic treatment on the one side, but a number of highly interesting observations and sometimes surprising interpretations on the other. In his essay “The Gospel and Culture” Voegelin highlights a feature of Jesus so far not mentioned; the existence of Jesus, here, is primarily characterized by “the experience of an extraordinary divine irruption”.^[23] And this irruption finds its expression in the “Epistle to the Colossians” in the following words: “For in him the whole fullness of divine reality dwells bodily” (Col. 2: 9). The divine reality in its whole fullness is present only in Jesus; all other men can participate in this fullness only by way of accepting the truth that he embodies. In a tone of appraisal adds Voegelin: “Something about Jesus must have impressed his contemporaries as an existence in the *metaxy* of such intensity that his bodily presence [...] appeared to be fully permeated by divine presence.”^[24] His disciples experienced the presence of God in Jesus in such a measure that they recognized himself as God. In “Order and History IV: The Ecumenic Age”, Voegelin makes the surprising statement that “the tale of death and resurrection is a myth”.^[25] Despite of this deprecating judgment is Jesus considered the apex of differentiation because he opened his soul so thoroughly toward divine reality that the whole fullness of divine reality could permeate him.

2) Paul: To appreciate the performance of Paul it seems reasonable to briefly remind the reader of the particular origin and provenience of Christianity. The outstanding historian Christopher Dawson accentuates this aspect repeatedly in his writings; he maintains: “Christianity is the one element in Western culture which is completely non-Western in origin”. It came out of “this unknown oriental world into the full light of Roman-Hellenistic culture with a new faith and a new standard of values which aspired to change human life”.^[26] It was the extraordinary performance of Paul to have transplanted and transported core convictions of this new faith from the Near East to the Greek and Roman soil. But he not only transported a fixed doctrine, he altered several of its contents by stressing certain aspects and leaping others. In the (already mentioned) letter to Alfred Schuetz from January 1, 1953, Voegelin hints to the effectiveness of Paul’s mission: “Christianity became historically effective through the Pauline compromises, one of which concerned the order of the world [...]; the other concerned the transformation of the faithful living in

eschatological expectation.”^[27] Voegelin certainly knows the achievement of Paul, appreciates it, and concentrates his discussion on Paul because of his outstanding importance for the development of early Christianity.

In his treatment of Paul in the “History of Political Ideas” Voegelin designates the “Sermon on the Mount” the “centrepiece of the teaching of Jesus”. This doctrine, however, is “an eschatological doctrine. It demands a change of heart and imposes rules of conduct that have their meaning for men who live in the daily expectation of the kingdom of Heaven.”^[28] In contrast to this eschatological doctrine of Jesus is the teaching of Paul who has the focus on the apocalyptic idea: “The visions of the Resurrected opened the path for a consequential development of the Christian community that can be described technically as the transition from the eschatological to the apocalyptic idea.”^[29] Whereas the eschatological idea maintains that the Messiah would appear at a given point of time in the near future and replace the present world order by the kingdom of God, the apocalyptic idea implies that the Messiah has already appeared and that his realm is actually established between him and his believers.^[30] In making this distinction Voegelin refers explicitly to the influential study on “Sacrum Imperium” by Alois Dempf and points, like Dempf, to the “Acts of the Apostles”, chapter 28, where Paul’s great speech before Agrippa and Festus is rendered. Paul reports his vision on the way to Damascus that convinced him of the reality of Jesus and of the messianic character of Christ; it made him understand the significance of the Resurrection as the beginning of a new aeon. Paul recognizes that the newly established community between Christ and the faithful is not only the beginning of any new community, but by way of it the commencement of a new epoch. Paul perceives in the appearance of Jesus the dividing line of world history and disposes insofar of a clear “epochal consciousness”^[31]. The epistle to the Hebrews reports of the end of the old epoch and its replacement by the new one: “He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second.” This is for Voegelin of eminent importance: “With the construction of Hebrews the idea of history as such, as an ordered process through which mankind is passing, has reached its full development.” And: “The idea of Hebrews envisages the aeon of Christ as the ultimate fulfilment of history and the preceding period as a preparation in accordance with the plan of God.”^[32] Despite this insight into the course of history and the decisiveness to determine the appearance of Christ as the turning point of history – in Voegelinian words: the acme of a giant civilizational cycle^[33] – Paul could very well and adroitly arrange with the socio-political circumstances of his time. Voegelin mentions as compromises of Paul first “the compromise with history”: Paul had to preach the Gospel to the gentiles; therefore he added to the Israelitic law a natural law, a law of the gentiles; and secondly “the compromise with the weakness of man – The Differences of Gifts and the Mystical Body”: Paul elaborates the idea of the body of Christ in which every personality type has its particular function; the unity between them is constituted by the Spirit by which they have been baptized.^[34]

Voegelin in his later work stresses other aspects of Paul’s thought. In “The Ecumenic Age” from 1974 Voegelin dedicates Paul and his “Vision of the Resurrected” one entire chapter (of seven chapters altogether). With reference to Paul’s “Epistle to the Romans”, where the author writes that “the creation eagerly waits for

the revelation of the sons of God” (Romans 8: 19) and that “the whole creation groans and suffers together until now” (Romans 8: 22) Voegelin differentiates the classical “noetic theophany”, exemplified in Plato and Aristotle, from the “pneumatic theophany”^[35], embodied in the writings of Paul. “The accent”, he says, “has decisively shifted from the divinely noetic order incarnate in the world to the divinely pneumatic salvation from its disorder, from the paradox of reality to the abolition of the paradox, from the experience of the directional movement to its consummation.” Despite these differences Voegelin emphasizes very important commonalities between Plato and Paul: Both agree first that “meaning in history is inseparable from the directional movement in reality”, secondly that “history is not an empty time-dimension in which things happen at random but rather a process whose meaning is constituted by theophanic events”, and thirdly that “the reality of history is metaleptic; it is the In-Between where man responds to the divine presence and divine presence evokes the response of man”^[36]. Paul was fascinated by the consequences of theophany and gained the conviction that man is destined to rise to immortality. He was more interested in the divine “pneuma” than in the philosophical “nous”, a consequence of which is his concentration on divine irruption and not on the structure of reality. This different point of view becomes also clear in one of Paul’s sentences of the “First Epistle to the Corinthians”: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is futile and your faith is empty” (15: 13-14). According to Voegelin this sentence is the key to the understanding of Paul’s experience of reality. Voegelin’s critical comment is as follows: “Hope in this life, in our existence in the Metaxy, not only is not enough, it is worse than nothing.”^[37] The vision of the Resurrected is, therefore, more than a theophanic event; it is the beginning of transfiguration itself. Voegelin concludes by saying that Paul “was obsessed with the expectation that the men living in Christ, himself included, would not die at all but, in the wake of the Parousia, be transfigured in their lifetimes”^[38]. This immortalizing transfiguration is the “central issue” of the letters of Paul; he lived, therefore, in a “state of existential unrest”^[39]. Since he is convinced of the truth of transfiguration he disposes of a knowledge of history that was unknown to classical philosophy. With reference to the important distinction of Karl Loewith on a “meaning *in* history” (which Voegelin approves of) and a “meaning *of* history”^[40] (which he firmly rejects) Voegelin delivers a final judgement on Paul: “The classic meaning *in* history can be opposed by Paul with a meaning *of* history, because he knows the end of the story in the transfiguration that begins with the Resurrection.”^[41] Voegelin ascribes to Paul an “obsession” with the transfiguration and, connected to it, a knowledge of history. Both these reproaches are harsh points of critique that cause, despite “Voegelin’s fascination for Paul”^[42], a distance between them which is considerable. Paul must therefore be counted among those who induce the derailment of Christianity from its right course.

IV) Christianity’s Vulnerability to Gnosticism

Voegelin has the highest appraisal of Christianity: the appearance of Jesus constitutes the apex of the “civilizational cycle of world-historic proportions”^[43], Jesus is regarded as entirely permeated by “divine

presence”^[44], and Paul had, next to his achievements of spreading Christian thought in Europe, an “epochal consciousness”^[45] for judging the events of his time. Voegelin, in general, has a positive attitude towards the Christian faith. In his letter to Alfred Schuetz from January 1, 1953, he speaks very benevolently of an “essential Christianity” which has attained “very significant achievements which should not neglected”. He enumerates first the “Christology”, second the “dogma of the Trinity”, thirdly the set of “Mariological dogmas”, and thirdly “the critical understanding of theological speculation and its meaning”, especially the “*analogia entis*” by Thomas of Aquinas.^[46]

Despite these and many other affirmative judgments about early Christianity and Christian faith, Voegelin also stresses the great errors and failures of Christianity. In his essay on “The Spiritual and Political Order of the Western World” he first states that order in societies is given when the three institutions of power, philosophy, and Christianity hold each other in balance. “Order is [...] when the three sources of order counterbalance one another and each is acknowledged by the others in its relative autonomy. Disorder exists if any one of the three disturbs the relative autonomy and balance among them.”^[47] On the basis of this statement he asks the question where disorder stems from. Why do these three institutions not function in this ideal balance? His answer: “The source of disorder is to be looked for in a place where it is generally not sought: in the structure of Christianity itself.” Christianity achieved something that the ancient philosophy was unable to: “a clear separation of transcendent, godly, being from the temporal realm. Divine being, divinity, is concentrated in the world transcending ‘Beyond’”^[48]. The consequence of this occurrence is enormous: the old notion of a world full of gods was dissolved. For the people living at the end of antiquity (and later) there were no more gods in the world; divinity was concentrated in a world-transcendent sphere, the intracosmic divine order disappeared. Voegelin concludes: “The de-divinization of the world through Christianity and the creation of a god-empty world are the prerequisites for Western existence as a whole.”^[49] In his “New Science of Politics” Voegelin goes one step further; he maintains that the de-divinization of the temporal sphere of power, which happened approximately in the first millennium AD, was followed by a process of re-divinization, which is characteristic of the late Middle Ages and the subsequent modernity^[50]. And whereas de-divinization is marked by a process in which the world became a kind of spiritual vacuum, the process of re-divinization is to be described as the attempt to fill this vacuum with various worldviews and private or public ideologies. Gnosticism, according to Voegelin, is the most prominent among them, laying the basis for the flowering of liberalism, socialism, positivism, progressivism, totalitarianism, etc.

Voegelins accuses Christianity of having created a “world emptied of gods”; the plurality of gods has been reduced to just one god, and this god has been transferred from this earthly world to the beyond. Only the tenuous bond of faith enables man to get into contact with god. Voegelin therefore denotes “uncertainty” as the very essence of Christianity.^[51] In his essay on “The Gospel and Culture” Voegelin poses a stronger focus on the text of the gospel itself and asks whether it contains traits of Gnosticism. The result of his investigation is that the Gospel itself is not Gnostic. It promises no heaven on earth, doesn’t maintain to

dispose of the relevant knowledge therefore, and, in general, deals nowhere with questions of how societies should be established, organized and ordered. Despite this statement Voegelin points to the possibility of derailment of the gospel into Gnosticism. His argument is as follows: The premise for an active faith is the relationship of man to the divine reality. This divine reality is present in the existential tension of man. This tension exists in all great pre-Christian civilizations. Voegelin characterizes this process, which spanned several thousand years, as a movement that had reached its climax in the gospel. The movement of participation and tension of man in and to the divine ground is interrupted by the experience of the epiphany of Christ who had been hidden until this time. And “since the revelation of this extracosmic god is the only truth that existentially matters, the cosmos, its gods, and its history become a reality with the index of existential untruth.”^[52] The consequence is that the existential tension, the life in the metaxy, between the poles of earthly life and divine reality gets lost and makes man look for new answers to his existential questions. The doctrinalization of contents of this once lively tension by the Church aggravates the problem. Gnosticism is one belief system which offers, at all times, attractive answers. Voegelin points to the fact that the possibility of derailment into Gnosticism has existed already before the founding of Christianity. But only Christianity developed – first in the life of Jesus, then in the thought of Paul, finally in the development of dogmas of the Church – the cultural environment in which Gnosticism actually came into being and evolved.

[1] Voegelin, Eric: *The Political Religions*, in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 5, ed. by Manfred Henningsen, Columbia et al.: University of Missouri Press, pp. 19-73, here p. 70

[2] Voegelin, Eric: *The New Science of Politics*, in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 5, ed. by Manfred Henningsen, Columbia et al.: University of Missouri Press, pp. 75-241, here p. 221 f.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 149 f.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 152

[5] Voegelin, Eric: *The Gospel and Culture*, in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, ed. by Ellis Sandoz, Baton Rouge et al.: Louisiana State University Press, pp. 172-212, here p. 192

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 185

[7] Voegelin, Eric: Letter to Alfred Schuetz, Jan. 1, 1953, in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 30: *Selected Correspondence 1950-1984*, ed. by Thomas A. Hollweck, Columbia et al.: University of Missouri Press, 2007, pp. 122-132, here p. 127

[8] Voegelin, Eric: Letter to Leo Strauss, Dec. 9, 1942, in: *Faith and Political Philosophy. The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, ed. by Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press,

1993, p. 9. It is interesting to note that Strauss in his reply letter to Voegelin praised Voegelin's interpretation as "toweringly superior to nearly all that one gets to read about Plato and Aristotle", but that he, nevertheless, had to deny that "the Platonic-Aristotelian politics were really by their intention Greek, and not universalizable"; *ibid.*, p. 10 f.

[9] Douglass, Bruce: *The Gospel and Political Order: Eric Voegelin on the Political Role of Christianity*, in: *Journal of Politics*, vol. 38 (1976), pp. 25-45, here p. 33

[10] Voegelin, Eric: *The Gospel and Culture*, l.c., p. 189

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 198

[12] Voegelin, Eric: *The New Science of Politics*, l.c., p. 150

[13] Voegelin, Eric: *The Gospel and Culture*, l.c., 173

[14] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 204

[15] See, for instance, Michael P. Morrissey in his treatise on "Eric Voegelin and the New Testament: Developments, Problems and Challenges", in: *Politics, Order and History. Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*, ed. by Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight, and Geoffrey L. Price, Sheffield (England): Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, pp. 462-500, here p. 489

[16] See, for instance, Voegelin's essay on "The Spiritual and Political Future of the Western World", in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 33: *The Drama of Humanity and other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, ed. by William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, Columbia et al.: University of Missouri Press, 2004, pp. 67-88

[17] Voegelin, Eric: *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 1: *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 19, ed. by Athanasios Moulakis, Columbia et al.: University of Missouri Press, 1997, p. 150

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 152

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 152 f.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 155

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 162 f.

[22] Cf. Voegelin, Eric: *Anamnesis*, where Voegelin utters about his methodological approach in the following way: "I incline to believe that the process-theological attempt and its expansion [...] is the only meaningful systematic philosophy." In: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 6: *Anamnesis. On the Theory of History and Polity*, ed. by David Walsh, Columbia et al.: University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 74

[23] Voegelin, Eric: *The Gospel and Culture*, l.c., p. 192

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 193

[25] Voegelin, Eric: *Order and History*, vol. 4: *The Ecumenic Age*, Baton Rouge et al.: Louisiana State University Press, 1974, p. 249

[26] Dawson, Christopher: *Christianity and European Culture. Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson*, ed. by Gerald J. Russello, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998, p. 138

[27] Voegelin, Eric: *Letter to Alfred Schuetz*, Jan. 1, 1953, l.c., p. 126

[28] Voegelin, Eric: *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 1: *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, l.c., p. 161

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 166

[30] Cf. *ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 168

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 168 f.

[33] Cf. Voegelin, Eric: *The New Science of Politics*, l.c., p. 211

[34] Cf. Voegelin, Eric: *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 1: *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, l.c., p. 170

[35] Voegelin, Eric: *Order and History*, vol. 4: *The Ecumenic Age*, l.c., 241

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 242

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 248

- [38] Ibid., p. 249
- [39] Ibid., p. 256, 258
- [40] Loewith, Karl: *Meaning in History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949
- [41] Voegelin, Eric: *Order and History*, vol. 4: *The Ecumenic Age*, l.c., 258
- [42] Henningsen, Manfred: Afterword to the German edition of „The Ecumenic Age“, in: Voegelin, Eric: *Ordnung und Geschichte*, vol. 9: *Das Ökumenische Zeitalter. Weltherrschaft und Philosophie*, ed. by Manfred Henningsen, Munich: Wilhelm Fink publishing house, 2004, pp. 237-257, here p. 249 (own translation).
- [43] Voegelin, Eric: *The New Science of Politics*, l.c., p. 211
- [44] Voegelin, Eric: *The Gospel and Culture*, l.c., p. 193
- [45] Voegelin, Eric: *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 1: *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, l.c., p. 168
- [46] Voegelin, Eric: Letter to Alfred Schuetz, Jan. 1, 1953, l.c., pp. 126-130
- [47] Voegelin, Eric: *The Spiritual and Political Future of the Western World*, l.c., p. 78
- [48] Ibid., p. 79 f.
- [49] Ibid., p. 80 f.
- [50] Cf. Voegelin, Eric: *The New Science of Politics*, l.c., p. 175 ff.
- [51] Ibid., p. 187
- [52] Voegelin, Eric: *The Gospel and Culture*, l.c., p. 210