

# **The Philosophical Basis for Belief: Some Voegelinian Reflections**

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Very unfinished version; not for quotation.

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A recent, interesting, and challenging conversation I had, in the immediate aftermath of the 7/22 terror attacks in and around Oslo, took as its point of departure a comment from my conversation partner: that it is scary to behold the things people will believe in. I mentioned the concept of a Second Reality, and he immediately saw its usefulness as an analytical tool for what he was thinking of. Our homegrown Mr. Breivik, a white supremacist and anti-islamist, seems to have lived in a reality where our society was seen to be greatly and immediately at risk, and where the only way to minimize this risk and stop the madness about to envelope society was through an armed attack on Social Democratic youth gathering peacefully at a political rally. He had no other choice, he said. The action, in its bizarre way, made sense in his alternative reality, just as it made sense for the followers of Marshall Applewhite of the Heaven's Gate cult in 1997 to encourage collective suicide so that the cult members could join the spaceship of God following in the tail of the Hale Bopp comet, to mention just one of many examples of a sort of seemingly spiritual mindset inspiring acts of great brutality or downright madness.

But just remember, added my friend: for some it even makes sense to believe that the Son of God died on a cross, or that there exist rituals one should perform in order to show veneration for, and receive goodwill from, the supposed Maker of the Earth. Wouldn't our world be a better place if we could escape the lunacy of such non-scientific, arbitrary beliefs?

In the next few minutes I tried to point out to him why I find deep meaning and sense, even as a philosopher, in calling myself a Christian, at the same time as I greatly fear the influence of cults,

ideological extremists, and even everyday dream-world creators who, sometimes dangerously, sometimes more innocently, fill our minds with ideas that lack any connection to our shared world of morality, open discussion, and common sense.

I'll leave the specifics of my conversation there. My wish is to use it as a point of departure for a crucial conversation amongst us as students of philosophy and political theory: What is the philosophical basis for belief? How can we viably claim that religious belief and sensitivity to spirituality play important roles in forming resistance to the untruth of political extremism, while we simultaneously keep our *own* beliefs from becoming pathological and politically extremist?

Few, if any, political philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can help us answer those questions as well as Eric Voegelin. By insisting on a politics guided by reason, yet understanding reason as openness to the existential truth experienced not by a *self-enclosed* human reason, but by a reason conscious of its existence in the "in-between" – between the ever-changing world of our senses and the unknown beyond – Voegelin offers a way of thinking that helps us diagnose and steer clear of on the one hand the dangerous magic of the extreme and on the other the equally dangerous allure of an immanentist secularism that forbids the questioning search for truth. Based on such a diagnosis, he helps us find a path between these Scylla and Charybdis; a path which is not just a compromise, but actually guides us to the truth of existence while also being compatible with political peace.

I would like to suggest three ways in which Voegelin – basing his approach primarily on his insights into Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian revelation, but always open to the existential mystery as expressed by other philosophical and religious symbolisms – helps us. In these ways he indicates to us the ways in which an experience of the divine (or of spirituality) can and should play a role in our everyday, all-too-human attempts at building a society where we can live together in peace (however fragile) and preserve the dignity of the individual human being.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Seeking***

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<sup>1</sup> For a masterful elaboration of the intimate link between a concept of transcendence on the one hand and the defense of human dignity on the other, see Glenn Hughes' discussion of dignity and the UN Declaration of Human Rights in "The Concept of Dignity in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 39(1), pp. 1-24, 2011.

The first crucial Voegelinian point in this discussion emphasizes the way in which *the belief in divine reality always has to take the form of the open, questioning search*; indeed, it must be guided by what Voegelin calls

the group of symbols which express the experience of restless wondering: “wondering” – *thaumazein*; “seeking,” “searching” – *zetein*; “search” – *zetesis*; “questioning” – *aporein*, *diaporein*.<sup>2</sup>

Voegelin adds that this is indeed a truly important, we might say *existential* sort of wondering or search: it is experienced with a sense of urgency and “is not a game, to be played or not” (ibid.). In other words, the “differentiation” which occurs through the serious philosophical and even mystical activity of great souls, such as Plato and Aristotle or the early Christian writers and thinkers, is not a directionless activity, designed to fill one’s time or entertain one’s friends. It is also not one that invents symbols at will, to fit a trend or fulfill an audience’s expectations, or one that caters to the human wish to escape the ills of this world: “The philosopher feels himself moved (*kinein*) by some unknown force to ask the questions,” says Voegelin (ibid.). This is indeed a sort of tension: between being drawn and pulled by a movement essentially outside one’s own soul, and being in a state of questioning and seeking that has the individual soul as its subject, or, to put it in more Voegelinian terms, as the one pole in the tension of existence. This is the very tension that must not be dissolved or destroyed if the seeking for the divine ground is not to degenerate into ideology or personal fancy.

### ***Ethics***

The second point consists in the urgent need for a basic sense of *ethics*, expressed, *inter alia*, by Voegelin in his discussion of the respect for the common man and woman that we find repeatedly displayed in the Gospels. This may not be as apparent a Voegelinian point as the one just mentioned, but we can find it quite clearly expressed in an important essay such as “The Gospel and Culture”,<sup>3</sup> which engages with the New-Testament insistence on Jesus’ preference for the “plain people” rather than the elites. This insistence on the actual presence of the Unknown God in the everyday existence of ordinary men and women can and should act as a counterweight to the possible derailment into what Voegelin terms Gnostic dream worlds. Indeed, the very real link to the reality experienced by

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<sup>2</sup> See “Reason: The Classic Experience”, p. 269, in: Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12: Published Essays 1966 – 1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> In Voegelin (op.cit.), see e.g. pp. 200-201, 209-210.

the common man and woman is the best inoculation against the thinker or political activist who believes he can save humanity by putting a vast amount of its members on a death list.

There is, however, little doubt that Voegelin struggled with this point, as he feared a deformation of symbols, such as “Son of God”, that could allow *anyone* to stand forth as the Son of God – bringing us back to my opening point about Heaven’s Gate and the many other religious sects whose leaders claim that they have a special message for humankind (or a small part of it). When symbols are detached from the experiences that engendered them, and become closed to critical examination, the self-proclaimed prophet who stands as keeper of the symbols and their mysteries can become the most dangerous of charlatans.

The key point in this regard is provided, I believe, in Voegelin’s emphasis (in the aforementioned passages from “The Gospel and Culture”) on *the response of the individual* who responds to the drama of humanity in the *metaxy*, such as Peter in Matthew 16: 13-20, who proclaims that Christ is Son of the Living God, after which Jesus instructs him and the disciples to tell no one that He is the Christ. This proclamation of Peter’s is, Voegelin emphasizes, not the response of the charismatic leader, but of the individual who experiences the drama of humanity in him- or herself, becoming sensitive to the ground of being as, most deeply speaking, *unknown, yet present as an existential pull*. This takes place on the level of an individual responding to the tension of reality, not among secluded elites, self-proclaimed prophets, or the powerful who can spread his gospel with the aid of the forces of this world.

### ***Philosophy and Revelation***

This leads us to the third and final point I wish to focus on, namely, the complementarity between philosophy and revelation, which is crucial if we are to be able to differentiate between on the one hand charismatic conveyors of a Second Reality, and on the other a spirituality which can open human life, individually and in society, to a deeper understanding of truth as well as to real resistance to untruth. I believe that for Voegelin, the hardening of human thought into *either* a quest for human wisdom through philosophical or scientific pursuits *or* an unquestioning acceptance of the symbols of revelation presented as data delivered directly or indirectly from God, constitutes one of the main enemies of an Open Society (in the Bergsonian, not Popperian sense). In the world of the self-proclaimed “Christian Conservative” Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian mass-murderer of July 22 infamy, there are no questions to be asked, no reality against which one must adjust one’s ideology,

no question of the rights or dignity of individuals, no humble acceptance of the limits of human power, and therefore no meeting ground between human thought and proclaimed revelation. Few things can be further from the Voegelinian ideal of openness to the divine ground of being.

Now, while the more *academic* forms of absolutism when it comes to the separation of philosophy and theology, or more accurately, between the human pursuit of truth and openness to divine revelation, of course come across as much more benign than anything we find in the pneumopathology of Mr. Breivik, for Voegelin they nonetheless represent a worrying trend and an intellectual dead-end. They lock out part of reality from the purview of human reason, and thereby represent a *double* threat: firstly, the narrowing of human understanding and reason, and, secondly, the blunting of the conceptual tools at hand to analyze and understand transcendence, spirituality, and the divine. Indeed, we stand in danger of losing all conceptual and intellectual tools to distinguish between madness and morality, between pathology and participation, between a closed and an open existence, if we build up an iron curtain between reason and revelation. This pathology can spread even to the Church and to the halls of science, ending in such proclamations as the one I read from famous geneticist and crusader-against-religion Richard Dawkins, visiting Oslo this week, who held forth in a newspaper interview in the Norwegian weekly *Morgenbladet* (August 26 issue) that he saw no reason whatsoever to take theology seriously or to bother to read it, because whose theology would that be: that of Christians, or that of the Norse theology of Thor and Odin? How could he ever take *any* of this idiocy seriously – indeed, where should he start? On the opposite side of the spectrum from Dr. Dawkins we have those who lock religious belief up in a case, in which, for instance, a literal reading of Old-Testament poetry and myth is seen as the only way to take it truly seriously, and those religious environments where those who would claim that, say, evolution or climate change are scientific hypotheses to be taken seriously, are told that they do not belong within the fold. These are the twin challenges with which we are increasingly confronted.

To sum up, we are called by Voegelin to take seriously (1) the crucial element of seeking and wondering in any human understanding of the divine, (2) the ethical respect for the common man and woman, and (3) the importance of not tearing apart the concepts of reason and revelation if we are to maintain respect for spirituality in a time of great challenges – challenges in the form of both mad mythmakers and extreme ideologists on the one hand, and a seemingly scientifically grounded,

total rejection of the divine on the other. If we bow to either of these, we in effect banish the *metaxy* from political reality.<sup>4</sup> And that is a heavy price to pay, as we have witnessed far too often already.

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<sup>4</sup> An excellent analysis of this problem, seen from the point of view of a historical analysis of religious symbolisms, can be found in Brendan Purcell, "The Big Mystery: Human Emergence as Cosmic Metaxy", in: *Philosophy, Literature, and Politics: Essays Honoring Ellis Sandoz*, eds. Charles R. Embry and Barry Cooper; Columbia: University of Missouri Press, pp. 102-125.