

## Man The Questioner: Voegelin's Idea of Religious Experience

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In this essay I attempt to set out some of the essentials of Voegelin's view of man as a questioner, explaining why he thinks this constitutes the essential part of our humanity. I compare Voegelin's view to three contemporary templates for religious life. First, I set out the popular view of religion as arising from a conversion experience that is often quite emotionally charged. Next, I turn to the idea that the essence of Christianity lies in the creeds and dogmas that have issued from two thousand years of history. And finally I consider Strauss's view that religion consists in a kind of "childlike obedience" to a particular divine law, assumed to be delivered through Biblical revelation. I position Voegelin against these three different versions of religious life, noting that he shares certain views with each but that he nevertheless has a strikingly original and unorthodox view of religious experience. In concluding, I evaluate Voegelin's position, considering objections that might be raised against it.

It is worth noting at the outset that Voegelin does not use the word religion as a generic term in his own work. This is because he finds the term too imprecise for his purposes. Does it, for instance, connote institutional religion? Or does it designate a certain kind of mysticism? Is it Christianity? Such questions necessarily arise in any discussion of the topic. Yet despite this potential confusion I have chosen the word intentionally, as a shorthand for something like "piety" or "the proper orientation of man towards his divine source." I am concerned here with placing Voegelin into a context with people who would and *did* use the term religion. And there is undoubtedly something profoundly "religious" about Voegelin's meditations on

transcendence, even as the point of this essay is to show just how far he departs from ordinary usages.

There is a notion that the Christian life can begin for an individual on a certain day. I have heard someone say that her "birthday" was June 23, 1987. By this she meant, of course, not the day of her physical birth but the day she was "born again" in Christian faith. This was the day of her conversion, away from a life of sin and into a life of sanctification. From that day forward she apparently experienced no more uncertainty about her nature and purpose, but put her trust in Christ. The doubts she had felt in the past were simply washed away, and worries and anxieties were thenceforth yielded up to a God who makes things right. She might not understand God's ways, and there might yet be sadness and grief in store for her, but any fundamental anxiety about existence was at last banished from her soul.

Such is one account of the Christian life. But there are, of course, others. Far from the almost magical conversion experience described above, we hear many Christians arguing for a much more reasoned and historically-grounded faith. For Frederick Wilhelmsen, the truth of Christianity lies not in emotional conversion experiences but, on the contrary, in the creedal tradition, which "made Christendom and gave us all our dignity and liberties." Such creeds are essential for preserving the truth of the Christian experience and preventing it from melting "without distinction into the babbling of fanatics who would impose themselves because they think they have seen something!" The experience of the divine *must* be articulated in doctrines "and therefore truly." Without propositions and creeds, we have only, in Chesterton's phrase,

"the usual article about the dangers of abstraction.<sup>1</sup> [1] Creeds and dogmas are, for Wilhelmsen, something like the American Constitution. We may differ over its interpretation but nevertheless agree that it expresses some fundamental truths in a way that helps to preserve those truths. It is very much Burke's argument that "the accumulated wisdom of the ages is superior to that of any one person.

We have, then, two contradictory accounts of religious experience. In the first, the essence of religion is found in a change of heart (and of conduct) after a loving and emotional experience of transcendence. From this experience forward one begins a kind of "new life" that is said to be categorically different from the old one. In the second account, emotion is downplayed in favor of reverence toward a reasoned and venerable tradition that provides assurance about the truth of doctrine. One comes to know and resonate with the truths embodied in the creeds. Perhaps they seem merely abstract propositions at first, but they are in fact the cornerstone of Christian faith. We need not wait for personal religious experience to confirm them for us, and certainly not for some kind of "mystical experience," which is--in Wilhelmsen's words, "laughable to a Christian."<sup>2</sup> [2]

Now compare these two accounts of the Christian life--common enough in our age--with Voegelin's radically different view. "Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity," he writes in *The New Science of Politics*.<sup>3</sup> [3] Contemporary believers, he observes, "are at rest in an

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1 [1] Frederick Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Philosophy* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978), 205.

2 [2] Ibid.

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 122, 141.

uninquiring state of faith; their intellectual metabolism must be stirred by the reminder that man is supposed to be a questioner, that a believer who is unable to explain how his faith is an answer to the enigma of existence may be a 'good Christian' but is a questionable man. Clearly, he is using the term "Christian" in two different and opposing ways here. And as if responding directly to Wilhelmsen, Voegelin argues that the gospel as a doctrine "is a dead letter" that will encounter "indifference, if not contempt, among inquiring minds outside the church, as well as the restlessness of the believer inside who is un-Christian enough to be man the questioner." 4

[4] Is Voegelin being deliberately provocative? Yes, no doubt. But he is also trying to convey an experience of religion that falls within no conventional understanding--neither conversion nor creeds.

Throughout his work Voegelin constantly returns to these themes of anxiety, restlessness, questioning, and tension. This is indeed an unusual view of the religious life, and for it he is called un-Christian (by many Christians) or unphilosophical (by Strauss and his followers).<sup>5</sup> [5] Sometimes even Straussians doubt that he is Christian. Thomas Pangle, for instance, mostly ignores Voegelin in his recent book, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, but in his one mention of him (in a footnote) observes only that Voegelin possesses a "very weak

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4 [4] Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture" in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin*, translated and edited with an introduction by Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 141.

5 [5] See, for instance, letter 38 in the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence, where Strauss directly challenges Voegelin's conception of classical philosophy as arising from a religious foundation. In *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 77-9.

conception of faith.❖6 [6] Such a characterization is, perhaps, laughable to this audience. And yet it is not easy to dispose of such criticisms quickly.

In describing Voegelin's view, however, it is worthwhile to begin not with Voegelin himself but with Strauss, and to consider yet another view of the religious life. In turning to Strauss one must, of course, consider not just religion, but religion and its relation to philosophy. As is well known, Strauss characterizes religious faith as something directly opposed to philosophy. Reason and revelation are two categorically different kinds of experiences, and all attempts to synthesize them must be viewed with suspicion. The root of religion, he writes, might "seem to be❖ the "unity of fear and pity combined with the phenomenon of guilt.❖7 [7] He also observes that in the Biblical view, man "is not meant to be a theoretical, a knowing, a contemplating being; man is meant to live in childlike obedience.❖8 [8] In contrast to this Biblical view the philosopher lives "above fear and trembling as well as above hope❖ and possesses "autonomous❖ understanding.9 [9] Strauss places fear, pity, guilt, and childhood in opposition to the mature goods of the philosophical life: contemplation, understanding and autonomy. It is hard to see the attraction of a religious life when it is characterized in such terms as these.

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6 [6] Thomas Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* ( Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 188.

7 [7] Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return❖ in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 250.

8 [8] Ibid., 257.

9 [9] Ibid., 251,246.

Yet in other works it is not at all clear that Strauss thinks disparagingly of religion, though he does find it categorically different from philosophy. He addresses the same issue in his 1935 book, *Philosophy and Law*, observing that the fundamental conflict between Orthodoxy and Enlightenment is "between the belief in revelation and the belief in the self-sufficiency of reason" and that "not just every compromise but also every synthesis between the opposed positions of Orthodoxy and Enlightenment proves to be untenable." [10] Nevertheless, Enlightenment "cannot disprove the claims of orthodoxy." [11] Reason, in other words, does not definitively triumph over revelation, and therefore the fruitful opposition remains in place. It is, as he observes elsewhere, the "secret of the vitality of Western civilization." [12]

What one can say of Strauss, without becoming too entangled in the difficult matter of his own position on religion, is that he sees the two kinds of experience as markedly different and irreconcilable, and that this was a view he held throughout his life. Strauss himself explained, in a 1951 letter to Voegelin, that "I believe that I basically still stand on the same ground" as he had in *Philosophy and Law*. [13] And as Ralph Lerner has observed of Strauss, "The powerful counterclaims of a revelation calling for obedience and a reason demanding satisfaction retained their primeval urgency for him." [14]

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10 [10] Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 5, 7.

11 [11] *Ibid.*, 13.

12 [12] Strauss, "Progress or Return," 270.

13 [13] *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 78.

14 [14] Foreward to *Philosophy and Law*, x.

The fundamental question this raises, of course, is *why* Strauss thinks that philosophy and religion are necessarily opposed, and to this he gives several answers, which may be summarized briefly as follows. First, there is the problem of divine omnipotence, which is the fundamental attribute of God, according to the Bible. For Greek philosophy, however, there is no divine omnipotence because the gods themselves cannot control "nature."<sup>15</sup> [15] Second, on principle philosophy cannot accept the idea that the ancestral is equivalent to the good. Philosophers must question the variety of divine laws, asking why any one particular law should be authoritative. It becomes necessary, writes Strauss, "to transcend this whole dimension [of contradictory divine codes], to find one's bearings independently of the ancestral, or to realize that the ancestral and the good are two fundamentally different things."<sup>16</sup> [16] In contrast, religion accepts the idea that the ancestral is equivalent to the good because it welcomes and respects the authority of the revelation contained in the Bible. And third, there is a fundamental antagonism between philosophy and religion with respect to the aims of reason. For the religious, reason is good if it is dedicated to the service of God; but if not, it becomes corrupt and prideful. Against this view the philosopher must emancipate understanding from such a "subservient function,"<sup>17</sup> as Strauss puts it. And since for philosophy "all solutions are questionable,"<sup>18</sup> it must resist the solutions postulated by religion.<sup>17</sup> [17] According to Strauss, philosophy "demands that revelation should establish its claim before the tribunal of human reason, but revelation as such refuses to acknowledge that tribunal."<sup>18</sup> [18] And so, says

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15 [15] Strauss, "Progress or Return,"<sup>15</sup> 252-3.

16 [16] Ibid., 255.

17 [17] Ibid., 259-60.

18 [18] Ibid., 265-6.

Strauss, we are left with an insoluble conflict. "Philosophy and the Bible are the alternatives, or the antagonists in the drama of the human soul." 19 [19]

Voegelin is aware of this way of understanding religious experience; but he rejects it. To make an obvious but fundamental point, Voegelin does not think that philosophy and Biblical faith can be opposed to each other in some such dichotomy as "Athens vs. Jerusalem" or "reason vs. revelation" because he thinks that both sides of these dichotomies represent a similar experience, namely, a divine human encounter. In the noetic experience of classical philosophy the accent is on human effort, as a thinker ascends to ever-greater understanding. In the pneumatic experience of Christianity, the inquirer has the sense that there has been a categorical shift, and that God has entered the human realm. The accent here is thus on the transcendence that reaches *toward* man, a kind of mutual participation between human and divine. As Voegelin wrote in a letter to Alfred Schutz, "One can no longer use the medieval distinction between the theologian's supernatural revelation and the philosopher's natural reason, when any number of texts will attest the revelatory consciousness of the Greek poets and philosophers; nor can one let revelation begin with the Israelite and Christian experiences, when the mystery of divine presence in reality is attested as experienced by man, as far back as ca. 20,000 B.C." 20 [20]

Voegelin sees these experiences as fundamentally similar because he thinks that philosophy and religion have a common noetic and experiential core. The act of questioning is

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19 [19] Ibid., 260.

20 [20] Eric Voegelin, "Response to Professor Altizer's 'A New History and a New but Ancient God?'" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 43 (1976), 766.

itself constitutive of the human experience, since only human beings are concerned about their nature and destiny. As he observes in "Reason: the Classic Experience," humans are aware of existing in a state of unrest. We experience life "in precarious existence within the limits of birth and death" whence arises the "wondering question about the ultimate ground . . . of all reality." We ask questions about "the wherefrom and the whereto. . . [about] the ground and the sense of . . . existence."<sup>21</sup> [21] Philosophizing, understood here as a kind of questioning, is therefore not an activity reserved solely for professional philosophers. Voegelin recognizes, of course, that many people will not have the inclination for this kind of inquiry and thought, and that some will express their sense of experience more luminously than others. Nevertheless, all people, if they examine themselves, have questions about the meaning of existence. And these questions are the foundation of both philosophy and religion.

We can see here a certain commonality with Strauss's view of the philosophical life, since Strauss describes the activity of philosophizing "not as a set of propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as a way of life, a life animated by a peculiar passion, the philosophic desire or *eros*, not as an instrument or a department of human self-realization."<sup>22</sup> [22] Like Voegelin, Strauss is opposed to systematizers and to those who would redefine philosophy so as to limit its scope and cripple the activity itself.

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21 [21] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12, Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 268-9.

22 [22] Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 223.

But although both thinkers understand the activity of questioning as something of utmost importance, here is where Strauss and Voegelin diverge. Though the basic questions about existence may initially be the same in religion and philosophy, Strauss sees two possible and opposed responses to this common existential uncertainty. One is to pursue the questions philosophically, following one's sense of wonder wherever it may lead, even if that be toward skepticism or atheism. The other option, however--the one that Strauss calls religious or "orthodox"❖--necessarily shuts down the questioning. In "childlike obedience"❖ to a particular divine law, a religious person finds security in the received wisdom of revelation, and there all questioning must cease.<sup>23</sup> [23] For Voegelin, on the contrary, the questioning must go on. In his view of religious experience there is no day of conversion, but only a continuation of unrest and uncertainty, even as one is simultaneously aware of the existence of transcendence. Contrary to the conversion thesis, in which everything is instantly transformed, human beings remain at the mercy of different pulls.<sup>24</sup> [24] We may be drawn toward a religious life, but our appetites remain what they always were. And so we feel tension and a lack of resolution.

Why, then, does Voegelin not incline toward Wilhelmsen's "creedal"❖ notion of religion? Much of Voegelin's work, after all, is devoted to showing that reason and a certain kind of

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<sup>23</sup> [23] Strauss has an image of revelation as authoritative moral law; Voegelin does not. For an interesting exchange on the nature of revelation, see *Faith and Political Philosophy*, letters 37-38. A clue to the falseness of Strauss's view of religion is that on this view *nobody* turns out to practice religion to Strauss's satisfaction. In his early writings he rails against the Jewish orthodox believers for failing to live the kind of life that unquestioning belief would require. This suggests that Strauss has created an ideal type--a caricature--in which the competing motions and counter-motions of religious experience are reduced to a single but incomplete element, namely, blind obedience.

<sup>24</sup> [24] One cannot help but think here of Paul and the lines, often quoted, about being changed "in the twinkling of an eye."❖

religious experience are not at odds. But Voegelin is not persuaded by the "reason" embodied in creeds and dogmas because he believes that no text can ever sufficiently capture the experiences that gave rise to it. As he reminds his readers, the Gospel was the answer to a question, a question posed not by "Christians" but simply by human beings. If the question is lost, or prohibited, then the symbols of the answer harden into doctrine and become opaque. This of course reflects Voegelin's abiding concern with the deformation of language, and the way in which words are liable not to illuminate but to obscure.

To identify the Christian religion with Christian dogma (or doctrine or creeds) is to remove the experience from the symbols until such symbols become idols, with little or no attention paid to the experience that engendered them. It is akin to a child repeating the mantra that "it is good to have nice manners" without possessing any sense of what manners are, or why it would be good to have them. In this case, as in so many others, the thing said is in fact true, but it has no experiential meaning for the person who says it. Here is Voegelin himself on the problem:

[E]ven the most adequate exegesis and articulation of an experience can achieve no more than symbols which remain as the exterior residue of an original full truth comprising both the experience and its articulation . . . It may be translated . . . into simple propositions . . . [but] the truth of the account will assume the form of doctrine or dogma, of a truth at second remove . . . When doctrinal truth becomes socially dominant, even the knowledge of the processes by which doctrine derives from the original account, and the original account from the engendering experience, may get lost. They will, then, be

misunderstood as propositions referring to things in the manner of propositions concerning objects of sense perception.❖25 [25]

Voegelin thus runs directly counter to many who find the truth of religion embodied in (and protected by) creeds and dogma. Indeed, on this point he is much closer to the convert, who at least has had a personal experience of some kind. For while Voegelin obviously does not find the foundation of religion in purely emotional experiences, he does recognize the vital importance of an individual actually having had *some* experience of transcendence. It is precisely from this experience that the questioning springs, after all.<sup>26</sup> [26] Yet this experience of transcendence need not necessarily present itself as specifically religious in character. It may begin as nothing more than an intimation of immortality in a particularly beautiful scene or poem. It might be a sense of amazement in experiencing a birth or death. Or it might be, as Voegelin once explained it, merely the sense that inquiry is necessary. "You are sitting here asking questions,"❖ observed Voegelin to a group of students. "Why? Because you have that divine *kinesis* in you that moves you to be interested....it is the revelatory presence, of course, that pushes you or pulls you. It's there. We are talking."<sup>27</sup> [27]

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25 [25] Eric Voegelin, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol"❖ in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 178-9.

26 [26] It may be, however, that this experience of transcendence is more ambiguous than the kind of experience that impels conversion.

27 [27] Eric Voegelin, "Conversations with Eric Voegelin at the Thomas More Institute for Adult Education in Montreal,"❖ in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 33, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 243-343 at 328, 330-31.

But this is not enough for many of Voegelin's critics, for whom such stirrings of awareness are a far cry from any "real" religion. And many critics are quite skeptical of Voegelin's arguments about the limits of language symbols, as is Frederick Wilhelmsen when he accuses Voegelin of a certain naiveté and hypocrisy. Voegelin *himself* must deal in philosophical propositions whenever he attempts to express his thoughts; and propositions "do not derail or debase experience," declares Wilhelmsen. "On the contrary, there are no human experiences without propositions . . . that utter in a eureka point what man knows or believes."<sup>28</sup> [28] But of course Voegelin knows that experience must be articulated "through appropriate language symbols."<sup>29</sup> [29] What he objects to is not the attempt to articulate truth in writing, but the idolizing of the propositions and the attempt to make them stand in for the experiences that generated them. The seductiveness of this cannot be underestimated; for it also seems to be the impulse that drives many people to worship only at the most aesthetically pleasing churches--only those with the most beautiful liturgies and music. Do we *in fact* worship the Book of Common Prayer, instead of the God who stands behind it? Precisely the same phenomenon occurs with philosophy when it is understood as a process that yields merely "results" or "findings" that are taken as indicative of the experience itself.<sup>30</sup> [30] Such an approach to either philosophy or religion neglects the participatory component of experience that Voegelin wants to recover, focusing only on the symbols generated by the activity.

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28 [28] Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Philosophy*, 206.

29 [29] Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," 272.

30 [30] *Ibid.*, 270; See, for instance, his discussion about Plato and Aristotle.

So far, then, we have observed three ways of understanding man's active orientation toward divinity: the conversion experience, the traditional/creedal approach, and Strauss's view of religion as childlike obedience to an irrefutable authority. It is clear that Voegelin's conception fits into none of these. Instead faith is a participatory, questioning process that takes place in the metaxy, "in the in-Between of poverty and wealth, of human and divine; the question is knowing, but its knowledge is yet the trembling of a question that may reach the true answer or miss it.❖31 [31] "Man the questioner❖ therefore exists in a state of unrest and anxiety. Some may attempt to ignore this state, seeking satisfaction in various practical projects such as career or family. Others, of course, do turn to a variety of conventional religions in the attempt to alleviate their anxiety. Still others attempt an escape by seeking various great, political (and often gnostic) solutions to human ills. All of these responses are attempts to ease or eliminate the existential anxiety. But none of them, on Voegelin's account, really succeeds--or, to the extent that it succeeds, it must close off important dimensions of human experience.

Yet perhaps the most radical aspect of Voegelin's view is the idea that ultimately there is no "solving❖ the problem of existence, which remains mysterious, before as after the coming of Christ.

It is thus clear that no conventional understanding of religion can get at the subtleties of Voegelin's view. And yet there are difficulties with his complex and subtle view that even a sympathetic reader will perceive, and it is worth articulating a few of these. Voegelin's central claim is that humans must maintain the balance of consciousness, embracing the anxiety that comes with the experience of being human, and searching for--if not necessarily finding--

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31 [31] Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture,❖ 142.

wisdom about how to live. But to put it bluntly, this view is too noetic and too difficult for nearly everyone who has ever lived. Most of us have neither the patience nor the ability to engage in the kind of meditative process that Voegelin engaged in throughout his life. His is the religious sensibility of the consummate philosopher, the extraordinarily gifted thinker, who is able to live with a kind of uncertainty and anxiety well beyond the reach of ordinary human beings. Voegelin himself recognizes this difficulty when he observes that many, if not most, people are ill-prepared for the "heroic adventure of faith," and that the more Christianity spread as a world religion, the fewer people were really prepared to engage in the rigors of such a life. Moreover, if anxiety and questioning are constitutive of the human experience, are not peace and resolution precisely what is sought in such questioning? To put it somewhat differently, part of the appeal of the Christian religion is that it addresses people in the midst of weakness, anxiety and uncertainty, promising a certain kind of "relief" or "healing." In Voegelin the "heroic adventure of faith" seems far removed from the character of the poor and suffering spirits whom Christ in the New Testament ministers to and affirms. And that there can be no relief, but only a continuation of the anxiety, is a rather dispiriting view.

For that matter, there is the issue of Christ himself, and the problem this poses from Voegelin's perspective. The problem is that Christ seems to have answers, and he seems to give them to human beings. And one wants to ask Voegelin precisely how, if at all, Christ altered the human condition. Has there been a cosmic change in our status because of Christ's death and resurrection? Has he demonstrated for us a way of living that we could not have known before? It is not easy to know exactly what Voegelin would say to these questions.

Another difficulty with Voegelin's view is that, in the name of noetic control, he seems to confine the Christian experience within the language and experience of classical philosophy-- particularly of Plato. But can one really understand the fullness of Christianity from the perspective of Greek philosophy? In this sense, Voegelin and Strauss seem more similar than different: both repair to the language of philosophy when discussing religion. But, as John Ranieri has pointed out, neither Voegelin nor Strauss "conceives of the possibility that the biblical text could hold the key to understanding the limitations of philosophy . . . In other words, the Bible as a text accessible to all (and not just to believers) may operate within a horizon foreign to that of the philosophers. If so, then philosophical attempts to interpret the text will run the risk of consistently missing the point. ♦32 [32] To put it bluntly, is "noetic control ♦ of Christianity not merely an attempt to stuff it back into the bag of classical philosophy, excising all the apocalyptic expectations of the prophets to preserve the order of being as set out by Plato and Aristotle? To put it even more bluntly, according to noetic philosophy, must we not pronounce that Christ is impossible? In classical Greek ontology, divine is divine precisely because it transcends matter. The idea of God becoming man is a contradiction in terms.

There is more that might be said by way of sympathetic criticisms of Voegelin's view. If we want, for instance, to point to constitutive human experiences (such as our desire to pose questions about existence) we should also point to the fundamental human needs for ritual and community. The desire to be part of some kind of community, a group of other fellow believers, is often as much a part of religion as the rather individualistic philosophical questioning that Voegelin finds fundamental to the religious consciousness. There is also, and Voegelin certainly

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32 [32] John Ranieri, "Leo Strauss's and Eric Voegelin's Philosophical Approach to the Bible, ♦ Conference paper presented at the APSA National Meetings in Boston , Massachusetts , 2008.

recognizes this, something extremely desirable about ritual and shared observance. And while there are secular outlets for this desire, the every-Sunday recitation of creeds and participation in the Eucharist is certainly a consummate expression of it. In other words, the experience of questioning takes place in concert with other experiences that are just as basic to human beings: the desire for community, for ritual, and, it would seem, for some kind of alleviation of the existential anxiety prompted by the activity of questioning itself.

We are left, then, with a view of religion that is quite hard to get hold of. Understanding Voegelin's thought on the subject requires that we be willing to suspend our own views, beginning from a charitable rather than a critical standpoint. For there is much to be gained in recognizing, with Voegelin, that religious experience remains something of a mystery, despite our best attempts to nail things down in propositional form. The idea that we exist in a state of anxiety and unrest, if we are spiritually sensitive, is a position that is difficult to maintain in the face of enormous pressure to find resolution. Moreover, Voegelin's delicate balance between emotion, experience and reason is one that is difficult simply to state correctly. On the one hand, Voegelin shares with the "convert" model of religion the idea that there is some kind of immediate access to transcendence, and that a person must have a personal awareness of the pulls that act upon him. And yet Voegelin would surely object to the excesses of this kind of spiritual life. On the other hand, he certainly shares the impulse to control the ecstatic, emotional, "spirited" expression of religion in favor of the reason and wisdom that many people find in written creeds and dogma. But this kind of reason runs the risk of losing the engendering experience and reverting to a kind of antiquarianism, relying excessively on words as the preservers of truth. And of course he does *not* share Strauss's view that religion is a denial of philosophical experience.

What can be said with assurance of Voegelin is that he overcomes many of the superficialities of the modern religious consciousness. Part of the reason I have set Voegelin's ideas against admittedly simplistic views of the religious life is to show just how much he departs from conventional understandings. But unless one is willing to let go of these understandings--or at least to suspend them for a time--Voegelin will appear incomprehensible. He aims not at fitting his thought into any pre-existing set of conventions, but at recovering the mystery that engenders experiences of transcendence--experiences that have now been transformed into "true doctrine." "It is the guilt of Christian thinkers and Church leaders," observes Voegelin, "of having allowed the dogma to separate in the public consciousness of Western civilization from the experience of 'the mystery' on which its truth depends. The dogma develops as a socially and culturally necessary protection of insights experientially gained against false propositions; its development is secondary to the truth of experience. If its truth is pretended to be autonomous, its validity will come under attack in any situation of social crisis, when alienation becomes a mass phenomenon; the dogma will then be misunderstood as an "opinion" which one can believe or not, and it will be opposed by counter-opinions which dogmatize the experience of alienated existence."<sup>33</sup> [33] Thus was Voegelin drawn to all those thinkers who were able to avoid dogmas and opinions and to live in ways that actually reflected their experiences of transcendence. George Santayana was a favorite of his for precisely this reason, and I end by quoting an excerpt from one of Santayana's poems entitled, of all things, *Eros*. Its applicability to Voegelin's idea of divine-human participation is evident.

*Yet the profane have marveled at my prayer,*

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<sup>33</sup> [33] Voegelin, "Response to Professor Altizer," 767.

*And cried: When did he love, or when believe?*

*They little know that in my soul I bear*

*The God they prattle of, and not perceive.*

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