

The Mystery of Divine Presence and "Christianity"

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Among the questions raised by the theme of Eric Voegelin's relationship to Christianity, the most significant and provocative, it seems to me, is the question of whether Voegelin is a "Christian philosopher."

There can be, I would argue, no clear-cut answer to the question. Voegelin was guarded on the question of his religious identity, and he likewise avoided any classification of his overall philosophical position, other than to affirm that he was a philosopher—indeed, a "mystic-philosopher."¹ As scholars have shown, one can find passages in Voegelin's work that do appear to read as confessions of the philosophical ultimacy of the Christian vision; but just as easily, one can find passages in which Voegelin insists upon the strict impartiality of his work as regards any philosophical or religious tradition.² But perhaps a harmonization of these apparently divergent postures can be attained, by considering them as thesis and antithesis of a dialectic that attains its synthesis in a higher viewpoint. In this case, the higher viewpoint entails understanding what "Christianity," in its most positive connotations, means for the mystic-philosopher Voegelin.

An access to this higher viewpoint may be found in an oft-cited passage from Voegelin's published response to Professor Thomas J. J. Altizer's review of Voegelin's *The Ecumenic Age*. Here he writes that his mature life's work, his massive inquiry into the human history of experience and symbolization,

generalizes the Anselmian *fides quaerens intellectum* [the process of "faith seeking understanding," as formulated by St. Anselm of Canterbury, 1033-1109] so as to include every *fides*, not only the Christian, in the quest for understanding by reason. Even this expansion of the *fides*, however, to all experiences of divine reality in which history constitutes itself, cannot be understood to go beyond "Christianity." For it is the Christ of the Gospel of John who says of himself: "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58); and it is Thomas Aquinas who considers the Christ

to be the head of the *corpus mysticum* that embraces, not only Christians, but all mankind from the creation of the world to its end. In practice this means that one has to recognize, and make intelligible, the presence of Christ in a Babylonian hymn, or a Taoist speculation, or a Platonic dialogue, just as much as in a Gospel.³

In this passage, Voegelin expands the horizon of the phenomenon of "Christianity" to the point where it is coincident with the horizon of all human experience of the mystery of divine presence worldwide. And how does he justify this expansion of the notion of "Christianity"? Drawing on the combined authority of St. John's Gospel and St. Thomas's theology, Voegelin identifies the divine presence in the existence of Jesus as experienced by Jesus himself and his apostles as an "extraordinary divine irruption," indeed a "fullness" of "irruption," of the one transcendent divine reality in which *all* human beings have participated and to which *all* human religious experience has been a response.⁴ In this way the symbol of "the Christ" becomes assimilable to the mystery of divine presence *per se*; and, on this principle, the phenomenon of "Christianity" can be claimed by Voegelin provocatively and heterodoxically to include all human experience of divine reality.

I think it worth emphasizing that this is not a case of Christian triumphalism. On the contrary, it is a case of mystical ecumenicism. Voegelin is, in this passage, as so often, insisting that the revelation of divine presence in the cosmos and in the soul is a universal human phenomenon, and that the divine mystery revealed through the teachings, actions, and presence of Jesus *is not a different divine mystery* than that experienced and attested to by non-Christian and pre-Christian peoples. As Voegelin explains to Professor Altizer, in his philosophical endeavors he is

indeed attempting to "identify" . . . the God who reveals himself, not only in the prophets, in Christ, and in the apostles, but wherever his reality is experienced as present in the cosmos and in the soul of man. . . . [One can not] 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 20,000 B.C., by the petroglyphic symbols of the paleolithicum.⁵

In particular, he reminds us, cosmological cultures cultures predating the discovery of the radical transcendence of divine being, and thus of the Israelite and Christian "God" must not be

viewed as "a domain of primitive idolatry, polytheism, or paganism, but [as] highly sophisticated fields of mythic imagination, quite capable of finding the proper symbols for the concrete or typical cases of divine presence in a cosmos *in which divine reality is omnipresent*." ⁶ Human consciousness, in other words, is always human-divine consciousness; divine presence is co-constitutive of human consciousness; and it is illogical, indeed ludicrous, to presume that the divine mystery to which the Greek poets and philosophers responded, or Babylonian hymn-makers, or Taoist mystics, or Indian gurus, or Sufi poets, is not the divine mystery encountered in the form of "an extraordinary divine irruption" in the person of Jesus. As Voegelin writes, the "breaking forth" of the divine-human word of truth about ultimate reality does not in fact occur as a single manifestation of truth in history but assumes the form of an open historical field of major and minor divine-human encounters, widely dispersed in time and space over the societies who together are mankind in history. Nevertheless, in spite of the pluralistic historical form, what breaks forth in this field is the one truth of the one reality. ⁷

Voegelin's mystical ecumenicism enables him to embrace, with a philosophical rigor and enthusiasm I have yet to encounter in any other thinker, a truly universal, truly pluralistic vision of the ultimate oneness of human participation in divine being and thus of the ultimate oneness of human history. And precisely because he recognizes the global process of revelation in history as reaching, in the epiphanies flowing from the experiences of Jesus and his apostles, a certain limit of differentiation in the human understanding of divine transcendence a "climactic revelation" of the Unknown God, as he has put it he can claim that the symbol "Christ" and the symbol "Christianity" can, in a sense, be seen as equivalent to the eternal divine mystery from which and within which all persons have lived. ⁸

This, then, is the mystical higher viewpoint on "Christianity" that synthesizes Voegelin's comments suggesting a certain philosophical ultimacy to the Christian vision and his insistence on his own scientific impartiality and universalism. This is, as I have said, a heterodox view, and would likely be condemned as heretical by an enormous majority of ecclesiastical authorities. ⁹ My own response to it, however, has been to find that, whenever I am once again overwhelmed by the arrogant exclusivism or myopic literalism of the Christian churches, not to mention their suffocating disregard of their own origins in the actual experiences of Jesus and his apostles, it is

Voegelin's diagnostic and therapeutic mysticism that manages, once again, to redeem for me "Christianity's" essential message of redemption.

¹ See Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 44 n. 43.

² As examples of the former, one might point to the following sentences: "The [directional] movement in reality, that has become luminous to itself in noetic [*i.e.*: rational-critical] consciousness, *has indeed unfolded its full meaning* in the Pauline vision [of the resurrected Christ] and its exegesis through the myth" (Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 251, emphasis added); "[T]he secret of the Gospel is . . . the event of [*the*]full comprehension and enactment [of the mystery of divine presence in existence] through the life and death of Jesus" (Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 172-212 (204), emphasis added). An example of the latter is the following comment of Voegelin to Alfred Schütz in a published letter of 1953: "Essentially my concern with Christianity has no religious grounds at all. It is simply that the traditional treatment of the history of philosophy and particularly of political ideas recognizes antiquity and modernity, while the 1500 years of Christian thought and Christian politics are treated as a kind of hole in the evolution of mankind. . . . A general history of ideas must be capable of treating the phenomenon of Christianity with no less theoretical care than that devoted to Plato or Hegel" (Eric Voegelin, "Letter to Alfred Schütz: I [On Christianity], January 1, 1953," in Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba, eds., *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness, and Politics* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 449-50).

³ Eric Voegelin, "Response to Professor Altizer's 'A New History and a New but Ancient God?'," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 294.

⁴ Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 192. See Glenn Hughes and Frederick Lawrence, "The Challenge of Eric Voegelin," *The Political Science Reviewer* 25 (1995): 399-452 (428-34).

⁵ Voegelin, "Response to Professor Altizer," 293.

⁶ Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 195-96 (emphasis added).

⁷ Eric Voegelin, "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 28, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Carlingella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 173-232 (182).

⁸ Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 196.

⁹ Note Voegelin's comment on the "heretical" character of his views on "essential Christianity" from the point of view of Catholic orthodoxy, in Voegelin, "Letter to Alfred Schütz," 457.