

## **"Reason and Revelation in Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin"**

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"Leo Strauss's and Eric Voegelin's Philosophical Approach to the Bible"

John Ranieri

"A Thomistic and Tocquevillian View of Strauss on Reason and Revelation"

Paul Carrese

While the topic of the panel is the intellectually engaging, and complex, issue of the approaches of Strauss and Voegelin to reason and revelation, the two papers upon which I am to comment have taken their own distinct paths. John Ranieri's paper, "Leo Strauss's and Eric Voegelin's Philosophical Approach to the Bible," starts out with an anticipated comparison of Strauss and Voegelin on the compelling matter of biblical hermeneutics only to transform into a contrast of Voegelin and Rene Girard. Paul Carrese's paper, "A Thomistic and Tocquevillian View of Strauss on Reason and Revelation," would demonstrate the limits of Strauss's interpretation of modernity by showing "Thomistic strains" in the analysis of the quintessential modern, Alexis de Tocqueville; but in the discussion Voegelin is surprisingly missing. In light of the direction of these papers, I see, then, the brunt of my commentary as an exploration of the relation of Girard and Voegelin and as an attempt to bring Voegelin into the dialogue about Aquinas and modernity. Let me address each paper in turn with these concerns in mind.

### **1. Ranieri's Argument: Strauss and Voegelin on the Side of Philosophy**

Ranieri's crisp and erudite discussion of Strauss's position on reason and revelation sees it as one of essential tension, if not incompatibility, or, indeed, existential contradiction. And yet the tension is perpetual, for neither can dislodge the other: Athens and Jerusalem both stand, Athens representing the openness of inquiry, rooted in both a pre-theoretical grasp of the human condition and the rigor of rational argument, and Jerusalem representing the inscrutable will of Deity authorizing moral law and religious practice. Strauss must choose between the two. A synthesis, or balance, is out of the question. In fact, the medieval attempt at such a balance has fundamentally corrupted modern culture. Strauss opts for Athens and urges political thought to return to the classical model.

While Ranieri affirms that Voegelin sees a quite different relation between reason and revelation--insofar as Voegelin would place reason (noetic consciousness) and revelation (pneumatic consciousness) as parallel, or equivalent, existential dispositions and differentiations--Ranieri nevertheless argues that Voegelin, like Strauss, ultimately opts for the superiority of reason. Focusing primarily on Voegelin's treatment in *Order and History* of "metastasis" and "the Pauline Vision of the Resurrected" to the relative neglect of Voegelin's discussion of Christianity in *The New Science of Politics*, *The History of Political Ideas*, the "Gospel as Culture," and other writings, Ranieri claims that Voegelin can contrast the fragility of Christianity and its temptation to eschatological wildness with the "balance of consciousness" in sober philosophy, which displays a kind of perfection, at least in Plato. Christianity, it seems, needs philosophy to set it right with the balance of consciousness, since philosophy, in this balance, retains a realism about the exercise of power. Ranieri, to the contrary, would see philosophy, at least as a cultural form, in need of the guidance of Christianity, at least as a cultural form with its impact on history. It is here that Ranieri introduces the work of Rene

Girard, to the effect that Christianity has incorporated the ultimate, if usually hidden, source of bias and corruption in civilization, namely, the scapegoating mechanism that arises out of the mimetic nature of human desire. The mechanism is largely hidden because it is the secret compromise that gives birth to society and to civilization itself. Only Christianity has fully uncovered the mechanism and destroyed it through the suffering and death of the victim, Christ. Christianity, then, represents true religion in its exposure of the mechanism, in contrast to the traditional religions enmeshed in the mechanism (the "false sacred"). But, Christianity, as a cultural form of liberation, also stands above philosophy, which utterly fails to identify the scapegoat mechanism in its full scope and repercussions and consequently clings too tenaciously to the need for power--to the neglect of what Christianity has given contemporary culture, viz., a greater sense of the equality of humankind and the respect for otherness concomitant with an appreciation of human dignity.

## **2. Voegelin and Girard**

The crux of Ranieri's argument, then, is his Girardian interpretation of Voegelin. We must raise questions about a number of key points.

We must consider, first, the claim that Voegelin may have an overly rosy view of philosophy. He is, of course, describing philosophy not as a cultural form to be viewed by an external observer but as an existential disposition with its own norms ingredient in the process of inquiry. Who can live up to the standards? Well, perhaps, thinkers of first rank can do so--or at least Plato. Indeed Plato was acclaimed as he

Who alone or first among mortals clearly revealed,

By his own life and by the method of his words,

That a man becomes good and happy at the same time.

Now no one can ever attain to these things again.<sup>1</sup> [1]

This moving tribute to Plato was not Voegelin's but Aristotle's in his famous altar elegy.

Voegelin himself is critical of Aristotle for his "immanentizing tendencies." The very project of philosophy Voegelin sees as precarious. Its intellectual capital can be squandered by the "forgetfulness of being," most dramatically exhibited by the materialists and sophists who, on the heels of the differentiation of consciousness, use reason to constrict the field of reality, losing a vision of the whole. There is also the inertial tendency to focus on the expressions of meaning and cut them off from the engendering experiences. Thus arises the "doctrinal mode" of philosophy, which Voegelin, discerns, for example, in the Stoics and the battle of the schools of philosophy. This doctrinal mode can reach the point where the transmission of the philosophical tradition can only be carried on in an extrinsic manner by a Cicero, who makes the symbols of philosophy into "hieroglyphics," according to Voegelin. Philosophical reason--even that of classical philosophy--therefore, is subject to aberrations and derailments. And this is just for the classical period! After all, the differentiation of consciousness creates problems and tensions.

Voegelin, then, urges a restoration of philosophy in our time. But this must be done under the "concrete circumstances" of our time. This is a comment truly befitting a philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> [1] Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, trans. Richard Robinson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 107.

of history. We cannot restore Hellenic philosophy with its "mortgage of the polis.❖ To be contemporary, philosophy must be a philosophy of consciousness and a philosophy of history.

And should it be surprising that there would be also problems with the pneumatic differentiation of consciousness if, as Voegelin alleges, the maximum of differentiation is the epiphany of Christ? If Voegelin places the accent on the possibilities of derailment more on Christianity than on classical philosophy, this is surely one reason. We must also recall Voegelin's profound revulsion at the totalitarian movements of his time, whose roots, at least in large part, he traces to the metastatic derailment of prophetic faith and to the neo-gnostic tendencies to immanentize the eschaton.

This does not mean, to be sure, that we can simply dismiss Girard's critique. For mimesis is clearly a major influence on the psyche, and Girard has brought this to our attention with unparalleled clarity. So, too, the scapegoating mechanism is a pervasive source of bias in human society. It is conspicuously present, for instance, in contemporary terrorists--and perhaps some anti-terrorists. And his depiction of Christianity as uniquely uncovering the scapegoating mechanism can provide a pivotal turning point in Biblical exegesis ❖as, for example, in the theologian Raymond Swager's interpretation of the Gospels as dramas. But we need to issue some precautionary notes.

Girard has a penetrating analysis of the French nineteenth-century bourgeois psyche as portrayed in novels. How truly universal is this situation? Girard seems to be in a French anthropological tradition that goes back to Rousseau, where he adds speculative generalizations about the philosophy of history to anthological data. His claim that the scapegoating mechanism is the origin of society may remind us of nineteenth century positivists, who attempted to explain

the origins of society, or of religion, in a reductionist way, countering Aristotle's dictum that humans are, by nature, political, i.e., social, animals. Perhaps, in a sense, Girard is an heir to Freud, who still operated in a positivist framework. I am not claiming that Girard is a positivist. At the least, he does not believe that Christianity in its essence can be subjected to reductionsit analysis or cultural critique. Rather, Christianity, as a cultural form, is itself a critique of culture. Nor do I wish to deny Girard's assertion that classical philosophy has basically fabled to uncover the scapegoating mechanism. Still, does this invalidate the achievement of classical philosophy with its articulation of the openness of the question, which is a perpetual antidote to bias? Girard, at least in Ranieri's account, seems to approach classical philosophy as an external observer, treating it as a cultural form rather than as an existential disposition and a spiritual exercise.

At the heart of the issue is the nature of desire. If all desires are conditioned by social and cultural factors--including the complex of mimesis--are there not some desires that are privileged--in a sense a priori--insofar as they are the psychic underpinning of what Voegelin calls the directional tendency of openness? Or the affective component of what Lonergan calls the "transcendental notions"? Or what John Alexander Stewart in his work on Plato's myths called "transcendental feeling"? Can the desire to know be completely suffocated or captured by mimesis and scapegoating? Will Plato's prisoner dragged out of the cave by the *helkein* escape the bias of scapegoating even if he has not made thematic the full play of its pernicious influence on society? Conversely, would not genuine philosophy, in Voegelin's sense, seek to appropriate Girard's critique of scapegoating to the extent it is warranted, not as a theory alien to its mission but precisely as part of its therapeutic enterprise? If Christianity, so to speak, has

brought this to the attention of philosophy, then this is an area, to follow Aquinas's mode of thinking, that pertains to both.

One final note of caution. Girard indeed seems to have given his own distinct application of Bergson's distinction of closed religion and open religion. On the one hand, most religions, with their orientation to the "sacred," are closed, basically structured to protect the group (and here Girard could show precisely in what the defense mechanism consists). On the other hand, Christianity is the open religion. One of the great achievements of Voegelin, I think, is to take seriously the authentic spiritual content of the early religions as expressing--in compact form--the experience of the in-between in human existence. Voegelin exhibits the same generosity of spirit he attributes to Aquinas. A Voegelin-Girard dialogue must consider the issue of compactness and differentiation of the early religions in the "cosmological" societies. Can a real core of spiritual experience exist along side aberration and distortion and corruption? This seems to be the case with Christianity!

There remains the serious issue John Ranieri raises about the role of power and the balance of consciousness. Let me address this issue in my comments on Paul Carrese's paper.

### **3. Carrese's Argument: Modernity and the Balance of Consciousness**

Carrese, like Ranieri, explores Strauss's juxtaposition of reason and revelation. On my reading, they seem to agree on Strauss's position, although Carrese emphasizes how Strauss's treatment is subtle and complicated and even respectful of revelation. Carrese focuses on Strauss's attack on the synthesis of reason and revelation in Aquinas, which, in Strauss's view, has had disastrous consequences for Western culture and has led, among other things, to an

"overreaction" in the form of instrumental reason or crazed ideologies. The cure, Strauss urges, is a return to the sobriety of classical political philosophy, which opted for reason uncontaminated by the need for an accommodation with revelation. Carrese argues, on the contrary, that some of the most sensitive modern political thinkers--he highlights Montesquieu and de Tocqueville--found that to examine seriously the conditions of order in political society they needed to effect precisely such an accommodation with revelation and, hence, to recapture, although in a distinctly modern form, the balance of consciousness of Aquinas. So Montesquieu in his *Spirit of the Laws* could not simply relegate religion to primitives, the superstitious, or the unprogressive. At a deeper level of encounter, de Tocqueville discovered that the more he studied democracy in America the more he had to recognize the decisive role of the "habits of the heart" nurtured by the Judaeo-Christian tradition, even as he struggled with his own Catholic faith. Are we dealing here with faith or revelation? Indeed a host of questions arise with this bold historical analysis. Perhaps to bring some analytic clarity, at the very end of the paper Carrese mentions that Voegelin shares this perspective. By way of commentary, let me take that one remark as the opportunity to interject Voegelin into the conversation.

#### **4. Voegelin, Aquinas, the Balance of Consciousness, and Power**

Voegelin surely appreciates the synthesis of reason and revelation by Aquinas. According to Voegelin, Aquinas is a thinker of first rank. He rises above his contemporaries in the thirteenth century, so much so that his vision of political society could not be sustained at a time when the old image of the *sacrum imperium* was severely challenged in the face of strains of new political, social, and economic forces. It is true that Voegelin criticizes Aquinas for introducing propositional metaphysics on a grand scale, but this criticism is tempered by



Voegelin's assurance that Aquinas had "empirical control" over his materials. This is not the case with Aquinas's successors. Voegelin laments how Aquinas's notion of faith as *fides caritate formata* was lost in modernity--to the detriment, if not destruction, of civilization--and, implicitly, how his more expansive view of reason (under "empirical control") was lost. Voegelin, in fact, decries the separation of mysticism and nominalist reason in the Late Middle Ages. The solution to this intellectual decline, says Voegelin, is not Thomism but a new Thomas.

One could reinforce Voegelin's appreciation of the balance of consciousness of Aquinas and his recognition of the dangers of its breakup by turning to Lonergan's parallel analysis of the loss in Western thought of Aquinas's nuanced treatment of the human mind (in contrast to the textbook depiction of Aquinas as a "naïve realist"). Instead of Aquinas's emphasis on insight generating concepts, Scotus and his rationalist successors would establish a metaphysics of possible worlds by "looking at" the nexus of concepts and essences. Instead of Aquinas's adoption of Aristotle's notion of the identity of knower and known in the act of knowing, Aquinas's medieval and modern successors would succumb to what Voegelin terms the "intentionalist fallacy," positing, as moderns put it, a confrontation of subject and object. Gone, too, was Aquinas's distinction of essence and existence (correlated with Aquinas's rejection of judgment as a synthesis of concepts). The battle in the Late Middle Ages between conceptualists and nominalists toppled over in the modern period to the battle of rationalists and empiricists, facilitating what Voegelin describes as the dialectic of dogmatism and skepticism in modern thought. The influence can be traced directly from the late medieval to the modern period (through Suarez to Descartes, for example). Far from being a reaction against Aquinas, as Strauss contends, this movement, which defines the very framework within which modern

political theory was formulated, was oblivious to the actual achievement of Aquinas. As Lonergan argues, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is a critique not of the mind as conceived by Aquinas but of the mind as conceived by Scotus. Voegelin sees Schelling as attempting a kind of restoration of philosophy and the balance of consciousness. Interestingly, the early Schelling's philosophy of identity (with echoes of Aristotle's theory of identity) and the later Schelling's positive philosophy (in search of existence) could be seen as attempts to rediscover the balance that had been a hallmark of Aquinas's philosophy. Schelling, of course, like de Tocqueville, saw revelation (and mysticism) as essential to the constitution of the polity, but he also saw it as essential to the constitution of historical existence itself.

In considering the balance of consciousness in Aquinas, we can turn to the issue of power. For Voegelin sees Aquinas, both the Christian theologian and the philosopher of first rank, as a "realist.❖ Aquinas could incorporate Aristotle's conception of the synthetic nature of human being into his spiritual framework. The various levels of human being, including that of the body, had to be functioning well for the balance to occur. With respect to the polity, power, as the capacity to act, was a crucial determinant and could not be ignored.

Arguably, Aquinas was in the grand tradition that Voegelin praised for its articulation (in Justinian's code) of the sources of authority in the polity. The sources of authority are spirit, reason, and power, and they form a balance. Clearly in most of modern political thought there is an imbalance tipped to the side of power, interpreted narrowly as raw force. Voegelin, then, if Carrese's thesis is correct, would join Montesquieu and de Tocqueville in the effort to restore the balance in a fashion meaningful under contemporary conditions--today the concrete conditions of pluralistic democracy and a plurality of world religions.

Voegelin, I think, sees power, reason, and spirit not as a neat synthesis but as a series of dynamic exigencies in a kind of normative hierarchy, where the higher respects the integration of the lower but adds something to it. Voegelin's emphasis on mystery would not lead him to reduce revelation to reason, as rationalists might be tempted to do. Nor would his emphasis on reason lead him to reduce reason to a mere instrument of power. On the other hand, his recognition of the integrity of revelation and of reason would not lead him to dismiss the proper exigency of power as the capacity to act as an agent in history..

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