

Voegelin, Christianity, and Murakami's

"all god's children can dance"

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In the text Paul brought to our attention, Voegelin writes:

The modernist topicality of Christianity may have obscured the fact of my dealing all the time with problems of Christianity when dealing with aspects of order which also may appear to fall under other topics.

A study of a cluster of concepts presented in *Anamnesis* helps us understand what Voegelin means by the modernist topicality of Christianity.

Among the cluster of topics Voegelin repeatedly returns to is the topic Metaxy. In *Eternal Being in Time*, Voegelin writes about the Metaxy in terms of flow:

We remain in the in-between, in a temporal flow of experience in which eternity is nevertheless present. . . . The concept most suitable to express the presence of eternal being in the temporal flow is *flowing presence*. (6:329).

Yet the phenomenon of flow points to an understanding of the roots of consciousness in the sphere of the body. If I said to a class of adult learners at Brown University, the function of the soul is to flow, I could sell a lot of snake oil or its contemporary equivalent in self-therapy. Voegelin separates the concepts flow and soul. He says,

it is precisely the function of human consciousness to move away from this vanishing point, not to flow but rather to constitute the spaceless and timeless world of meaning, sense, and the order of the soul. (6:64)

In another essay in *Anamnesis*, he writes,

In the experience of flowing presence, there occurs a meeting of time with eternity, and of man with God. An experience of this *metaxy*, therefore, can put its accent modally on either the human seeking-and-receiving pole, or on the divine giving-and-commanding pole. (6: 335)

One accent, he argues, yields philosophy, the other accent revelation. And yet traditional Christians have not been keenly attentive to *flow*. At the end of the essay Voegelin ponders the shortcoming of Augustinian allegory in the exploration of modes of experiencing the flowing presence, claiming that only contemporary historians and comparativists have cleared the way for understanding *flow*.

This cluster of topics, applied to a fiction about modern Christianity, help us respond to the second part of Paul's passage, the ironic but still pointed proposal: If anybody is dissatisfied with the results hitherto published, or cannot wait for more, he is heartily invited to take a hand at the task himself.

Which brings me to a recent story by Haruki Murakami, the contemporary Japanese writer. The story is called all god's children can dance and it appears in his new collection after the quake.

It is, for starters, a satire on contemporary Christian cults in Japan. The protagonist Yoshiya is a victim of the kind of mass spiritual illiteracy Voegelin has taken pains over the years to point out as symptomatic of modernity. And yet through the protagonist's sincere search for his father, whom he has never known, Yoshiya arrives at a place it is a baseball field which will be the site of his epiphany. In a remarkable development of consciousness, Yoshiya becomes profoundly aware of his own potential for evil and in the last line of the story, acknowledges the fearful transcendence of God.

This moment of self-understanding does not happen in a vacuum. It happens as part of a process, after the episode of dancing in which Yoshiya bound himself to the forest of experience, when he recognized that the ♠forest was inside him . . . ♠ The dancing episode ends as he looks down and notes that the firm ground on which he dances is the roof of a subterranean world in which hides phenomena ♠ like earthquakes ♠ ready to reduce the human world to rubble.

These, too, were helping to create the rhythm of the earth. He stopped dancing and, catching his breath, stared at the ground beneath his feet as though peering into a bottomless hole.

Thus Murakami dramatizes consciousness as a scene of differentiation, a site of impersonal drama. It is with the dying of the dance, and Yoshiya's awakening to his own mere humanity, that Yoshiya spontaneously ♠ and perhaps blasphemously-- calls out God's name.

Is Murakami a connoisseur of life in the Metaxy? In his image of the ♠bottomless hole ♠ over which Yoshiya has been dancing, Murakami may be drawing on a tradition exemplified by the haiku artist Issa (1763-1827), who wrote: ♠In the midst of this world/We stroll along the roof of hell/ gawking at flowers. ♠

Murakami's characters are quintessentially modern ♠ post-Cartesian ♠-- in their alienation from their bodies. Yoshiya's redemption is to break out of the conceptual prison that governed his life ♠ a prison characterized by a Christian idiom that disfigures not only Christian truth but those who adopt the idiom. Yet when Yoshiya gave up the search for his human father, ♠meaning itself broke down ♠:

So what if the man was his father, or God, or some stranger . . .? It no longer made any difference to him, and this in itself had been a manifestation, a sacrament: should he be singing words of praise?

In a minute he had begun to dance.

In some senses, Murakami's art is profoundly traditional. He writes, ♠Kneeling on the pitcher's mound, Yoshiya gave himself up to the flow of time. ♠ Yoshiya's experience had been perverted by a form of angelism, but after his experience of flow, he seems ready to join

humanity in time. But as we have seen, Voegelin writes: "In the experience of the flowing presence, there occurs a meeting of time with eternity, and of man with God." Voegelin's standard helps us measure the quality of Yoshiya's experience and perhaps Murakami's vision within the topicality of modernist Christianity. And yet, the ambiguity of the story, captured brilliantly in the final line-- "Oh God," Yoshiya said aloud-- nevertheless suggests the process of the search for meaning in the Metaxy.

In his analysis of order, Voegelin could deal with modern Christianity as just another topic because he developed more general topics like Metaxy. For his part, Murakami sees Christianity is one among several movements within modern culture that illuminate the tensions within consciousness. Both philosopher and novelist explore the modernist topicality of Christianity.

Seen both as confirmations and departures from Voegelin's conceptual schemes, Murakami's stories help us map the Metaxy. A study of Voegelin's Metaxy helps us map consciousness. In some analogous fashion, both conceptual analysis and story help us locate the body and the flow within a larger whole, a whole suggested by Voegelin's concept of the presence of eternal being. If Voegelin is a mystic philosopher and it does seem that this is a consensus position it may be that his topical approach to Christianity was not merely determined by the facts on the ground. There may be a pious motivation. It seems impertinent to ask Voegelin to name this presence. Likewise, Murakami's fiction preserves the mystery.