

"We Do Not Know from Where":  
Transcendence and Openness in Burke and Voegelin

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DRAFT PAPER  
Prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Eric Voegelin Society  
during the 2010 meeting of the American Political Science Association  
Washington, DC

This paper will not draw the writings of Edmund Burke and Eric Voegelin into a pleasant harmony. Indeed, we cannot evade the fact that despite what may seem to us to have been his ample opportunity, Voegelin never devoted much attention at all to Burke at all. Such silence speaks volumes. Michael P. Federici captured the difficulty we encounter as we regard these two writers when he observed that comparing Burke and Voegelin reveals “perplexing and enigmatic” features in Voegelin’s relationship to the conservative tradition identified with Burke, even as Federici was able to identify and delineate several apparent similarities between Burke and Voegelin.<sup>1</sup> But, despite those similarities, very few connections between Burke and Voegelin can be found and, consequently, very few attempts to link them have been made. Perhaps that is as it should be. Indeed, so far as any contemporary attempts go, the four pages that Federici devotes to the attempt stand almost perfectly alone.

Yet, with appropriate notes of caution now sounded, perhaps still it should not seem so unreasonable to spend a little effort on a comparison between two figures known for flavoring their responses to revolutionary movements with Christian religious accents. We need not go so far as Bruce Frohnen, a formidable scholar of Burke’s writings, as to reduce Voegelin to a “religious thinker.”<sup>2</sup> We need only observe that Burke and Voegelin each saw danger in the rejection of what Burke styled the “invisible world” and what Voegelin so familiarly described as “transcendence.”<sup>3</sup> We can note, to push the point further, that each of those descriptions

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 153. Concerning Burke and Voegelin, Federici observes that, “Like Burke, Voegelin is reacting to revolutionary movements that are disrupting the foundations of Western political order. Both men identify the core of modern revolutionary movements to be a pseudo-spirituality that rejects genuine transcendence. They both hold sober and realistic views of human nature and politics that are grounded in historical experience”(153).

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism: The Legacy of Burke and Tocqueville* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Burke, “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” *The French Revolution: 1790-1794*, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke VIII, eds. L.G. Mitchell and Paul Langford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 147. Voegelin’s use of “transcendence” is so common that there is little to be gained from singling out a representative quotation. The curious reader might look to the dozens of times Voegelin recurs to the description alone in: Eric Voegelin, “Anamnesis,” *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M.J. Hanak and

makes use of or, at least, echoes that strain of the Christian religious tradition commonly described as apophatic, the negative way.

Neither Burke nor Voegelin was a mystic in the style of John of the Cross or Teresa of Avilla. In fact, neither Burke nor Voegelin really was a mystic in any way we ordinarily would understand the term. Yet, what Burke and Voegelin did share with the great mystics was an openness to mystery, a sense of its supreme importance as human beings engage and inhabit a reality beyond their designs of control. Mystery always has been a constituent of human affairs, of course, from the prehistoric wonder at the thunderstorm to the physicists' quest for a unified theory. All of these have evoked in humans an awestruck sense of a larger reality we do not comprehend fully.<sup>4</sup> Yet, perhaps we can begin by observing that such a strong need to distort and corrupt the place of mystery in human consciousness itself verifies the vital role that openness to mystery plays in our human experience. We may even go further to observe that to take mystery seriously may promise no new knowledge of reality or privileged glimpse of the Divine Ground, but Burke and Voegelin each make strong cases that it can produce insight and understanding needed in human affairs.

So, instead of pursuing an ill-advised course that would draw Burke and Voegelin together despite their differences, exaggerating what are important though slight similarities, perhaps it is more fitting that we should put the matter in this way: despite their considerable differences and because of some key similarities, we can look to Burke and Voegelin both as authors who separately, across distances of time, space, and intellectual perspective, verified the need that we should turn to mystery when we take up philosophic or political questions. Indeed,

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Gerhart Niemeyer, ed. David Walsh, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* 6 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Choosing the example of the quest for a unified theory is no coincidence, of course. The very nature of the quest has a Promethean, gnostic character (one theory to explain all physical reality), and physicists themselves are quite blunt about what they seek when they describe the object of their quest, the Higgs boson, as "the God particle."

whatever impels us to doubt the appropriateness of comparing Burke and Voegelin only ratifies the necessity that we should compare them, for it makes their agreement about the primacy of mystery all the more striking.

If Burke and Voegelin can be drawn into such a colloquy about the vital role of mystery in human affairs, we shall have succeeded to assert that openness to mystery is the reply to the philosophical disorders both Burke and Voegelin diagnosed, and there at least they share an important common feature.

### Eric Voegelin

Despite the considerable importance of openness and mystery in Eric Voegelin's ideas, perhaps what is most striking as we begin to consider the matter is Voegelin's profound caution wherever he takes up mystery or mysticism, a carefulness that sometimes verges on disdain for the mystic. Most particularly and notably, we can look to Voegelin's regard for Joachim de Fiore, whom Voegelin describes as a "mystic" but whose intuitions Voegelin found to be the archetype of gnostic expression.<sup>5</sup> Openness to mystery, itself, is no particular value in Voegelin's thought, for such apparent openness may be only delusion, or may mask far more nefarious intentions.

In order to understand Voegelin more clearly, we must first pay more careful attention to words like "mystery" and "openness" so that we can identify their value for his political ideas, and how he used them. Several critics have found Voegelin in debt to Henri Bergson for the

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Volume III: The Later Middle Ages*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 21, ed. David Walsh (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 239. For a representative treatment of Joachim de Fiore in Voegelin's *oeuvre*, see chapter IV in: Eric Voegelin, "The New Science of Politics," *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions, The New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 5, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 178ff.

beginnings of his understanding of “openness.”<sup>6</sup> Bergson himself had explored the Christian mystical writers in his early life, and had would later describe how he had found in them “an echo in his own mind.”<sup>7</sup> In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson distinguished between the “closed society” and the “open society,” finding that the open society is one that “is deemed in principle to embrace all humanity....[It is] a dream dreamt, now and again, by chosen souls,” but it is not the fanciful dream of the gnostic.<sup>8</sup> The aim of such a society is that mysticism should “transform humanity,” but if it succeeds it will “do so only by passing on from one man to another, slowly,” the *l’ame ouverte*: an ‘open heart’ “toward reality,” as Voegelin described Bergson’s meaning.<sup>9</sup> The meaning cannot be contained or captured by language, but must live and breathe in concrete experience. Openness, therefore, “demands receptivity to the experience of theophany, or the awareness of the divine presence in the consciousness of men.”<sup>10</sup> Openness, when we understand it this way, is not openness to whatever happens to come along. It is a particular openness to highest reality, the Divine Ground of which human reality is a constituent without regard for time, space, or experience. All human reality is constituted by the Divine Ground because the Divine Ground is the fullness of all reality, and this is the sense in which Bergson can speak of an open society as one that embraces “all humanity.” The

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<sup>6</sup> Federici, 228. Also: Dante Germino, *Political Philosophy and the Open Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 1ff. Of course, in *Autobiographical Reflections* Voegelin praised Jean Bodin and Henri Bergson as being “for me the representative figures for the understanding order in times of spiritual disorder,” at: Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 34, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 139.

<sup>7</sup> John MacQuarrie, *Two Worlds Are Ours: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 235.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra, Cloudesley Brereton, and W. Worsfall Carter (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 267.

<sup>9</sup> Bergson, 235. Also: Eric Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 12, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 273.

<sup>10</sup> Germino, 19.

*realissimum* is available to those who have the ability and desire to experience it wherever, whenever, and by whatever means it offers itself.<sup>11</sup>

Because the experience of the Divine Ground is so essential to Voegelin's account of human affairs, there is little surprise in finding that his treatment of spiritual mysticism to be so deferential that he seems not to feel the need even to offer direct words of praise.<sup>12</sup> His regard is communicated casually, as though it requires no explanation at all. Voegelin compares John Wycliffe unfavorably with "a great mystic like [Meister] Eckhart," and describes Nicholas of Cusa as a "humanist and a mystic, with a great metaphysical temperament" who "had roots in the *theologica negativa*," a theological outlook which, itself, Voegelin appears to have found to be praiseworthy.<sup>13</sup> We find negative spirituality present in the Amon Hymns of Dynasty XIX about which, in *Israel and Revelation*, Voegelin observed that the Egyptians employed *theologia negativa* to describe Amon, "circumscribing the nature of a transcendent god," as evidence of the procession out of a cosmological understanding toward differentiation.<sup>14</sup> We hear Voegelin's regard for the *via negativa* of the mystics in some of his early correspondence, in which he wrote that, "The philosophical process never begins with the categories of being but, as with every important thinker, with the rationalization of the experiences of God by means of the mystical

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<sup>11</sup> "[O]penness does not imply an attitude of neutrality on questions of truth. Rather, openness entails an awareness of the character of reality as a process in the Between and entails an obligation to strive to maximize the pull of the Divine Ground and to minimize the counterpull of evil and death. Openness is an existential orientation in which the theophanic experiences are regarded as authoritative in terms of illuminating the structures of reality"(Germino, 25). Also: "Open existence, openness. In Voegelin, the mode of existence in which consciousness is consistently and unreservedly oriented toward truth and toward the transcendent pole of the tension of existence," in: Eugene Webb, "Glossary of Terms Used in Eric Voegelin's Writings," *Autobiographical Reflections*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 34, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 170.

<sup>12</sup> "Theophany. A manifestation of the divine," in: Webb, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Voegelin, *HPI* III, 169, 257.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume I: Israel and Revelation*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 14, ed. Maurice P. Hogan (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 126.

*via negativa*.”<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Eduard Baumgarten, Voegelin was even more unreserved. He wrote, “I do believe that the mystic’s *via negativa* is indeed a genuine way to the *fruitio Dei* and not an illusion, and that in this way an essence is obtained,” even as he added, cryptically, that “I doubt the way in which the Christian thinkers believe [it] leads to the *Realissimum*.”<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps that last note of skepticism about whether, ultimately, the *via negativa* can be trusted to guide us toward the *Realissimum* was a prefiguration of how Voegelin’s *Order and History* would articulate the distinction between the pneumatic differentiation of Paul and the noetic differentiation of Plato, who “kept the theophanic event in balance with the experience of the cosmos.”<sup>17</sup> The nature of Paul’s theophany drew him in the same direction as Plato’s experience yet, for Paul, the Vision of the Resurrected was “more than a theophanic event in the Metaxy; it [was] the beginning of” a process toward realizing the perfection of man in divine reality, as opposed to preserving the tension of the Metaxy and participating in divine reality, as Plato did.<sup>18</sup> Absent a noetic check on his experience of pneumatic depth in theophany, Paul inverted the structure of the experience. For Plato, “the derivation of historical meaning from the meaning of personal existence” follows the noetic pattern that anchors the experience of theophany in cognitive truth (as distinguished from the more opaque existential truth we find in Paul), even as it left a door open to the later pneumatic differentiation.<sup>19</sup> Paul found himself “engulfed” by his experience, and articulated that sensation in terms markedly different from Plato’s, drawing the theophanic event “into a sharper focus than did the philosopher’s exegesis

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Voegelin, “To Friedrich Engel-Janosi (1 February 1943),” *Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 29, trans. William Petropoulos, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 354.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Voegelin, “To Eduard Baumgarten (13 September 1936),” *Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 29, trans. William Petropoulos, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 354.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 17, ed. Michael Franz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2000), 303.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 317.

of the noetic theophany.”<sup>20</sup> Voegelin leaves little doubt that these features rendered the Pauline Vision of the Resurrected the most remarkable theophanic account in human history. Yet, no matter the extraordinary document Paul has provided, his having been “engulfed” by the experience left his account susceptible to misuse. “Paul was not a philosopher,” and theophany, whose meaning is “so badly obscured today by theological, metaphysical, and ideological overlayings” is “rich” with “potential for misunderstandings and deformations.”<sup>21</sup> The pneumatic insight into theophany is essential to Voegelin’s analysis, and yet the rise of egophanic revolt and pneumatopathology subsequent to Paul’s writings alert us to dangers that accompany the Pauline differentiation that has constituted history throughout the Christian era.

It is amid these considerations and with a chastened zeal for what the *via negativa* can reveal reliably to us that we must engage Voegelin’s treatment of openness, mystery, and transcendence. The difficulty is to come to grips with what is meant by ‘theophany’ as an experience, what is meant by ‘religious experience’ as an event in human consciousness. There can be no doubting that in the encounter with God a human being is at some disadvantage. The full totality of God’s nature and even aspects of the encounter, itself, must remain unknowable to a mortal human and so, perhaps invariably, we begin to speak in the language of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, burying oneself “in a cloud of forgetting all creatures that ever God made that you mayest direct thine intent to God, Himself.”<sup>22</sup> This is the altogether unsurprising way in which the human being who pursues mystical experience finds himself “engulfed” and “overwhelmed” by theophany. The experience lends itself to the apophatic characterization of a God who, even in the theophanic encounter, only can be understood haltingly by defining the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 306, 307, 316.

<sup>22</sup> In a contemporary edition, at: Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 99. Quoted by Voegelin at: “Anamnesis,” 57.



negative space that we can find around him, “circumscribing the nature of a transcendent god” (as with Amon), when we fix our attention on the encounter to the exclusion of other influences. Of course, given the imperfections of human perception, when we have a religious experience it is at least possible that our gaze will slip away from its trans-worldly object and fall on some innerworldly one.

It was for these reasons that Voegelin devoted the beginning of *The Political Religions* to the “anthropological exposition of the problem of religious experience.”<sup>23</sup> Religious experience is a “problem” because it challenges the critical consciousness, which cannot encompass and contain the religious experience rationally. Indeed, religious experience itself is an area of human activity as contingent and highly fraught as it is indispensable to the search for order. As Voegelin describes them, the kinds of religious experiences that bring us to “states of excitation” and prompt us to speak in terms of “primal emotions” in the way that they overwhelm us emerge from such a variable range of origins (“from the *unio mystica* in spirit to the exaltation in community; to the dedication to the fraternity of companions; to the loving extension of oneself into the landscape, the plants and the animals; up to carnal convulsions in the sexual act and bloodlust”) that they tend to promote “misunderstandings and misrepresentations arising...[from] an inexhaustible supply of experiences as well as rationalizations and systematizations.”<sup>24</sup> As it was for Paul, so it is for any of us.

Given the level of uncertainty, perhaps we would expect that it would seem at least expedient to dispense with mystery, openness, and theophany for all of the considerable mischief that misunderstanding, misrepresenting, and abusing them has brought about. Despite those

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<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Gebhardt, introduction to *Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 29, trans. William Petropoulos, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Voegelin, “The Political Religions,” *Modernity Without Restraint*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin 5, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 31-33 *supra*.

factors, Voegelin's lifetime of research may be described, in the main, as describing the structures of consciousness in which the divine-human interplay occurs in the light of these differentiations we have reviewed. Even Paul, who experienced that most remarkable theophany, was compelled to resort to apophatic descriptions of the God manifested to him in the experience.<sup>25</sup> For whether we discuss the theophanic manifestation of God or the mystic's quest for the Divine Ground, once we begin to commit those experiences to words we already lose the most vital elements of the reality that underlies them. Even symbols only can capture so much of that reality in human terms. "Words and meanings are just as much a part of the reality to which they refer," and even the most sublime and articulate symbols possess a "deformative character" we can be tempted to overlook.<sup>26</sup> To describe the human experience of higher reality is perhaps as impossible as to summon that experience at will. Both, in some critical way, restrict the freedom of the divine movement while substituting for that freedom a human desire to define it within restrictive, artificial parameters.

To say what can be said about the reality that lies behind theophany, to explore the rich language of symbols we have developed to describe the mystery at the heart of existence to which the mystic is open and attuned, is the challenge, finally, that Voegelin's work may be said to take up. This also is why the differentiation of mysticism occupies such an important place in Voegelin's analysis of spiritual disorder, a differentiation that only became possible once Paul cast his theophanic encounter into the terms of pneumatic insight. To understand our consciousness of the mystery not as an artifact which can be quantified but as a "flow" or a "process" that begins in a Middle and radiates toward Beginning and Beyond in its open-ended

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<sup>25</sup> Rom. 11:33-36: "How rich and deep are the wisdom and the knowledge of God. We cannot reach to the root of His decisions or ways. Who has ever known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor?" Or, 1 Cor. 13:12: Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can only know imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am known myself."

<sup>26</sup> Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, Order and History V (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1987), 17, 33.

quest to grasp at the *Realissimum* is the beginning of any serious effort to comprehend the reality we inhabit. Mysticism, openness to mystery, stands athwart the human search for order: it has become impossible to avoid it.

### Edmund Burke<sup>27</sup>

The least we can say about Edmund Burke's religious faith is that he was not dogmatically orthodox in his Christianity. The great diversity of religious influences in his life gave him reasons to appreciate many different forms of Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, his religious vision was so broad that his view of non-Christian religions was more than admiring, as well.<sup>29</sup> The least we can say about his political thought is that religious faith was essential to it. An important question for Burke scholarship, therefore, must concern how Burke understood religion as much as it should concern what use he put it to in politics.

Some of Burke's most youthful writings joined him in an ongoing debate about religious enthusiasm, and indications in his more mature writings suggest that he never fully abandoned his interest in the subject.<sup>30</sup> Enthusiasm was a seventeenth century religious phenomenon with

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<sup>27</sup> Portions of this section have been accepted for publication and will appear at: Steven P. Millies, "The Inner Light of Edmund Burke: A Biographical Approach to Burke's Religious Faith and Epistemology," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 22 (in press).

<sup>28</sup> Burke's mother, Mary Nagle, was a Roman Catholic, as was the rest of her family. According to the custom of the time in mixed marriages, Burke's sisters were raised according to their mother's faith, while Burke and his brothers were raised according to the Protestant faith of their father, Richard Burke. Burke married Jane Nugent, the daughter of Catholic physician Dr. Christopher Nugent.

<sup>29</sup> Burke praised Islamic political systems for the understanding of law that originated in their religious tradition, observing that the British constitution "is not, in many parts, as correct in its distinctions and wise in its provisions as the Mahometan law," at: Edmund Burke, "Speech in Reply—Second Day: Friday, May 30, 1794," *The Works of The Rt. Honourable Edmund Burke* XI, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1884), 251. Elsewhere, Burke observed that, "wherever the Hindoo Religion has been established, that Country has been flourishing," at: Edmund Burke, "Opening of Impeachment—15 February 1788," *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* VI, ed. Paul Langford (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996), 305.

<sup>30</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, perhaps alone before this study, has addressed the role of enthusiasm in Burke in: J.G.A. Pocock, "Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution," *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* 3 (New York: Pergamon Press, 1987-1994), 19-43. Pocock identifies the "erroneous belief in personal inspiration" that Burke's contemporaries condemned as enthusiasm with the "revolutionary *transparence*" of the Jacobins, going so far as to say that "The defence of the Whig political order

roots in the classical period, certainly in the works of Montanus but perhaps also linked to Platonism. Michael Heyd is perceptive in his account of responses to enthusiasm in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when he observes that “it is a misguided historical exercise to search for a clear definition of enthusiasm, let alone to look for a well-defined movement.”<sup>31</sup> In general, we can say that enthusiasm refers to a “widespread and extremely diverse experiential phenomenon in which the self is expanded beyond its normal range of experience to contact another (e.g., mysticism).”<sup>32</sup> A religious inspiration evidently played a role in the thinking at least of a young Edmund Burke, and he used the language of enthusiasm—a term also linked to the Inner Light of Quakerism—to describe it. These passages in Burke’s youthful writings bear an at-least-arguable connection to his later writings, and it will profit us to explore those links.

Some of Burke’s earliest writings can be found in a notebook he kept with his friend Will Burke (no relation) during the 1750’s, which still can be found in the archive of Burke’s papers at the Sheffield City Library. The notebook contains some poems and several short essays whose authorship are generally clear, Edmund and Will having signed their names to most of their own works.<sup>33</sup> One of the notebook essays, titled “Religion of No Efficacy When

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therefore included a defence against enthusiasm”(26). Importantly, Pocock’s correlation of enthusiasm to the hubris of the revolutionaries recalls the way in which Voegelin alerted us to the potential errors and abuses possible after the pneumatic differentiation. As we consider Pocock’s condemnation of enthusiasm, it would be well to recall that his treatment does not cite to even one of the occasions where Burke wrote favorably about enthusiasm, to say nothing of attempting to explain them. If Burke found merit in mystical religious experiences it is certain he would have esteemed them differently from the program of disestablishment and confiscation upon which France embarked. Failing to see this distinction, in many ways, is the mark of reading Burke in close correspondence with the Scottish Enlightenment and its emphasis on religion as one among many “manners” that constitute the social order (see particularly the emphasis on religion as a means of “control” over the “progress of manners,” the notion of religion as possessing a “psychopathology” such as enthusiasm that “recur[s] from time to time,” needing the regulation of a church for restraint). This emphasis on religious faith is welcome, though unequal to and quite unlike the emphasis that this study finds Burke, himself, placed on it.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Heyd, *“Be Sober and Reasonable”: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries*, (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 5.

<sup>32</sup> *The HaperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, s.v., “ecstasy” (re-directed from “enthusiasm”).

<sup>33</sup> In 1957 H.V.F. Somerset and Cambridge University Press brought forth the first publication of the whole notebook. Excerpts from the notebook had appeared in several publications during the nineteenth century, and some have since appeared in a 1993 volume from Cambridge University Press. Microfilm reproductions of the notebook

Considered as a State Engine” by a twentieth century editor, provides Burke’s youthful treatment of enthusiasm and, though that treatment is only a few lines long, I wish to argue that it raises important possibilities. Burke wrote:

I know the Clergy shamed & frightned [*sic*] at the Imputation of Enthusiasm, endeavour to cover Religion under the Sheild [*sic*] of Reason, which will have some force with their Adversaries. But God has been pleased to give Mankind an Enthusiasm to supply the want of reason & truly [*sic*] Enthusiasm comes nearer the great & comprehensive Reason in its effects, tho not in the Manner of Operation than the Common Reason does, which works on confined narrow common & therefore plausible Topics. the [*sic*] former is the lot of very few. the [*sic*] latter is common & fit enough for common affairs, to buy & sell, to teach grammar & the like, but it is utterly unfit to meddle with Politics Divinity & Philosophy. but [*sic*] Enthusiasm is a sort of Instinct in those who possess it, that operates like all instincts, better than a mean Species of Reason. It is true indeed that enthusiasm often misleads us, so does reason too: such is the Condition of our Nature & we cant [*sic*] help it. but [*sic*] I believe that we act most when we act with all the Powers of our Soul. When we use our Enthusiasm to elevate & expand our Reasoning, & our Reasonings to check the Roving of our Enthusiasm.<sup>34</sup>

The clergy of eighteenth century Britain were “shamed & frightned” at the suggestion of enthusiasm surely because of the controversies that surrounded it. John Locke condemned enthusiasm in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>35</sup> Critics of enthusiasm were so numerous and influential that their writings would cast suspicion on anyone—conforming clergy, or not—who gave credence to ecstatic inspiration in religious faith and, presumably, elsewhere.<sup>36</sup>

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can be viewed under the title “Politics in the Age of Revolution” at a few research libraries around the globe. All citations to the notebook refer to the “Politics in the Age of Revolution” facsimile.

<sup>34</sup> “Politics in the Age of Revolution—Burke Notebook” (microfilm reel 23, WWM Burke Papers Bk P 40-47) pp. 71-73, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC I have preserved, as much as possible, Burke’s own spelling and punctuation. Note that this essay is one that is unattributed in the notebook, either to Edmund or to Will. Somerset concluded that Edmund was its author in his 1957 edition, and Ian Harris ratified that judgment in his own 1993 edition. Having reviewed the facsimile of the notebook in microform, and having compared its script to works signed by Edmund, I also am confident that Edmund Burke is the essay’s author.

<sup>35</sup> Locke defines enthusiasm as that which, “in effect...takes away both reason and revelation, and substitutes in the room of them the ungrounded fancies of a man’s own brain, and assumes them for a foundation both of opinion and conduct,” at: John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (2<sup>nd</sup> vol.), ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959), 430.

<sup>36</sup> Enthusiasm which had been such a prominent feature of the Protestant Reformation had brought so much embarrassment to the “Protestant elite” that, by the dawn of the Enlightenment, they had “adopted more secular attitudes” to distance themselves from the enthusiasts. Enthusiasm, seen this way, may “have been one of the factors contributing to the process of secularization,” at: Heyd, 274.

We can see in that notebook essay Burke's effort to moderate enthusiasm with reason, a fact which is notable not least for its embrace of enthusiasm in contrast with the prevailing trends of his day that eschewed it. But Burke's embracing enthusiasm is all the more notable for his unabashed zeal for enthusiasm, which "comes nearer the great & comprehensive Reason in its effects, tho not in the Manner of Operation than the Common Reason does." Note the relationship between enthusiasm and reason, where enthusiasm "elevate[s] & expand[s] our Reasoning," and reason merely "Check[s] the Roving of our Enthusiasm." Enthusiasm can improve our reason, whereas reason bounds and contains enthusiasm within rational limits. This relationship is dynamic and essential, and as reason and enthusiasm play off one another it is clear that the relationship is almost one between equals.

Yet what also is undeniable is the advantage possessed by enthusiasm in this relationship, being "nearer the great & comprehensive Reason in its effects." In this description certainly we can hear the echo of Burke's classical and Scholastic education, the identification of a "great and comprehensive reason," which suggests that enthusiasm—perhaps, we might call it the voice of God—must play a privileged role in human affairs. God speaks to us, and that voice should not be rated second to human reason. Humans err in our reasonings and in our enthusiasm, Burke allows. Accordingly, we possess both faculties and, as Burke has it, when we act "with all the Powers of our Soul" (it is notable he did not say 'Mind') we might come to more certain conclusions about the questions we face in human life.

Burke did not define enthusiasm as a faculty of the mind in the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) in the way that he enumerated others. He did, however, use 'enthusiasm' consistently in the sense of a faculty of the soul in the *Enquiry*. Describing the effects of "Clearness and Obscurity as They Affect the

Passions,” Burke noted that “a great clearness helps but little toward affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever.”<sup>37</sup> Burke defined sublimity along a parallel with enthusiasm as that which overwhelms the senses.<sup>38</sup> The *Enquiry* is, as much as anything, a Burkean statement about the finitude of human intellect, and of his faith that sublime forces exist which are capable of overwhelming us. While the *Enquiry* is remembered properly for the influence it exerted on nineteenth century arts and literature, it is otherwise useful for how it extends beyond those aesthetic concerns and seeks to speak of more general truths about human nature that include politics. And, so the point is not lost, the character of the sublime appears to embrace a kind of wonder and awe at those things we experience which point toward a larger reality beyond our control.

In the critical passage of the *Reflections* where Burke offered his account of the established church as a restraint on those who rule he wrote that those who hold power must defer to “sublime principles” and “they should not look to the paltry pelf of the moment nor to the temporary and transient praise of the vulgar, but to a solid, permanent existence in the permanent part of their nature.”<sup>39</sup> Considering the energy Burke had devoted to the definition of the “sublime” earlier in his life, his recurrence to that terminology should not pass without note,

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<sup>37</sup> *Enquiry*, 60. Also, while writing that “Words May Affect Without Raising Image,” Burke wrote of a sightless poet that he is “as much affected by his own descriptions as any that reads them can be; and yet is affected with this strong enthusiasm by things of which he neither has, nor can possibly have any idea further than that of a bare sound” (*Enquiry*, 168-169).

<sup>38</sup> Burke wrote in the *Enquiry* of “Vastness” and “Infinity” as also evoking the sublime, just as “Obscurity,” “Uniformity,” “Magnitude,” and “Magnificence” also create in the mind an experience of sublimity. An experience of sublimity “so entirely fill[s] the mind] with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it”(57). Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a mid-eighteenth century definition of sublime as “Affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.” Burke himself did not link this account to the operation of enthusiasm, nor in any direct way to a description of God. We should note that the *Enquiry* was a tract more concerned with documenting the effects of the sublime and the beautiful on the human mind than with accounting for the origins of these phenomena, so Burke’s silence on ultimate causes is at least explicable.

<sup>39</sup> *WSEB* VIII:143, “Reflections on the Revolution in France.”

particularly when the use of it placed sublimity in such close correspondence with religion, and in such a critical political context. In these ways we can suggest that Burke's religious faith was linked to his account of sublimity, and his conception of politics was rooted deeply in it. When we see Burke describe the sublime or the working of enthusiasm, in both cases he takes up a range of experiences that fit broadly into the description of mysticism. The sublime can be understood as a kind of "peripheral" experience, one "preparatory" to a deeper mystical experience in its evocation of a higher reality. Enthusiasm could go so far as to include "visions and ecstasies," but just as well encompasses the *unio mystica* even as it is achieved through mystical contemplation.<sup>40</sup>

Burke's underlying affirmation of the experience of sublimity is what is important for us, and his reluctance to trace the experience back "to the throne of God himself" is indicative of why.<sup>41</sup> Sublimity, however it is accounted for, evokes the sense of insufficiency that kept Burke from attempting to seek beyond the "depth" appropriate for human inquiry through the use of reason. Beyond the bounds of "the immediately sensible qualities of things" lies a realm unsuited to human powers and in which the human mind only can be impotent before the task of understanding.<sup>42</sup> This unmistakable intellectual deference, this sense that there are experiences and ideas not fit for unaided human cognition, must necessarily have consequences beyond the realm of aesthetics. And, no matter how important the mysticism that underlies these prejudices was to Burke's ideas, like Voegelin he was deeply cautious about interpreting mystical intuition.

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<sup>40</sup> Here I rely on Bernard McGinn's introduction to *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, which he edited for Modern Library. McGinn classifies two categories of mystical experiences, those which are "peripheral and preparatory" and those which achieve the *unio mystica* even to the dramatic extent of producing "visions and ecstasies," in: Bernard McGinn, introduction to *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), xiiiiff.

<sup>41</sup> "That great chain of causes, which linking one to another even to the throne of God himself, can never be unraveled [*sic*] by any industry of ours" (*Enquiry*, 129). No finer statement of the finitude of human intellect can be found in the *Enquiry*, itself a magnificent statement on that subject.

<sup>42</sup> *Enquiry*, 130.



Burke had yet another religious influence we should note: he attended a Quaker school at Ballitore operated by Abraham Shackleton from the age of twelve (1741) until the age of fifteen (1744), crucial formative years in a young man's life during which Burke made a lifelong friend of Richard Shackleton, the son of the headmaster. Burke's quarrels with Richard Shackleton on the matter of Quaker faith are well known, and so there is no grounds on which to claim Burke was a secret Quaker (as so many have claimed he was a secret Catholic). Surely the first passage from Burke's corpus on the topic of Quakerism that will come to the mind of anyone sufficiently familiar with his writings will be this passage from a 1744 letter to Richard Shackleton:

I don't like that part of your letter wherein you say you had the Testimonies of well doing in your Breast, whenever such motions rise again endeavour to suppress em, it is one of the Subtilest Strategems that the Enemy of mankind uses to delude us, that by lulling us into a false peace his conquest may be the easier.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, Burke here refers to the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light when he refers to Shackleton's "Testimonies of well doing," and he refers to it "in terms which must have been somewhat wounding to his Quaker friend," according to Conor Cruise O'Brien, who presents this quotation as evidence that Burke is "distrustful of human nature, and of those who are confident in their own virtue."<sup>44</sup> This view, slanted somewhat toward a more Scholastic perspective of human problems, offers an incomplete and unfair account of Burke's feelings on the subject of a mystical encounter with the divine.

The November 1744 letter to Richard Shackleton strikes a strong note of caution about ecstatic inspiration, and it is a note that we do well to take. Burke expressed his worry that his friend should take care in those moments when the Light spoke through him because what

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<sup>43</sup> WS I:36, "To Richard Shackleton—1 November 1744."

<sup>44</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 25.

Richard Shackleton heard as the voice of God might only be his own voice, or the voice of an even more malevolent character. This is good advice, especially against the backdrop of the rational tradition of Christianity which holds that God and God's requirements of us must be reasonable. The sensible path Burke recommends to his friend, notably, was not to discard enthusiastic inspiration.<sup>45</sup> Instead, Burke urged his friend to live in "the state of a paenitent because the most righteous of us is no better than a Sinner," and then directed Shackleton's attention to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican found at Luke 18:10-14a.<sup>46</sup> That parable is an interesting choice, for the contrast between the Pharisee and the publican reinforces the importance of humility. When we gaze back upon the manner in which Burke's dispositions were premised entirely on asserting the finitude of human intellect and competencies, the letter to Shackleton actually adds force to the human reliance upon divine grace and inspiration, so long as it is balanced by its consultation with reason. Ecstatic inspiration alone should not be trusted, and its directives should be suppressed pending some other validation (just as reason alone is insufficient to guide us).

The November, 1744 letter to Shackleton is especially interesting when we compare it with a letter Burke wrote to him on July 7, 1744 concerning a man who had killed himself in despair over an unrequited love:

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<sup>45</sup> Burke did urge his friend to "suppress" that inspiration, but it we should be careful in our evaluation of his choice of words. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests as the most straightforward definition, "To put down by force or authority," though probably the secondary definition, "To subdue (a feeling, though desire, habit)" is more contextually appropriate. Indeed, we might imagine a range of circumstances in which one might subdue a feeling in the way that one suspends judgment while awaiting better or more complete information. In view of the additional remarks Burke made in the Nov. 1, 1744 letter, and in view of Burke's far larger body of writing that recommends the passions and affective impulses to our consideration, it seems that we are right to read his call for suppression with some latitude.

<sup>46</sup> *Corr.* I:36. The parable reads: "Two people went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other."

This accident has altered my Sentiments concerning love, so that I now am not only convinced that there is such a thing as love, but that it may very probably be the source of as many misfortunes as are usually ascribed to it this [*sic*] may I think be a sufficient example to shew to what Lengths an unrestrained Passion tho virtuous in itself may carry a man and with how much craft and surety our great Enemy endeavours by all means to work our Destruction, how he lays a bait in every thing, and how much need we have to care Lest he make too sure of us, as is the case of that unfortunate youth.<sup>47</sup>

We might read Burke's cautions about "an unrestrained Passion" as another repudiation of the Inner Light, such as in his letter to Shackleton of 1 November 1744, especially as we see again his care that "our great Enemy" (just as in November of 1744 he would write of the "Enemy of mankind") might be baiting us in our passions. But we might also reasonably assume that Burke no more intended by his notebook essay of the 1750's to cast off enthusiasm than he wished in this 1744 letter to do away with love. The question seems to be not one of whether passion plays a role, since he nowhere suggests it does not. Instead the question concerns how passion may be restrained and, in the notebook essay, by teaming enthusiasm and reason he may have found a tolerable answer.

We might suggest that, for Burke, history provides a process of purposeful divine revelation to humanity, the speaking of the voice of God subtly but discernibly through habits, customs, and traditions that have withstood long human practice and have given assent to the guidance of a providential hand. Burke's historicism has a sort of mystical quality, for history and tradition are for Burke the medium through which the divine reveals itself most typically. This self-revelation of the divine through history is a participatory enterprise, a relation between man and God. The most interesting passage in Burke's notebook essay may be that note of aristocratic privilege we hear in Burke's assertion that enthusiasm "is a sort of Instinct in those who possess it." We might be tempted to assume that the instinct is bestowed unequally in the way that intelligence or athletic prowess are possessed in different degrees. Burke has not left us

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<sup>47</sup> *Corr.* I:28

a document sufficient to answering that question. But we can say with certainty that all of us live in history. The instinctive awareness of the solidity of tradition is available to us when we open ourselves to it. Those who trust their reason will be blinded to their instinctive, affective, emotional response to the aggregated wisdom of the human community by their own hubris. Those who will partner their reason with their enthusiasm can see a more complete picture.

“We Do Not Know From Where”

Eric Voegelin remarked in 1976 that, “We all experience our own existence as not existing out of itself but as coming from somewhere even if we do now know from where.”<sup>48</sup> By 1976, *The Ecumenic Age* had been in the hands of readers for two years, and Voegelin had entered the most mature and carefully-developed phase of his lifelong reflections. The source of existence, as much as our perception of that source, was the question to which his life’s work had redounded. Edmund Burke’s life and career ended on a less valedictory note, instead finding him on the losing side of the Revolution in France and, at least at the time of his death, apparently on the wrong side of history. History has judged Burke’s response to the revolution more kindly than he might have expected at the end of his life, and the reason is perhaps also reminds us a bit of Voegelin. Edmund Burke’s lifetime of political reflection reached its culmination in his mature and articulate reply to the revolutionaries. Burke’s conception of political life—indeed, of all human reality—comes to forceful expression through language that evokes his more youthful treatments of religious mystery. Burke observed in the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1791) that “The States of the Christian World have grown up ... by a great

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<sup>48</sup> *Conversations with Eric Voegelin*, ed. R. Eric O’Connor (Montreal: Thomas More Institute Papers, 1980), 9.

variety of accidents,” and were not formed upon a blueprint.<sup>49</sup> Meandering through history by unseen design, these accidents are in fact the greatest strength of ancient institutions because they are not contrived to seek some particular end. These ancient institutions seek “the greatest possible variety, and...become in a manner infinite” in the ends they can accommodate, far better suited than any gnostic scheme to suit the vast and unforeseeable blend of human ends that multiply and transform with the passage of time.<sup>50</sup>

That Burkean sense of the unseeable action of Providence, the wandering design of history that breeds epiphanies and eccentricities, recalls the openness of Bergson to a reality human beings neither can capture nor fully comprehend. Reality discloses order if we can be patient enough to search it out, rather than rush the matter to create an order of our own which quickly enough reveals itself to be disorder. This is the core of Burkean historicism, the key ingredient of his political thought, but it cannot fail to appear quite at home with Eric Voegelin’s more well-developed account of the role of openness and mystery as we seek to discern the order of reality. So many differences between Burke and Voegelin easily can be counted, yet on this matter so essential to both they do agree. We cannot account for the source of order, nor say much very definitely about how order discloses itself to us. Still, if we take the investigation of politics and reality seriously, we must attend to mystery and what we can learn through our encounter with it, even though “we do now know from where” that knowledge arises.

Some rather straightforwardly obvious conclusions suggest themselves. First, it should appear quite clear that this paper does not draw Voegelin and Burke into any more close proximity than we saw them in its earliest pages. Apart from difference of history and culture, the circumstances of their times and educations, Burke and Voegelin certainly undertook

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<sup>49</sup> *WSEB* IX:287 “Second Letter on a Regicide Peace.”

<sup>50</sup> *WSEB* IX:287 “Second Letter on a Regicide Peace.”

different methods to solve different problems. One was a statesman who spent a life embroiled in public affairs and political controversies; the other was a philosopher who devoted a lifetime to penetrating political questions as questions of existence to their deepest levels. Still, that conclusion alone suggests a further, second conclusion if the foregoing argument about openness and mystery has been persuasive at all. That conclusion is that the primacy of openness to mystery in both writers, despite their differences, calls out for serious attention. If such different writers from diverse perspectives can be brought to common agreement among their most fundamental presuppositions as political thinkers, we ought to take note. However, this second conclusion raises an even more perplexing issue as we think through its ramifications to anticipate a third and final conclusion.

It is startling to consider how little attention the openness to mystery and mystical experience receive in political writing. In two centuries from Burke to Voegelin, very little progress has been made in this area among political writers who have, in the main, not even taken up much the question. Indeed, Bruce Frohnen's reduction of Voegelin to a "religious thinker" is indicative of how deeply the presumptions of rationalism (whether its genus be scholastic or Enlightenment) have penetrated even among writers who take Burke and Voegelin seriously. The problem, perhaps, is easy to trace. Voegelin, himself, has frightened off more than a few readers not just for his terminology, but also for the difficult mystical character of the questions he undertakes. Mystery is not an easy subject about which to write or to speak, as the name should imply. Then again, to discover what we can learn about the nature of reality and our existence in politics should not be easy, should demand the most serious attention of people with serious minds.

Among Burkeans and Voegelinians, then, the challenge is to articulate the need to press forward the exploration of mystery among scholars of political thought. If the comparison of Burke to Voegelin yields anything for us, it must yield us this insight that to pursue mystery is essential, and that far too little work has been done in this direction to date.