

An Agnostic View of Voegelin's Gnostic Calvin

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The genius of Eric Voegelin is perhaps most apparent in his insight that the crisis of Modernity springs less from the naturalistic relativism that followed modern science than from unrestrained religious absolutism. The horrors of the twentieth century thus arise out of religious claims to truth. According to Voegelin, there are two sides to this genesis. On the one hand, the growing millennial speculation fueled in the late Medieval period engenders apocalyptic claims by political leaders; on the other, the civilizational instability in the West tempts political followers to grasp the straws of apocalyptic claims. The religious dimension here thus exists both in the claims to divine knowledge and in the desperate hope for historical salvation in the face of historical evidence to the contrary.

In laying out his argument, Voegelin (and I am taking him to be largely consistent through his published works here) makes two rather startling claims. First, the "Gnosticism" (that is, the desperate attachment to the fantasy of historical salvation) of the Modern age has its-mostly dormant-roots in the Christian experience, and second, that the Protestant Reformation-particularly the parts in that movement played by Luther and Calvin-most explicitly nourished its awakened growth.

In this paper, I shall then take issue with Voegelin's analysis in these two respects. While I agree that the Christian faith appears to bring to the table a certain temptation to millennial claims, I find Voegelin's argument for the necessary (to restrain millennial claims) civilizational accommodation of the church and the "spiritual stamina" of the faithful to be both questionable and, in a way, self-contradictory. In addition, I question his characterization of Calvin's project as Gnostic anti-intellectualism and as manifesting an obvious will to power.

Gnosticism. the Christian Church- and Civilizational Domicile?

As most in this audience will know, Voegelin's understanding of the universality of human experience points to the existential tension which arises from living in the Platonic metaxy (the "in-between"). Representative human beings, working out of the civilizational (historical) context in which they find themselves, express this otherwise inexpressible tension symbolically, that is, metaphorically or allegorically. Various expressions of human relationship to the transcendent thus divide into at least three-we should say, healthy -- categories: the cosmological, the anthropological, and the soteriological. In the first instance, human relationship with the divine runs through the omphalos provided by the imperial, and semi-divine, ruler. In the second, the representative human being is the Platonic philosopher or the Aristotelian *spoudaios*, the fully-developed, intellectually and spiritually attuned creature who tastes of divine reality but properly recognizes his lack of complete connection with it. Through him surrounding society-if it will-sees the measure or standard of human excellence. In the last instance, the Christian experience, the Person of divine reality touches whom he

will, though almost certainly NOT those who profess either worldly authority or developed intellect. In each case, of course, human sanity rests with recognition of both contact and distance from divine presence. The truth is thus the tension, and the proper response to the truth is one of patient and modest attunement.

With Gnosticism, a Christian heresy, we get in the West a perversion of proper human response to the divine. Existential tension is ignored and modesty abandoned. Humanity claims divinity, both divine perspective and divine power. Human salvation is self-salvation; divinity becomes merely a tool of human pretense. The result is megalomania, that is, insanity, an insanity that ultimately drives the revolutionary, and totalitarian pretensions of the Modern age (e.g., *NSP*, 107ff.; *EA*, 18-20, 27-29).

While Gnosticism takes many forms in the modern West (for example, "intellectual emotional," or "volitional" [*NSP*, 124]), its common source is the millennial speculation which Christianity makes possible. By positing an explicit beginning and an anticipated end to human history, Christianity (most egregiously through its inclusion in the canon of the *Revelation to John* [*NSP*, 108]) opens the door to human presumption that both God's agenda and His timetable are open to clear view by self-chosen human beings. Gnosticism thus "re-divinizes" worldly activity (*NSP*, 106 107, 130), transforming otherwise limited creatures into beings of unlimited ambition and drive. The creature becomes the Creator. We see the end results, of course, as we survey the carnage of the twentieth century. Gnostic "creativity" has yielded only psychotic mutilation.

Voegelin appears to think that the special susceptibility of Christianity to Gnosticism resides both in its potential dislocation of human conscience from civilizationally expressed standards and in the peculiar "spiritual stamina" (*NSP*, 104, 122-23) which it requires of most human beings. There is, in other words, a kind of social "isolation" implied by the Christian faith that can destabilize carefully wrought institutional designs and breed the instability of spiritual paranoia. Positing history as a now decipherable pattern thus works both to remove (unduly, it goes without saying) existential anxiety and elevate historical events to a status of divine significance (eg., *NSP*, 110-12, 119-20).

In effect, says Voegelin, the Christian experience requires a special subtlety of soul and mind both to house it historically and to live it existentially. 'The heroes of the early church would thus include Augustine and Gelasius, Augustine for his explicit demarcation of secular and sacred history in the "two cities" metaphor, and Gelasius for his careful enunciation of the delicate balance between temporal and spiritual authority, an enunciation which made possible a stable civilizational residence for the Christian church (e.g., *NSP*, 109, 118-19; *CW*, 22:222, 262; 23:47). Augustinian theology thus guarded against millennial speculation, while the Gelasian political balance and institutional scheme guarded against the social isolation of divinely inspired mystical expressions.

It seems clear to Voegelin that the roots of the Protestant "disruption" thus grow from the failure of the Medieval church to "channel ... into institutional forms" the "great wave of mysticism" which appeared-no doubt inevitably-in the fourteenth century (*CW*, 22:228). The lack of sufficient "ecclesiastical statesmanship" thereby "pushed and derailed" the mystics into "heretical

underground movements." Resisting the Gnostic temptation required a kind of containment of the mystical experience, a placing of it in the larger context of human historical and transcendent reality. And, given the terms of Christian identity, such containment would be possible only with either remarkable psychic and emotional balance on the part of the mystic or a wise and subtle flexibility of institutions on the part of the church. As Voegelin says in another place, "If the predicament of a fall from faith in the Christian sense occurs as a mass phenomenon, the consequences will depend on the content of the civilizational environment into which the agnostics are falling" (NSP, 123). With its institutional rigidity, the church bobbled its opportunity to contextualize the mystical experience, thus effectively denying the legitimacy of the experience *in context*. Leaving the mystics to their own devices only aggravated the social isolation the church had in fact a primary obligation to prevent. And left to their own devices, the heretical sects fell into the heretical temptation.

While I do not dispute Voegelin's insight that Gnostic claims grew from perverse millennial speculation, I do dispute his understanding of the Christian faith not only as institutionally amenable to civilizational identity-as, we might say, psychically stable only when civilizational stable-but also as requiring for its flowering a pre-existing spiritual maturity on the part of the faithful. According to Voegelin, the legitimacy of the church rests on the "historicity" of its symbolization. "The Spirit is absolute," he says, "but the symbolization of its experience and its institutionalization in the life of human community is historical" (CW, 22:223). The implication here is that the church-as the body of the faithful-is healthy only when its *institutional expression* is historically stable. Voegelin does not mean historical stability to be simply a matter of historical continuity, of course. However, he does see stability as largely a function of historically (institutionally) imaginative symbolic expression. Widespread acceptance of particular symbolizations thus point to common experiences of the transcendent, and, one then hopes, healthy religious exercise.

The great problem facing the Reformers, says Voegelin, was the problem of "recovering intellectual order" (CW, 23:18), the problem of giving new civilizational expression to the historical differentiation that was the late Medieval experience (CW, 22:221-24). The "essence of Christianity," he says, "is a matter of permanent readjustment of its historical expression" (CW, 22:223). Indeed, Voegelin says in another place, the latent instability of the Christian faith was aggravated by the failures of the Church fathers, who "did not understand that Christianity could supercede polytheism but could not abolish the need of a civil theology" (NSP, 158).¹

I wonder, though, if he does not in this way get the heart of the Christian experience exactly wrong. Always, it seems, pointing back to Plato for the base dimensions of spiritual health, perhaps Voegelin does not fully appreciate the dramatic break with the Platonic vision which the Christian experience required. When God comes to human beings in Christ, he does this not only in completely unpredictable way, but with uniformly destabilizing results. It is, after all, precisely institutional expression of the faith which Christ appears most explicitly to resist. If the Christian experience means anything, I would think, it means that God not only breaks into history (the mention of Pontius Pilate in the Apostles' Creed bears mention here) but marks off the

¹ Voegelin's fascination with Hobbes's attempted "solution" to the religious wars is instructive

here. See NSP, 152ff.

terms and direction of historical movement. The church survives not by human ingenuity but by God's watchful eye and guiding hand. Voegelin does not seem to want to let God be *in charge* of history, only to be a facet of human experience *within* history. As he says in *The Ecumenic Age*, "No answer ... is the ultimate truth ... because no answer can abolish the historical process of consciousness from which it has emerged ... (75)."

Interestingly, earlier in this same volume, Voegelin reveals both an astute awareness of the full implications of the Christian story and an apparent determination to keep it at a distance: "Considering the history of Gnosticism, with the great bulk of its manifestations belonging to, or deriving from, the Christian orbit, I am inclined to recognize in the epiphany of Christ the great catalyst that made eschatological consciousness an historical force, both in forming and in deforming humanity" (EA, 20).² The implication here, of course, is that the clay pots which tend to carry the Christian substance would ultimately not be up to the task. But of course this is only half of the Christian message. Says Paul, "For we have this treasure in jars of clay to *show* that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 *Corinthians* 4:7).

The idea that healthy religious expression grows from reasonably healthy religious institutions and from spiritually mature human beings, then, flies in the face of much of the Christian story. Religious and spiritual health grow from following God's lead, not from articulating and channeling God's reality. God seems rarely to make use of either the intellectually sophisticated or the emotionally mature. On the contrary, it is the presence of his Spirit which defines both wisdom and emotional balance. Even more

² See also NSP, 100- 101.

to the point, God's Spirit seems to defy all attempts to articulate his presence institutionally. The institutional church, this means, is as much in tension with the destiny God has mapped out for it, as it is with the political realm within which it finds itself set historically. Prophetic voices are not only real, but ongoing.

When Voegelin states in *The Ecumenic Age* "the process of history ... is not a story to be told from the beginning to its happy, or unhappy, end; it is a mystery in process of revelation," I am with him completely. I lose him, however, and I think he loses the essence of the Christian story, when he seems to require appreciation of the mystery to precede its experience. If God in Christ is not only the source of the mystery but the answer to it, then God's direction and will become the guiding lights, not intellectual subtlety and emotional balance. To suggest, as Voegelin does in his analysis of the Reformation (eg., CW, 22:247 and 262), that Christian "individualism" is somehow dangerous and misplaced is to ignore the heart of the Christian witness. Surely there are "false prophets," but just as surely there are institutionally isolated and even socially bizarre "true prophets."

I wonder, therefore, if there is not something at least a bit contradictory in Voegelin's emphasis on the spiritual maturity of the representative human being, on the one hand, and on the

necessary civilizational embodiment of the representational experience, on the other. Looking in particular at these two claims from the perspective of the Christian faith, the contradiction seems apparent. Voegelin himself acknowledges that the representational experience can be expressed only symbolically.³ So long as this

³ See, eg., CW, 22:226-27, on the transubstantiation controversy.

experience is merely one of an eternal and immutable "presence," such as one finds in Plato, then some sort of institutional embodiment is potentially non-problematic. Yet the Christian experience of God is one of intensely *personal* contact: God operates out of loving determination, but he speaks, it seems, almost idiosyncratically. What he says to one, he may not say to another. Indeed, what he says to one at one moment may turn inapt the next: witness Jesus' conversation with Peter and the other disciples in *Matthew 16:13-23* (also *Mark 8:27-33*). It is precisely for this reason that Paul works so hard to abolish the traditional emphasis on "the law" of God, and to enthrone the reality of "righteousness through faith" (e.g., *Romans 3-5*). *How can* the representational experience, then, be fully embodied in historic tradition? The Christian faith comes only from personal confrontation with the God of grace; it cannot come from institutional guidance or the "re-lived" experience of others.⁴

At the same time, Voegelin claims that the Christian faith requires an unusual "spiritual stamina." Clearly this follows, for him, from the possibility-perhaps likelihood-in Christianity of an individuation of transcendent experience. Christianity requires a certain psychic maturity to keep in balance the reality of God's presence and the limitations of human endeavor. No doubt such balance is essential. Yet Voegelin seems determined to emphasize the importance of the "ecclesiastical statesmanship" which imaginatively institutionalizes this balance. The implication here thus points more to a Platonic elitism. So long as the spiritual stamina of the talented few is historically

⁴ Perhaps the best evidence of this personalization is the long series of "conversion" stories making up the heart of the Christian tradition. Unless a person experiences *alone* the reality of his *own* sin, the healing grace of God will never penetrate to the core and engine of their being. See, eg., the powerful story of Augustine's conversion in *Confessions*

intact, the body of the faithful is stable and well-ordered. This is the primary reason, after all, for Voegelin's conclusion that the timing of the Reformers' "individualist" emphasis was so catastrophic; the Medieval church was not institutionally equipped to catch the "fall" of ordinary persons from inherited civilizational identity (NSP, 123-24).⁵ So it seems that for the great mass of the church body, spiritual stamina is less important than institutional obedience. But if true "spiritual stamina"---as I understand the Christian story to propose it---appears only *after* and *through* individualized contact with divine reality, then not only are civilizational elites ruled out by definition but the need for civilizational net-catching is as well. It is the ongoing reality of God's presence that holds up the believer and gives him his proper balance and poise. Those who lose their balance are not the true believers, but precisely the pretend believers, the ones who rely not on God's real presence but on human inclination and civilizational bearings.⁶

John Calvin as Gnostic Revolution?

With the above discussion in mind, my reasons for skepticism regarding Voegelin's treatment of John Calvin will perhaps become clearer. While Voegelin is convinced that Calvin's reformational view only *presumed* divine and Scriptural

⁵On this point see also Voegelin's discussion of the devastating effects of *sola fide* in CW, 22:248-60.

⁶Voegelin's take on the "human carriers of the spiritual outbursts," as he gives it in *The Ecumenic Age* (8), is instructive here. Such carriers "do not always realize the narrow limits of the area directly affected by the differentiating process. For the differentiation of consciousness indirectly affects the image of reality as a whole; and the enthusiastic discoverers of the truth are sometimes inclined to treat such secondary effects as they believe themselves to perceive, and not always correctly, as direct insights." The implication, of course, is that some are better prepared for contact with divine reality than others. I understand the Christian story to be saying something very different, namely that *no one* is "prepared" for such contact. More to the point, it is the divine reality Himself who inspires and manages the proper response. Witness the wonderfully illustrative story of Moses and the burning bush in *Exodus* 34.

authority-thus laying the political foundation for worldly revolution-I would question Voegelin's take both on the Christian experience generally, and on Calvin's presentation of it. Voegelin's most energetic objections are to two facets of Calvin's work: his doctrine of predestination and the apparent "political" uses he makes of this doctrine. In effect, Voegelin argues, Calvin uses predestination first to radicalize Luther's individualism and then to establish a new ecclesiastical, ultimately political, elite. In opposition to this view, I shall argue first that Calvin's predestinarianism is perfectly in keeping not only with Christian orthodoxy but also with ordinary Christian experience. I shall argue second that Calvin's "political" ambitions-in fact modest and quite limited-were very much in keeping with the boundaries which Scripture imposes.

For Voegelin, the Reformation as a whole is "the successful invasion of Western institutions by Gnostic movements" (*NSP*, 134). While Luther's ideas were the most destabilizing,⁷ Calvin's influence enthroned the Gnostic tendencies. Calvin continued the "anti-philosophical" attack on Medieval scholasticism and rational openness to truth. His contributions to the "breakdown of ordered, systematic thought" (CW23:17) culminates in his production and promotion of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the "first, deliberately created Gnostic koraiif" (*NSP*, 1374 1). Following Luther's lead in elevating to lodestar the doctrine of *sola fide*, Calvin completes the destruction of inherited understandings of social ethics and of human wholeness. "Whether a work is good or evil cannot be decided by standards of ethics; it depends on the justification or non-

⁷ These included Luther's "attack on the doctrine offides caritateformata"; his attack on Aristotelian scholasticism; his "destruction" of the "balance of human existence" through his

righteousness solafide; and his "prototypical personality," through which he aimed to impose "as an order of existence on mankind at large" his peculiar, personal experience, "his "egotistical obscurantism" (CW22:245-46, 259, 267-68).

justification of the man through faith alone" (CW22:258). Thus, "the decision of the heart solves all complications and conflicts of values" (CW22:260).⁸ Calvin's predestination only serves to solidify the attack by proposing new criteria for evaluating human effort: the "saints" can do no wrong; the reprobate can do no good. And the determination of sainthood rests not on any traditionally understood levels of human maturity but rather on the eccentric choices of a megalomaniacal and idiosyncratic God (CW22:283).

The key point about Calvin, for Voegelin, is that the doctrine of predestination is both destructive and *invented*. Voegelin finds Calvin's enunciation of the doctrine clearly "fallacious" and just as clearly politically-motivated (CW22:284; NSP, 138-39). Says Voegelin, "There is enough objective comedy in [Calvin's "exegetical"] enterprise to provide chapter after chapter of solid entertainment for the connoisseur of dirty tricks in argument" (CW 22: 275). With predestination in place, Calvin can and does assemble his own army of the saints, energizing them with visions of temporal paradise through unquestioned earthly authority. The purpose of the *Institutes*, says Voegelin, "is the foundation of a new universal church with Calvin in the role, not of a successor to St. Peter, but of a new St. Peter himself" (CW 22:277).⁹ Why else would Calvin so assiduously and erroneously construct a misleading "Biblical" theory of government which approves in practice only those which "operate institutionally under the close supervision of a board of Calvinist divines" (CW23:46-47).

⁸ See the entire discussion in CW 22:248-60.

⁹ See also CW 22:273, 276, 280, 283, and 286.

We should consider these characterizations one at a time. First, what is Calvin's doctrine of predestination and what basis in Scripture might it have? My sense is that Calvin's doctrine not only makes sense on its own terms, but is solidly based in Scripture. The Christian experience of the *personhood* of God should be our guide here. Personal interaction with his creatures thus implies for God not only particular-time-, place-, and person-specific---conversations and instructions, but also a differentiation of value *based on* such interaction. To be "chosen" by God thus implies for the one singled-out a far different set of experiences and subsequent motivations than those coming to the Platonic philosopher or the Aristotelian spoudaios. And the experience of so being "chosen" is universally present across the entire story of God's people, from the Patriarchs to the Judges to the Prophets to John the Baptist to the disciples to the Apostle Paul. Is Voegelin suggesting that God's choosing ends with the end of the scriptural accounts? Can he so easily ignore the retelling of such encounters from the Church Fathers down to the present, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and even in our day to Columbine High student Cassie Bernall? Surely there is a sense in which every such story has similar and comparable dimensions, but not one of them is the same. And of course the one universal and constant chord running through them all is the confusion over God's choice: Why me? How am I worthy of God's attention?

Calvin's doctrine of predestination-following closely, I would argue, the authority of the Gospels as well as the leads of both Paul and Augustine¹⁰--aims to showcase precisely this universal Christian experience: belief follows divine choice. More to the point, the belief following choice engenders gratitude and social humility.

¹⁰ See, eg., Romans 8:28-39; as well as Augustine, *The City of God* XIV. I and YXI. 12

As Calvin puts the point, the "very sweet fruit" of predestination lies both in its pointing to "the wellspring of God's free mercy" and in its growing of "true humility." Thus, "They who shut the gates that no one may dare seek a taste of this doctrine wrong men no less than God. For neither will anything else suffice to make us humble as we ought to be nor shall we otherwise sincerely feel how much we are obliged to God" (*Institutes* 3.2 1. 1, 922).

Voegelin clearly dissents from the notion that predestination engenders humility, but, as Calvin makes clear, properly understood it can do nothing else. ¹¹ No doubt, Calvin acknowledges, "human curiosity" sets to "wandering in forbidden bypaths and thrusting upward to the heights" of God's hidden wisdom. "If allowed," Calvin says, "it will leave no secret to God that it will not search out and unravel." Such "audacity and impudence" ends up being counter-productive and even self-destructive, of course. When one inquires into predestination, one presumes to enter the "sacred precincts of divine wisdom," and "if anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity" but rather "will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit." For human beings "unrestrainedly to search out things that the Lord has willed to be hid in himself" is, simply, "not right" (*Institutes* 3.21.1, 921-23).

Indeed, Voegelin's protestations to the contrary, ¹² Calvin is remarkably consistent

¹¹ On this score, I find Voegelin's attack on Calvin's moving of his discussion of predestination (from Book I of the *Institutes* to Book III) misguided. According to Voegelin, predestination is properly a matter concerning "The Knowledge of God," rather than of "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ." Calvin's "wrong use" of the doctrine is demonstrated in just this transfer. Yet how is this doctrine to engender any kind of intellectual and personal modesty if God's choosing is in the end a proper subject matter for natural theology-Calvin's primary concern in Book I?

¹² For Calvin, says Voegelin, "the problem of predestination ... thus was actualized by the emergence of individuals who through their special call have penetrated into the knowledge of God's decree of salvation" (CW22:281).

on this point. The hiddenness of God's choice making is a constant theme in the *Institutes* and in Calvin's writings generally. ¹³ The *presumption* to know the pattern of God's choosing is a sign not of faith but of sin. Calvin understands quite well the more subtle and insidious dimensions of human pride. Believers, as all human beings, "readily esteem our virtue above its due measure" (*Institutes* 3.8.2, 703). Quite easily, then, "presumption" can "creep [in] upon the saints" (*Institutes* 3.2.22, 568). ¹⁴

Calvin is not being anti-intellectual here. He merely seeks to point out the dangers of intellectual presumption, of philosophical smugness. It turns out, I would argue, that Calvin ends up presenting a remarkably Voegelinian picture of human tension in relation with God. On the one hand, the personal call and claim of God is one of unmistakable clarity.¹⁵ Yet on the other hand, the reality of the *recognition* of one's continual sin and thus one's full dependence on God's deep and everlasting compassion and mercy is unmistakably clear as well. The "two plagues," which believers in particular must "banish from our minds," are to "put any confidence in the righteousness of works" and to "ascribe to works any glory." Instead, Scripture "consistently dissuades us from confidence." It teaches "that all our righteous deeds are foul in God's sight unless these derive a good odor from Christ's innocence" (*Institutes* 3.14.16, 782-83).

The keys to maintaining the proper balance between inspired conscience and personal humility—the keys then to "the sum of the Christian life" (*Institutes* 3.610)—include continual mindfulness of the Cross, recognition of and gratitude for the

¹³ For a quick survey of this point, see Stevenson, *Sovereign Grace*, 18-19, 132-38, and 155n14.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Stevenson, *Sovereign Grace*, ch.'s 1-2.

¹⁵ For Calvin's discussion of the assurance of faith, see, *eg.*,

earthly (institutional) "helps" which God through His providence has provided, and an active life of prayer (*Institutes* 3.20, 850-920). Nowhere does Calvin imply that the "assurance" of faith assures the righteousness of whatever one does. On the contrary, he spends pages upon pages reminding believers of their full dependence upon the Father's providential provision, the Spirit's mysterious instigation, and the Son's sacrificial intercession. Hence, "a dauntless spirit of praying rightly accords with fear, reverence, and solicitude" (*Institutes* 3.20.14, 869).

Voegelin's anxieties about predestination appear to stem primarily from his conviction that the reformers' doctrine opens the floodgates to individual eccentricities, moral relativism, and thus perversely charismatic leadership. With this doctrine, says Voegelin, Calvin can not only claim the legitimacy of whatever he wants to accomplish but also include in his "revolutionary" movement whomever he chooses. Predestination thus makes otherwise isolated individuals particularly susceptible to the charismatic call of the revolutionary mass movement. But two questionable assumptions are in play here. One is that there exists no objective and determinable *content* to the personal, salvific calls which believers experience. The other is that their "isolation" breeds only emotive and heedless sociability.

It is certainly true that Calvin argues for the centrality of personal motivation in the evaluation of interpersonal deeds (*e.g.*, *Institutes* 3.7.6-7, 696-698). Yet when he speaks on numerous occasions of "all the duties of love" (*eg.*, *Institutes* 3.7.6, 696; and 3.19.12, 845), he rather clearly does not understand such "duties" to be personally subjective and idiosyncratic. Pointing persistently to Scripture, Calvin finds obvious objective content in the notion of loving intention. Love requires seeing in another human being the very face of Christ; it requires believers to put

themselves "in the place of him whom they see in need of their assistance" (3.7.7, 697). Hence Jesus' Sermon on the Mount lays out in great detail all the objective extremities of right love, and does so by pointing more to motivations and less to deeds: "You have heard it said..., 'Do not murder.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (*Matthew* 5:21-22). The law of God, now through the reinvigoration of Christ, must be understood only with reference to the clearly revealed purpose of the Lawgiver (*Institutes* 2.8.6-10, 372-76).

God's "election" of particular human beings, then, lays a foundation of compassionate empathy, not arrogant and graceless judgment. After all, such election points initially and primarily toward the Cross of Christ. Reading through Calvin's collected correspondence is particularly instructive on this last realization. No doubt Calvin used harsh and apparently judgmental language from time to time, but what strikes the reader of this correspondence most are his frequent and poignant pleas for selfexamination and patience, exhorting those feeling the sting of apparent persecution to await God's guidance and to accept his sometimes unexpected divine judgment. God's choosing and his subsequent care of those chosen can take surprising and often-indeed, usually-painful turns. True belief is thus as much about patient and forbearing inaction as about assertive and courageous action. True Christian discipleship, in sum, means trusting with one's whole being the loving Creator, Ruler and Sustainer whom one

¹⁶ See the recounting of a number of examples in Stevenson, *Sovereign Grace*, 131-48.

follows, and taking the path *he* takes.¹⁶

To ascribe revolutionary political motives to Calvin thus seems rather seriously to exaggerate. No doubt Calvin was politically astute: he was aware of events surrounding him and his advice was often sought by persons in positions of power. But was he the quintessential charismatic megalomaniac? According to Voegelin, in Calvin "we sense a will to power without intellectual conscience" (CW22:276).¹⁷ I find this characterization uncharacteristically (for Voegelin) simplistic. Indeed, perhaps the most striking evidence to the contrary is Calvin's clear fascination-particularly toward the end of his life-with the biblical story of Daniel. His final biblical commentary is on the *Book of Daniel* (1561), and his preface to that work is addressed explicitly to the faithful in France. In it, he exhorts them *not* to armed revolution (not to the "madness of the impious who act thus intemperately") but rather to "that moderation by which alone [the persecutors] have thus far been conquered and broken down" (*Comm. Dan.* Pref., Ixxi).¹⁸ Not only the *example* Calvin elevates to prominence, but the manner in which he elevates it recalls less the wild-eyed modern revolutionary than the patient, forbearing, but observant Christian of *Romans* 12.

Were Calvin's political ideas true to Scripture? I believe they were. While Voegelin finds that "Calvin's unrivaled gift for unscrupulous interpretation enabled him to find the status and function of civil government outlined in the very epistles of Saint

¹⁷ Voegelin goes on in this passage to describe Calvin's "terroristic" practices in Geneva, a description now belied by a number of recent studies of the Geneva of Calvin's day. See in particular the work of Robert Kingdon and his team of researchers.

¹⁸ Contra Voegelin, the essay "On Civil Government" in the final (1559) edition of the *Institutes* seems to me perfectly consonant with Calvin's injunctions in his *Commentary on Daniel*. See Stevenson, *Sovereign Grace*, 32-36; 138-47; and *passim*.

Paul" to be *within* the "charismatic order of the Christian community" and this in the face of "fifteen hundred years of Christian history" (CW23:47-48), I find Calvin's interpretation of *Romans* 13 both commonsensical and straightforward. Contrary to-and because of-those "tumultuous spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ cannot be sufficiently elevated, unless all earthly powers be abolished, and that they cannot enjoy the liberty given by [Christ], except they shake off every yoke of human subjection," says Calvin in his *Commentary on Romans* 13: 1, the apostle Paul "was induced to establish, with greater care than usual, the authority of magistrates." Indeed, Paul "calls them the *higher powers*," apparently in order to "take away the frivolous curiosity of men, who are wont often to inquire by what right they who rule have obtained their authority." Instead, "it ought to be enough for us, that they do *rule*; for they have not ascended by their own power into this high station, but have been placed there by the Lord's hand." Moreover, "by mentioning *every soul*, [Paul] removes every exception, lest any one should claim an immunity from the common duty of obedience" (*Comm. Rom.* 13:1, 477-78; Calvin's emphasis).¹⁹

Calvin does indeed, as he shows throughout his writings, understand civil government to be a significant part of God's plan of redemption for his world. Those with temporal authority do thus necessarily shoulder obligations of loving service to their temporal subordinates. Civil government has, that is, a proper-biblically grounded-role to play.²⁰ Yet Calvin just as consistently adheres to the institutional

¹⁹ Here Calvin speaks of "die error" of thinking that believers should never "continue in submission to another power." Even those "attempting to take away the kingdom from Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth," are nonetheless "legitimate princes and rulers" (*Comm. Rom.* 13:1, 477-78).

²⁰ See *Institutes* 4:20.2, 1487; as well as Stevenson, *Sovereign Grace*, 94- 100.

separation of church and "state." He does not understand it to be the church's role either to hold temporal power, to pick temporal rulers, or to write temporal policy. Civil rulers are of course obliged to "cherish and protect the outward worship of God," and to "defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church," but they are just as obliged to "adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility." ²¹ Anyone who thinks, says Calvin in the same passage, that there "ought to be such great perfection in the church of God that its government should suffice for law ... stupidly imagine such a perfection as can never be found in a community of men" (*Institutes* 4.20.2, 1487). In sum, while Calvin does understand civil governors to have clear obligations under God, he understands as well that their authority and place must be respected *even* if it appears that they are self-consciously ignoring or refusing those obligations. ²²

All of this begins to undermine Voegelin's argument that Calvin's worldly-Machiavellian, perhaps?-ambition was his primary motivation." The question of Calvin's true intentions is one we will probably never answer, but in criticism of Voegelin's generalization it is worth noting that Calvin was an odd choice for

²¹ It is interesting to note on this score that Calvin's usual word for "government" was the Latin *moderatio*.

See Harro Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

For an important argument aiming to demonstrate the basis for religious liberty in Calvin's thinking, see

John Witte, Jr., "Moderate Religious Liberty in the Theology of John Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal*

31 (1996): 359-403.

²² Voegelin is fond of generalizing about Calvin's on the basis of the traditional accounts of life in

"Calvin's" Geneva. As noted above, however, these traditional accounts have been rather seriously called

into question in recent years.

²³ See, for example, Voegelin's rather remarkable statement that Calvin's praise of rulers tolerant of the

Protestant cause "is extended not primarily to make the people submissive to civil authority, but in

order to make the rulers submissive to Calvin" (CW 23:48).

charismatic, power-hungry, quasi-totalitarian leader. Twice he resisted coming to Geneva even after express pleas to do so; his first efforts at establishing a pastorate there resulted only in his banishment, in 1538, from the city; his obvious influence on the Genevan municipal government became apparent only after 1555; none of his published works, even after 1555, supported a theory of armed revolution; indeed, both his Christology and his ecclesiology held fast to the Gospel; thus his understanding of human experience under the ultimate rulership of God in Christ assumed, as Harro Hopfl makes clear, that the church would never be anything "but a beleaguered and persecuted minority" (Hopfl, 194). No doubt the extravagant claims of Cromwell and Knox supported the notion of a "revolution of the saints," but Calvin's legacy ought just as properly to include the liberal thinking Locke inherited from John Owen and others, not to mention the American legacy of Jonathan Edwards.²⁴ Is it worth noting that none of the great ideological movements of the twentieth century were able to get a foothold in societies with a strong Calvinist heritage, countries such as England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Hungary, Switzerland, and the United States?²⁵

Conclusion

As I have tried to make clear in this paper, my critique of Voegelin's assessment

²⁴ For connections to Owen and others, see Wayne J. Baker, "Church, State and Toleration: John

Locke and Calvin's Heirs in England, 1644-1689," in *Later Calvinism* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 525-43. For the political implications of Edwards' theology, see, e.g., Allen C. Guelzo, "From Calvinist Metaphysics to Republican Theory," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995): 399-418; and Gerald R. McDermott, "Jonathan Edwards and the Culture Wars: A New Resource for Public Theology and Philosophy," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (Summer, 1995): 268-80.

²⁵ Somewhat ironically, Voegelin pays tribute to British and American resistance to the ideological currents of the day at the end of his lecture series published as *The New Science of Politics* (189).

of Calvin rests primarily on what I take to be Voegelin's unduly Platonic view of the Christian experience. There is no question that the experience of Christ's gracious salvation engenders a sense of personal isolation and thus social instability. It is that experience, after all, which brings one to a new appreciation of the full context of Christ's saving work and so calls into question all humanly-devised social institutions. There is also no question that the experience of Christ leads one to see human history in a different and altogether compelling way. If Christ is Lord, then history as a whole is a real story. Yet Voegelin seems to assume that since most human beings are neither intellectually nor psychologically equipped to manage the reality of the world in the face of the reality of Christ's rule then the Christian faith, as intriguing as it might be, merely provides a handy and ultimately dangerous cover for the megalomaniacal claims of false prophets.

There are two main problems with this train of thought. First, the idea that human beings must somehow be capable of receiving God's truth in Christ shortchanges the-I dare to say, universal-experience of Christians that only Christ is capable of divine goodness, and only in and through Christ are his followers capable. The Christian faith is not simply an intellectual problem to be enjoyed and appreciated, in other words, it is a genuine lifeline thrown by the one true God to the spiritually desolate center of us all. Its strength lies not in its knowledge of Christ, but in the ongoing relationship with Christ which it establishes. The balance and poise to live in the world come after meeting Christ, not before. Second, and consequently, Voegelin assumes that to leave the discernment of false prophets to the faltering consciences of individual believers is to invite mass delusion and ultimately mass hysteria. But it is precisely the Spirit of Christ which calls believers to skepticism regarding various "prophetic" claims. Indeed, perhaps the key building block of Christian witness grows from Christ's injunction to *beware* false prophets (e.g., *Matthew* 24: 23-25; *Mark* 13: 21-23; and *I John* 4: 1-2 1).

As only one example, Calvin's commentary on *I John* 4:1 clearly demonstrates his loyalty to Christian gospel by showcasing just this question of "tying the spirits." Noting that "the Spirit will only ... guide us to a right discrimination, when we render all our thoughts subject to God's word," Calvin proposes "a twofold trial of doctrine, private and public" (Comm. *I John* 4:1, 23 1), a twofold trial steeped at both ends in confession and prayer. The Christian faith, that is, requires us to welcome true prophetic voice but to pass all prophetic claims through the sieves of "private and public" spiritual discernment. In the end, says Calvin, "[n]othing is easier than to boast that we are of God; and hence nothing is more common among men..." For that reason alone, then, "we prove ourselves to be of God ... by the *obedience* of faith" (Comm. *I John* 4:6,

236), and obeying Christ means following John's injunction that "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God," and that "whoever does not love does not know God" (*I John 4:7-8*; Comm. *I John 4:7-8*, 238-39). Calvin understands, that is, that the Christian faith points less to the need for "ecclesiastical statesmanship" and "great ordering minds" than it does to genuine response to Christ's love and faithful obedience to his earthly example.

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