

Carrying Coals to Newcastle

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The question is about Eric Voegelin's relationship to Christianity. Was Voegelin a Christian? Is his philosophy Christian philosophy? The personal and scholarly issues must be divided and subdivided for my few hints on these complicated subjects.

From the time I first heard him lecture as a young undergraduate student in 1949 I never doubted that Voegelin was profoundly Christian whatever the ambiguities of his formal church affiliation. It never dawned on me at the time to think otherwise, since the whole of his discourse was luminous with devotion to the truth of divine reality that plainly formed the horizon of his analytical expositions in class and of his scholarly writings as well, as I later found out. That youthful judgment was valid then and, with appropriate qualification, remains so long years later. His faith formed the bedrock of his personal *resistance* to National Socialism and strengthened his interpretation of philosophy itself as an act of resistance against debilitating untruth. It vivified his early insight that the individual man is the intersection of time and eternity¹ [1] and that human nature is a process-structure that is spiritual: "Through spirit man actualizes his potential to partake of the divine. He rises thereby to the *imago Dei* which it is his

1 [1] "Herrschaftslehre," chap. 1, MS p. 7 (ca. 1931); full citation in Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction*, 2nd edn (Transaction Pubs., 2000), 275n31.

destiny to be.❖2 [2] The integrity of the individual human *person* thus conceived, with its reflective consciousness, is the spring of resistance to evil and responsive source of the love of truth❖the very core of participatory (*metaxy* or In-Between) reality, never to be sacrificed to any collectivity of any kind whatever.3 [3] At the concrete level of political action, for example, Voegelin❖s ❖identification of the Nazis as a satanic force for evil was sufficiently unambiguous even for the most dull-witted employee of the Gestapo to realize that the author [of *The Political Religions*] was not on [their] side.❖4 [4]

Voegelin was baptized and buried a Christian, the latter by process of long-deliberated choice of whose details our colleague Paul Caringella was intimately eye-witness. Even the philosopher must face the ineluctable facts of the human condition and of his own mortality when dying and death loom as more than abstract metaphors. For his Lutheran form of interment service Voegelin asked that two passages from the New Testament be read: ❖Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone: but if it die, it brings forth much fruit. He that loves his life shall lose it; and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal❖ (John 12:24-25); and ❖Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For

2 [2] Eric Voegelin, ❖The German University and German Society❖ in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (University of Missouri Press, 1990-), 12:1-35 at 7.

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, ❖Reason: The Classic Experience,❖ in *ibid.*, 265-91 at 290: ❖All ❖philosophies of history❖ which hypostatize society or history as an absolute, eclipsing personal existence and its meaning, are excluded as false.❖

4 [4] Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (University of Missouri Press, 1999), 10. Cf. Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions in Modernity Without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, *Collected Works*, 5:19-73 at 24.

all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust thereof: but he that does the will of God abides for ever (First John 2:15-17). When Eric's wife Lissy asked him why he would want that second passage read, he is said to have replied for repentance.⁵ [5]

Does this then mean Voegelin was a Christian philosopher? While he took the fact and rich contents of *revelation* with utmost seriousness in all of his work, repeatedly dealing with it over the decades, the answer seems to be no. As is well-known he was no party man but sought to maintain the dispassionate even fiercely independent stance of impartiality that he considered indispensable to the integrity of the scientific work to which he devoted his life.⁶ [6] Since there is no fury like a dogmatist scorned, however, Voegelin was excoriated and calumniated by religious, ideological, and secularist zealots of all shades and still is. But he accepted self-

⁵ [5] Personal communication from Paul Caringella by E-mail on 1/23/2000.

⁶ [6] I have been called every conceivable name by partisans of this or that ideology. I have in my files documents labeling me a Communist, a Fascist, a National Socialist, an old Liberal, a new Liberal, a Jew, a Catholic, a Protestant, a Platonist, a neo-Augustinian, a Thomist, and of course a Hegelian—not to forget that I was supposedly strongly influenced by Huey Long. Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (1989, 1996; available University of Missouri Press), 46. In a related vein Voegelin wrote professor (later U. S. Senator from North Carolina) John East as follows: The pre-Reformation Christian [label you mention] is a joke. I never have written any such thing. These *canards* arise because I frequently have to ward off people who want to classify me. When somebody wants me to be a Catholic or a Protestant, I tell him that I am a pre-Reformation Christian. If he wants to nail me down as a Thomist or Augustinian, I tell him I am a pre-Nicene Christian. And if he wants to nail me down earlier, I tell him that even Mary the Virgin was not a member of the Catholic Church. I have quite a number of such stock answers for people who pester me after a lecture; and then they get talked around as authentic information on my position. Letter of Eric Voegelin to John P. East dated 18 July 1977 (in Hoover Institution Archives, Eric Voegelin Papers, microfilm reel 10.23.) Cf. William M. Thompson, Eric Voegelin: A Pre-Nicene Christian? in *The Ecumenist*, 38 (2001), 10-13; also see Ellis Sandoz, Eric Voegelin a Conservative? in *The Politics of Truth and Other Untimely Essays: The Crisis of Civic Consciousness* (University of Missouri Press, 1999), Chap. 9.

designation as a mystic-philosopher, perhaps to distinguish himself from the odd personalities sometimes inhabiting academic philosophy departments, and to identify his work as palpably like that of the Hellenic philosophers of antiquity.⁷ [7] If the exploration of the human relationship to the transcendent divine ground of being is the cardinal problem of philosophy, as Voegelin thought,⁸ [8] and if he devoted his life to the task in its manifest diversity over time from prehistory into the present, the designation seems appropriate enough.

If in the course of his work of a lifetime he concluded that the open exploration of Man's tension toward transcendent divine being (while the universal attribute of mankind experienced-symbolized in many modes) is most optimally conducted in the light of the revelatory experiences of prophets and apostles, and the pneumatic-noetic exegesis by Greek philosophers of equivalent experiences, it is not too surprising that he should especially admire these. But more than this: In the confluence of these currents with medieval Christian mystic-philosophy, the *fides quaerens intellectum* of Anselm, Aquinas, and Eckhart, Voegelin saw a form of meditative technical philosophizing never surpassed, one that remains paradigmatic into

7 [7] The [ancient] mystic-philosophers break with the myth because they have discovered a new source of truth in their souls. The unseemly gods of Homer and Hesiod must pale before the invisible harmony of the transcendental *realissimum*; and the magnificent Homeric epic that was enacted on the two planes of gods and men must sink to the level of poetry when the drama of the soul with its intangible, silent movements of love, hope, and faith toward the *sophon* is discovered [by Heraclitus]. Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis, Order and History II*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis, *Collected Works*, 15:311.

8 [8] Philosophizing seems to me to be in essence the interpretation of experiences of transcendence....There are degrees in the differentiation of experiences. I would take it as a principle of philosophizing that the philosopher must include in his interpretation the maximally differentiated experiences.... Now with Christianity a decisive differentiation has occurred.... Eric Voegelin to Alfred Schütz, Jan. 1, 1953, as given in *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness and Politics*, ed. Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba (Klett-Cotta, 1981), 450.

the present. In that specific sense Voegelin may, after all, be a Christian philosopher: not by partisanship but by discerning and validating experientially a superiority perfecting the contemplative life, one implicit in it from distant antiquity and that he sought to live by himself.⁹

[9] In this practice of meditative philosophy, he pushed well beyond conventional understanding to insist that *Reason* (*nous* in Plato and Aristotle) is itself a revelation (not merely ♦natural♦) and that the contemplative activity of rational inquiry emerges as a divine-human participation from questions that arise in the first place ♦because you have that divine *kinesis* in you that moves you to be interested.♦ So-called ♦♦natural reason♦ is due to God♦s grace,♦ and it lies at the very heart of philosophy itself.¹⁰ [10] This settled analytical conclusion of the late Voegelin, with its far-reaching implications, gives cold comfort to radical secularists, naturalists, and any others for whom fervent separation of ♦religion♦ from ♦philosophy♦ in experience and rational inquiry may be axiomatic.

9 [9] Cf. Eric Voegelin, ♦Quod Deus Dicitur♦ in *Collected Works*, 12:376-94, and the analysis in Sandoz, *Voegelinian Revolution*, 258-63.

10 [10] *Conversations with Eric Voegelin*, ed. with an intro. by R. Eric O♦Connor, Thomas More Institute Papers 76 (1981), 138-40; cf. Eric Voegelin, ♦The Beginning and the Beyond,♦ in *What is History? And other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, *Collected Works*, 28:209-232. On *nous* as revelatory see ♦noetic pneumatic theophany♦ in Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age, Order and History IV*, ed. Michael Franz, *Collected Works*, 17: 96-97, 305-308, 315-17, 324-25, 337, 375. ♦The movement in reality, which has become luminous to itself in noetic consciousness, has indeed unfolded its full meaning in the Pauline vision [citing esp. Col. 2:9 and Rom. 8:22-23] and its exegesis through myth. The symbolism of the man who can achieve freedom from cosmic Ananke, who can enter into the freedom of God, redeemed by the loving grace of the God who is himself free of the cosmos, consistently differentiates the truth of existence that has become visible in the philosophers♦ experience of *athanatizein* [immortalizing, as in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b35]. Ibid., 316.

Finally, the insistent exclusivity of putative ❖Christian❖ (doctrinal) truth, Voegelin tempered with the mystic❖s tolerance as expressed by Jean Bodin who wrote: ❖Do not allow conflicting opinions about religion to carry you away; only bear in mind this fact: genuine religion is nothing other than the sincere direction of a cleansed mind toward God.❖¹¹ [11]

And the universality of Christ he grandly understood in accord with Thomas Aquinas who ❖asks ❖whether Christ be the head of all men❖ (*ST* III.8.2), and [who] answers unequivocally that he is the head of all men, indeed, and that consequently the Mystical Body of the Church consists of all men who have, and will have, existed from the beginning of the world to its end....[Thus] the symbolism of *Incarnation* would express the experience, with a date in history, of God reaching into man and revealing Him as the Presence that is the *flow of Presence* from the beginning of the world to its end. History is Christ written large.❖¹² [12]

¹¹ [11] Jean Bodin❖s 1563 letter to Jean Bautru as quoted in Sandoz, *Voegelinian Revolution*, 268, 276n37.

¹² [12] Eric Voegelin ❖Immortality: Experience and Symbol,❖ in *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 12:78. The symbolism of the divine experienced as ❖flowing presence" is fully developed in Eric Voegelin, ❖Eternal Being in Time,❖ in *Anamnesis*, ed. David Walsh, *Collected Works*, 6:312-37 esp. 329-30. Cf. Paul Caringella, ❖Voegelin: Philosopher of Divine Presence,❖ in *Eric Voegelin❖s Significance for the Modern Mind*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (LSU Press, 1991), 174-205. Voegelin routinely referred to Jesus as ❖the Savior❖ and ❖the Messiah❖ in the first volume of *History of Political Ideas*, written in the early 1940s; e. g. Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas I: Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis, *Collected Works*, 19:108, 109, 119, 151f, 153, 162f, 182f. Among important late writings reflecting upon the meaning of Christ as revealed in Scripture see esp. ❖The Gospel and Culture,❖ in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, *Collected Works*, 12:172-212, with particular attention to the analysis of Colossians 2:9 at 192ff, and again in ❖The Beginning and the Beyond,❖ *Collected Works*, 28:173-232 where Voegelin writes: ❖The Christ is the mystery of God in reality; in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; for in him the divine reality, the *theotes*, is present in its whole fulness (*pan to pleroma*); and by responding to this maximal fulness through faith, all men will achieve the fulness of their own existence (*pepleromenoi*)❖ (183).

