

## History and Faith: Eric Voegelin and Historical Jesus Research

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### Introduction

Eric Voegelin's interpretation of Christianity bears a direct relationship to the type of scholarship that developed out of the Protestant Reformation. Placing the authority of Scripture above the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church presented the opportunity for Biblical interpretation and Biblical criticism to be independent of Church authority. This also allowed the resulting conclusions to be outside the traditions of the Church.<sup>1</sup> Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes that for Martin Luther the "recovery of the original text was the key to the recovery of original Christianity ... so the theologian could measure the inadequacy of medieval Christianity against the norm of the primitive church, or even better, the figure of Jesus himself."<sup>2</sup> Voegelin's relationship with the Christian tradition was strikingly similar to this type of Reformation thinking which posited that "the recovery of origins means the recovery of essence" that "can act as a theological non-n for the reform of the church."<sup>3</sup> Johnson in his study is attempting to draw a straight line from the Reformation to modern (and radical, according to Johnson) historical Jesus research. Though Voegelin himself was not an historical Jesus scholar, one can see how his work on the meaning of Christianity comes from the same vein as

<sup>1</sup> This analysis is dependent on Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional God (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 67-9.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus, p. 68.

historical Jesus research. Both, as children of the Reformation, are committed to the recovery of the authentic origins of Christianity behind what they see as decaying dogma. More important for present concerns, both are committed to the importance of the figure of Jesus, and both would stir up much controversy, debate, and reflection because of their desire to dig to the roots of the Christian experience.

The publication of The Ecumenic Age, the fourth volume of Voegelin's five volume Order in History brought the issue of Voegelin's analysis of Christianity to the forefront of debate. The perception was that Voegelin, in the nearly two decades between the third and fourth volume, had moved away from a decidedly Christian perspective on the order of history to one that was more detached and spiritually neutral. The emphasis now seemed to be centered on consciousness and not on the figure of Jesus and subsequent Christian history which were expected in the fourth volume. The meaning of Christianity now seemed, according to Voegelin, to be found in the consciousness of Paul rather than in the figure of Jesus and the early Christian community.

Harsh critics like Frederick D. Wilhelmsen claimed that Voegelin was not concerned at all with the figure of Jesus. Wilhelmsen would postulate that for Voegelin Jesus' existence meant

nothing, only the spiritual experience of Paul mattered. Friendly critics like Gerhart Niemeyer still generally agreed that Voegelin did not emphasize the figure of Jesus and his direct relationship to Christianity. The opinion seemed to be that Voegelin's interpretation of Christianity was troubled by its underplaying of the type of history and development that were done so thoroughly with ancient Israel and the Greek world in the previous volumes.

With the generally negative reception of The Ecumenic-Age, as background, this paper will examine Voegelin's relationship to Christianity by highlighting one aspect of Voegelin's writings, his treatment of the figure of Jesus. Voegelin's treatment of Jesus will then be used to illuminate Voegelin's understanding of Christianity in general. This paper will look at Voegelin's perspective on the figure of Jesus within the horizon of historical Jesus research. Though one cannot claim that Voegelin holds some esoteric theory about the historical Jesus (in fact he numerous times disavows any quest for the historical Jesus), the model of historical Jesus research will permeate how this study examines Voegelin's writings that deal with Jesus. This paper will use historical Jesus research as a net in order to lift out what Voegelin says about Jesus in his work. Closely examining Voegelin's writings about Jesus within the horizon of historical Jesus research allows the importance of the figure of Jesus in Voegelin's work to come forward.

A common framework that historical Jesus research works within is the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Voegelin collapses the distinction between the two, because for Voegelin the divine presence in reality can only be known through an experience of the divine, not through an empirical model. The only ways to understand anything about the figure of Jesus are: (1) a divine experience followed by an analysis of that experience within the structure of reality; or (2) to study the divine experiences of others by opening oneself up to the structure of reality.

Though Voegelin was most concerned with the structure of reality, an analysis of his work proves that he hardly ignored the figure of Jesus. Voegelin's utmost concern is with the structure of reality. The figure of Jesus is important but still only fits within

Voegelin's larger concern. Many scholars became very critical of Voegelin's philosophical writings that dealt with Christianity, because in his later work the structure of reality became more important than a linear conception of historical persons and events. This paper shall begin with Voegelin's harshest critic and then move forward to those who recognize the importance of the figure of Jesus for Voegelin.

### Interpretations of Voegelin

As stated above, Frederick D. Wilhelmsen was critical of Voegelin's treatment of Christianity in The Ecumenic Age. In writing about the volume, Wilhelmsen states that the "historical figure of Jesus is totally bypassed by Voegelin and the only Christ to emerge in Voegelin's pages is the resurrected Christ of Paul's experience, the Christ who appeared to Paul and who transfigured his life and the life of all mankind as well."<sup>4</sup> For Wilhelmsen there is a crucial distinction between historical fact and personal experience that Voegelin ignores. The historical figure of Jesus

cannot be ignored and replaced with the experiences of his followers. Wilhelmsen concludes that for Voegelin personal experience is more important than historical facts.

Like Gerhart Niemeyer, Wilhelmsen claims that Voegelin has given insufficient attention to the existence of Jesus. For Wilhelmsen, Jesus as a particular figure at a particular time in history is more important than Paul's experience of the Resurrected Jesus. The meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection cannot be divided from the historicity of those events, where Wilhelmsen sees Voegelin as only concerned with their meaning and not their history. Wilhelmsen is outraged at Voegelin's apparent disinterest

<sup>4</sup> Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, Christianity and Political Philosophy (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978), p. 197.

in the historical facts about Jesus. In a rhetorical flourish, he states that "the historicity of Christ and of his resurrection, of the Easter we Christians celebrate as the central feast of our faith, annoys Voegelin: he finds it vulgar ... Whether Christ arose in deed or arose from the dead only in Paul's experience of a deed that occurred only in Paul is an irrelevant distinction for the German professor."<sup>5</sup> The fact that historical reality for Voegelin cannot be divided from the experience of reality makes Wilhelmsen compare him to George Santa Ana who held that there was no historical Jesus to be discovered by scholarship behind the Christ of faith as known throughout history. However, Santa Ana held that the Christ of faith was just a myth, so history and faith were both devoid of truth. Wilhelmsen writes that Voegelin, because of his conception of reality, is not even concerned about whether Christ is a false myth.

It appears to him that Voegelin has ignored that historical existence precedes any meaning or interpretation. For Wilhelmsen what is important is that the events of the New Testament happened historically prior to any interpretation of them. Where Niemeyer faults Voegelin for not taking Paul's conception of Jesus into account, Wilhelmsen believes that Voegelin has abandoned the historical existence of Christian events altogether.

Gerhart Niemeyer does take Voegelin to task for insufficient attention to the figure of Jesus in The Ecumenic Age. Niemeyer writes, "St. Paul knew Jesus to have been a contemporary person who was born, lived, preached, performed miracles, 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.' Apart from the problems

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelmsen, p. 203.

of the 'historical Jesus,' the facticity of Jesus himself separates Christian theology as a type from all myths and philosophical speculations."<sup>6</sup> Niemeyer claims that what jumps out of Voegelin's book, by his downplaying the fact of Jesus' existence, is that Christianity, myth, and philosophy have all collapsed into one category. Thus Christianity can be approached in the same way as myth or philosophical speculation. However, Niemeyer holds that the stumbling block for such a collapse is the historical figure of Jesus. Jesus is not just another symbol resulting from an experience with the divine ground of being. According to Christianity, Jesus is not a symbol but is the divine ground of being.

Niemeyer complains that Voegelin's analysis of Christianity almost exclusively deals with Paul's vision of the Resurrected Jesus and does not take into account the specificity and particularity of the figure of Jesus himself. As a result, Jesus just appears to be a symbolization of Paul's experience. Voegelin never asks the question of who Jesus is and what the idea of incarnation in the person of Jesus means, because this particularity and specificity of Jesus will not allow one to make Christianity equivalent with other experiences of the Beyond. Niemeyer writes that the heart of the problem is that "Voegelin's exegesis of St. Paul would not have to be changed if one removed Jesus Christ from it altogether."<sup>7</sup>

In regards to Voegelin's relationship to Christianity, Niemeyer concludes that it "seems that this once Voegelin has approached a great spiritual reality from a standpoint

<sup>6</sup> Gerhart Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind," Modem Ag (Winter, 1976), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup>Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's," p. 35.

extraneous to it."<sup>8</sup> Voegelin has swallowed up the truth of Christianity, which depends on the particular figure of Jesus, into his own philosophical system. Clearly Niemeyer does not criticize Voegelin for not engaging in a quest for the historical Jesus, but he does use the term 'particular' in order to demonstrate that Christianity has to take the figure of Jesus into serious account and cannot pass off its central figure as just a symbol.

The two preceding interpretations conclude that Voegelin discounts the historical figure of Jesus. However, as more of Voegelin's writings about Christianity were digested, the hostility that greeted The Ecumenic Age subsided into an appreciation of the totality of Voegelin's thought and the place of Jesus within that thought.

In a later essay, Niemeyer praises Voegelin's openness to the truth of Christianity in his writings that deal specifically with Christianity. He admits that if he wrote a review of The Ecumenic Age, at the time of this later essay (about 19 years after his earlier review), his criticism would "be somewhat milder."<sup>9</sup> Though still reproducing a large section of the original critical review, Niemeyer states that "Voegelin puts himself in sharp contrast with so many contemporary philosophers or historians who seek to put Christianity on the same plane as other great religions by not mentioning Jesus as the core of Christian faith."<sup>10</sup> When taking into account the totality of Voegelin's writings on Christianity beyond his exegesis of Paul, Niemeyer can appreciate the depth of Voegelin's interpretation of Christianity.

Against Wilhelmsen's complaint that Voegelin has no core truth to distinguish a

<sup>8</sup>Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's," p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhart Niemeyer, "Christian Faith, and Religion, in Eric Voegelin's Work," The Review of Politics (Winter, 1995), p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Niemeyer, "Christian Faith," p. 102.

true experience from a false one stands Niemeyer's conclusions. Niemeyer claims that Voegelin's philosophy does not simply lead to an open-ended spirituality that leaves one unable to separate the truth of various visions and experiences from their falsity. Niemeyer does admit that for Voegelin the "divine reality ... is not subject to discovery, or verification by the senses, like things are. It is a matter of inner *experience*."<sup>11</sup> However, that does not leave divine reality as just a matter of inner experience. Niemeyer points out that "there is a spiritual truth, even though it cannot be something found attained by measurement or experiment."<sup>12</sup> There is a way to determine true visions from false visions. The inner criterion of truth is a "consciousness filled with the loving tension toward God."<sup>13</sup> The criterion for the outside world is that this consciousness must be expressed in language that "fit the 'In-Between' situation of man."<sup>14</sup> These inner and outer criteria are attempts by Voegelin to put the structure of reality into language. Jesus is important as the core of Christian faith, but experiences of Jesus must fit within this structure of reality for it to be regarded by Voegelin as true.

Bruce Douglass also takes Voegelin's entire project into account and concludes that the figure of Jesus is important for Voegelin. Douglass states that "Voegelin's Gospel is inextricably tied to the life and death of Jesus. Strictures against concern with the historical Jesus notwithstanding, Voegelin is not a Bultmann."<sup>15</sup> Against the conclusion of Wilhelmsen, Douglass believes that Voegelin is unlike Rudolf Bultmann

<sup>11</sup> Niemeyer, "Christian Faith," p. 102. Emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> Niemeyer, "Christian Faith," p. 102-3.

<sup>13</sup> Niemeyer, "Christian Faith," p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> Niemeyer, "Christian Faith," p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Douglass, "A Diminished Gospel: A Critique of Voegelin's Interpretation of Christianity," Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History, edited by Stephen A. McKnight (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1987), p. 145.

who claimed that one could know practically nothing about the figure of Jesus. Thus one is completely dependent on the proclamations of faith of the earliest Christian communities. Voegelin in his writings is concerned with the historical figure of Jesus who stands behind early Christian belief. As proof, Douglass points out that Voegelin addresses the figure of Jesus when he writes about the meaning of the Incarnation, the dual nature of Christ, and the events of the death and resurrection. In The Ecumenic Age, Voegelin does not seem to be concerned with the historical figure of Jesus, because he is writing about Paul's vision of the Resurrected Jesus. If one looks at the entire corpus of Voegelin's writings about Christianity, one can see that though he may not be concerned with a strictly historical approach to the figure of Jesus, Voegelin was very interested in the meaning of Jesus and holds specific traits about the figure of Jesus as certain.

David Walsh also recognizes the importance of Jesus throughout the corpus of Voegelin's work.

Walsh even holds that for Voegelin Jesus engages in a "redemptive suffering on behalf of fallen man."<sup>16</sup> When critics take into account Voegelin's writings that deal with Jesus, a stronger relationship between Voegelin's philosophy and the figure of Jesus emerges. Voegelin's entire corpus of work, beyond the chapter on Paul in The Ecumenic Age, proves the assertions of the later Niemeyer, Douglass, and Walsh correct. The figure of Jesus is important for Voegelin, and Voegelin holds that we can know something about Jesus. This will be made plain by a close examination of Voegelin's writings about Jesus with special focus on the recently published History of Political

<sup>16</sup> David Walsh, "Voegelin's Response to the Disorder of the Age," The Review of Politics (1984), p. 280.