

he Philosopher's Slant on Christianity

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I do not ask whether my late and very great teacher, Eric Voegelin, was a Christian or was not. Rather, I ask whether he understood Christianity primarily from within its own originating historical experience or from within the experience of the mystic philosopher seeking to understand the order of history from the history of order. The latter seems clearly to be the case, and that perspective produced an interpretation of Christianity and its effects that is open to serious challenge. For Voegelin, Christianity represented soteriological truth following on anthropological truth following on cosmological truth in the differentiation of the consciousness of reality. It completed the process of differentiation by disclosing—as did Israel—the gracious movement of God toward humankind to complement the hellenic understanding of the movement of the human being toward God. Most Christian theologians, and certainly all theologians in the Reformation traditions, would agree with this emphasis on divine grace as the heart of the Christian message, even if they would not necessarily see it as complementing a human movement toward God.

The problem is that Voegelin positioned Christianity mainly in the succession of the Greek philosophers and not in that of the Hebrew prophets. The revelation of this grace in history, he wrote, through the incarnation of the Logos in Christ, intelligibly fulfilled the adventitious movement of the spirit in the mystic philosophers. (NSP, 78) Christianity moved away from Jewish messianic and apocalyptic expectations to the understanding of the church as the apocalypse of Christ in history in a process of evolution in which the specific essence of Christianity separated from its historical origin. (NSP, 108) The specific essence of Christianity is defined in Greek terms by the opening of consciousness to transcendent being, not in Hebraic terms by the descent of God to be with God's people in their history and to fulfill the promises of their liberation. Accordingly, Voegelin applauds the suppression of Jewish elements in Christianity and the decision by Augustine to move the eschaton from the end of

history to a point of transcendence above history. This achievement represents the maximum realization of consciousness of being. Its definitive statement is in the medieval philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.

Voegelin takes his stand with the Platonic, Stoic, and ultimately Aristotelian capture of Christianity and its sacralizing of the hierarchical and coordinating powers of state and church—exactly the arrangement that other interpreters of the Christian experience have seen as the true derailment of Christianity. One consequence is that order has primacy in his scale of political values. The Hebraic concern for justice seems to be absent. At times he speaks contemptuously of the —masses— and their concerns. Voegelin certainly is correct that the divine-human tension cannot be resolved in history, and that movements promising the resolution of all human ills in history should be criticized and resisted. However, he has created a framework of interpretation in which almost any efforts or movements for justice can be dismissed by the guardians of power as Gnostic, heretical, and dangerous.

I regret that Professor Voegelin did not take cognizance of the Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr also was severely critical of movements Voegelin considered Gnostic in essence. Like Voegelin, he believed that the problematic of human nature (for Niebuhr, original sin) was a permanent element of experience and could not be resolved in history. However, for Niebuhr the essence of Christianity was the sacrificial love of the cross, not the ascent to the beatific vision. Sacrificial love meant love for the neighbor, and love for the neighbor implied a quest for justice. This quest required challenges to the established powers, but not a transformation of human nature and history. At this point, Niebuhr and Voegelin could have had a very interesting conversation.

Another consequence was that Voegelin saw every movement away from the medieval synthesis as a deformation of Christianity. That was how he read history from the philosopher's standpoint. He could find no positive place for the messianic tendencies inherent in Christianity or for efforts to return to sources that were not dominated by philosophical concepts. Medieval sectarian movements were —derailments,— —eruptions with Jewish symbols against the maximum differentiation of truth, not serious social protests against the condominium of state and church (and property). Voegelin portrayed the Protestant Reformation, at least in *The New*

Science of Politics, as the catalytic event for the emergence to power of gnosticism, supporting that assessment with what he acknowledged to be an extreme Puritan example, and not balancing it with Calvinism's constitutionalism, Martin Luther's *Hard Book* against the Peasants, and his understanding of the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator*, and the Anabaptist *Schleitheim Confession* all of which reject implicitly the immanentizing of the eschaton.

The problem is in the method: Voegelin understood Christianity as a development primarily in the line of the philosophers, the emergence of its essence requiring the suppression of its Hebraic roots. Christianity when understood as emerging from Judaism, not from Greece, looks different, as do elements of its succeeding history. Its messianic elements then must be taken seriously, even if they must be reinterpreted in the light of a theology of cross and resurrection. The philosophical elements which it finds useful must be subordinated to that theology, not dominate them, and must support the divine work of liberation and reconciliation in history, not repudiate them.