

## The Relationship between Mysticism and Science in Voegelin's Work

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The relationship between mysticism and science in Eric Voegelin's work is present in his earliest texts: in his doctoral dissertation in sociology and in his treatise on the dramatist Frank Wedekind, both written in 1921. I will focus on these two texts.

Voegelin's dissertation, "Interaction and Spiritual Community"<sup>1</sup> [1] , contrasts the sociological thought of Georg Simmel with that of Othmar Spann. Voegelin adopts Spann's theory of the spiritual relationship of human beings as the fundamental experience that constitutes social identity. He chooses this over Simmel's theory of interaction because "the purely causal nature of interactions between individuals does not permit qualitative differentiation". [34]. The intersubjective acts that Simmel has made the center of his sociology do indeed deepen and further define a society, but only because they take place between individuals who have already been fundamentally united through their participation in a common spiritual ground.

According to Voegelin substantial communication between human beings takes place in acts of spiritual awakening which occur between two or more human beings, what Othmar Spann calls "Gezweigung". The individual is not spiritually autonomous, but rooted in a communal spirit. This community may consist of living contemporaries in the individual's immediate circle; or through science, philosophy, art, religion, etc. the individual may be in contact with the living spirit of former generations or distant contemporaries. For the purpose of sociological analysis one must, according to Voegelin, consider individual human beings as points of meaning or purpose in the process of the realization of this spirit. The spiritual center of each individual in a society

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1 [1] Eric Voegelin, "Wechselwirkung und Gezweigung". Diss. University of Vienna , 1922. In Voegelin Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford California Box 47 , Folder 5. Translated into English as: "Interaction and Spiritual Community: A Methodological Investigation" in: Eric Voegelin, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 32 The Theory of Governance and other miscellaneous Papers (Columbia/London: University of Missouri Press , 2001) 19-141. Quotations will be cited in the text between [ ].

embodies a greater or lesser degree of understanding, and therefore articulation, of that society's commonly held spiritual substance.

Voegelin's dissertation contains Neo-Kantian terms. Thus he speaks of the "values" that are pursued by a particular society as "imperatives" that the individual is called upon to realize in his social relationships. The "task of maximizing the meaning of our experiences" in the pursuit of the spiritual values that define a society is an "imperative to be fulfilled by continuous effort". [63f.] Thus the "individual" who is the object of sociology is not one who can be perceived by the senses. The object of sociology is the spiritual center of the individual who participates in the communal process of realizing "meanings" and "imperatives"; a process that "transcends" individuals and makes them into partners in substantive communication (*Gezweigung*).

Active participation in this spirit ("Metaphysical knowledge") is gained in an act of intuition of the ground of being. This act is momentary. Once gained the experience must be expressed in concepts. Mistakenly, however, it is very often the work of conceptual expression-- what Voegelin calls "the logical apparatus of science" -- that is taken for "science" itself, and the fundamental role of an original intuition is ignored. But, as a matter of fact, "it is the metaphysical intuition upon which everything else depends". If this is forgotten the heart of science, the "original intuition", is replaced by a view that reduces science to "logical operations" and "propositions" [65]. But "Intuition is something altogether different from the formulation of thought in words." [67] "By its very nature, meaning transcends conceptual formulation.... We should never forget the mere relative validity and symbolic nature of logical formulation." [65]

Having warned against the danger of reifying acts into propositions and reducing science to information, Voegelin turns to the nature of the intuition upon which science is based. Following Bergson Voegelin writes that knowledge must penetrate to the essence of things to "establish itself in that which is moving" and adapt to the "life of things themselves". [65] Such an intuition may be compared to plumbing the depths of the ocean. The intuitive meditation (*Sinnversenkung*) "penetrates to the meaning of the world itself". It is "a submerging of the self

into the essence of things where, by means of continuous contemplation, it becomes one (Einswerden) with them❖. [67]

If intuition and the mystical union ❖ becoming one with the ground -- constitute the heart of science it follows that all seekers of knowledge must penetrate to this same ground. This raises the questions: 1) How does one account for the differences in the penetration of the ground on the part of various individuals? 2) What are the implications for the understanding of man's relationship to man if, in fact, all human beings meet in the ground of being?

Concerning the first point Voegelin writes: In the act of plumbing the ground the "more alive the reality that is touched, the deeper the sounding❖.[65] The philosophical teacher is the one who has "so deeply penetrated the philosophical maze that we can no longer see which gate it was through which he entered❖. [66] His disciples are "those in whom a particular pre-existing formulation remains recognizable as the point of entry.❖[67] But, of course, this "point of entry❖, the linguistic formulation of the problem that interested the disciple, must be transcended in the disciple's own meditation of the ground. The difference is one of the breadth of the experience, but both master and disciple must attain the same depth.

Concerning the second point: the social meaning is given in the fact that such a sounding of the depths is not just a cognitive act: Participation in the common spiritual substance is the act in which society itself is constituted. Voegelin adopts the position of Othmar Spann that society, and indeed nature itself, is anchored in an overriding spiritual reality. Through acts of intuition this reality enters into human consciousness. Through mutual acts of spiritual awakening human beings participate in one another and in the spiritual reality out of which they live.

In his dissertation Voegelin expressed the unio mystica with the German word, "Einswerden❖, which means "Becoming-one-with❖. In the ancient world this participation ❖ cognitive and affective -- was expressed by the symbol of love, eros, philia, amicitia, or agape. The symbol "love❖ is a mythical expression for the comprehensive participatory relationship of one being to another.

In the second text, also dating from Voegelin's twenty-first year, and unpublished in his life time, "Wedekind: A Contribution to Contemporary Sociology", the symbol of love in this comprehensive sense becomes thematic.<sup>2</sup> [2] But first, as in his dissertation, here too we are confronted with Neo-kantian terms. The word "value" intrudes, but cannot obscure Voegelin's intent to articulate the deeper relationship of the participation in being. For, in reference to one of Plato's consciously constructed myths in The Republic, Voegelin speaks of the "vertical value" that unites individuals into one society. He contrasts the "vertical value", which like an axis penetrates from the height to the depth of society, thus touching the individuals of all classes, with the "horizontal values", or the specific value of each particular class: for example the "courage" of The Republic's guardians. [40]. But it is the "vertical value" that concerns us here because all members of all classes participate in this axial value. It expresses what Voegelin in his dissertation called the "imperative". Each member of a society is obliged to realize the leading value of the society. By participating in the process of its realization the individual becomes a member of society. The individual who most deeply grasps the "vertical value" and articulates it most clearly, becomes the representative person of that society. In Voegelin's words, the "great personalities" are those whose lives are characterized by the "highest intensity of reflection on this value" [49].

Voegelin's next point articulates his intention to overcome Neo-Kantian scepticism about the knowledge of being. Voegelin asks: How can society's highest value be precisely articulated in order to avoid subjectivity? And he replies: "We find this precise expression where the meaning of life is formulated, in the reason why one lives in the society at all: namely in the formulation of the concept of salvation or love". [44 ] At this point the language of "values" is dropped. Voegelin discusses love in the sense of an ordo amoris (Scheler), the order of loved "objects" and that constitutes a society's leading idea. Further, Voegelin argues that the structure of an idea can be analyzed, but that the last meaning of a love can only be found in the experience (Erlebnis).

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<sup>2</sup> [2] Eric Voegelin, "Wedekind: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie der Gegenwart", ed. Thomas Hollweck, Occasional Papers Eric-Voegelin-Archiv, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet, II B ( Munich , 1996). Quotations appear in the text in [ ]. The English translation in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 32, was not available to me.

Love cannot be grasped conceptually: "The linguistic formulation is merely a reference to the experience❖. [44f.]

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize four points that have emerged in this examination of Voegelin's earliest writings for what they reveal about his understanding of the relationship between mysticism and science, and to offer a few brief examples to illustrate its further development.

1. The human being as a spiritual being is constituted in the mystical experience of the ground; it is at this level of being that society is formed. As we have seen, according to Voegelin, the heart of any society is found in its myth of "salvation and love❖. And Voegelin later wrote in Race and State with reference to Schelling: The myth is not brought forth by a people; it is rather the myth out of which the people emerge. In this connection he also quotes Othmar Spann: "The intellectual history (Geistesgeschichte) of mankind is above all the history of religion❖.3 [3]
2. The mystical union with the ground of being is not ancillary to science; it is the heart of science. For this reason Voegelin's Order and History begins with the consubstantial community, the structure of being consisting of God, the world, society, and man. Indeed science begins where the philosopher's myth supplements and succeeds the myth of the people. Voegelin expressed this thought succinctly in his review of Ernst Cassirer's The Myth of the State. Cassirer, he writes, describes well "the disengagement of consciousness from the myth❖. But he is not good at describing the "new myth that takes the place of the old one❖. His approach shows Plato's "struggle against the disintegrating myth of the people, but it is blind to the new myth of the Socratic soul, which forms the substance of Plato's own position❖.4 [4]

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3 [3] Erich Voegelin, Rasse und Staat (Tuebingen: J.B. Siebeck Mohr, 1933). 115f. For further references to this theme, cf. 151f.


4 [4] Eric Voegelin, "Review of Ernst Cassirer, The Myth of the State(1947)❖, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin. Vol. 13: 156-158.

3. Those who participate most intensely in a society's *ordo amoris* become its representatives. This is the basis of Voegelin's personalism, i.e. the biographical interest he took in other thinkers' fundamental spiritual experiences, (for example Weber, Husserl, Nietzsche, Marx etc.). It is also the reason why Voegelin later conducted his own anamnestic experiments: he wanted to find the roots of the questions that stirred his love and thus shaped his person from the beginning.
4. The science of human order is a way of life engaged in by people who have advanced beyond the *volk-myth* of their own society to become rooted in the world ground and in the *ordo amoris* of the lover of wisdom. Thus, from the early 1930's we find Voegelin referring to the experience of St Augustine : "He begins to leave who begins to love. Many the leaving who know it not, for the feet of the leaving are affections of the heart: and yet, they are leaving Babylon."<sup>5</sup> [5] The starting point for the scientist must always be the widest and deepest *ordo amoris*. Otherwise he overlooks the most important aspects of reality: its height and its depth.

I would like to close by pointing out that Voegelin's orientation to mysticism in his early writings is not an exotic or merely personal orientation. In the sociology of Othmar Spann the mystical unity with the ground of being occupies a central position<sup>6</sup> [6] . And equally, in a book that Voegelin cites in his dissertation, Georg Simmel speaks of mysticism as one of the two fundamental approaches to the comprehensive knowledge of the world, the other being the Kantian. And Simmel defines mysticism as that intellectual turn found in all epochs at the deeper levels of the life of humankind, [that believes] we can penetrate to the

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5 [5] St. Augustine , Enarrationes in Psalmos 64.2.

6 [6] Cf. Othmar Spann, Gesellschaftslehre (Leipzig:Quelle&Meyer, 1923),184-209 et. Passim. And Ibid., Meister Eckharts mystische Philosophie (Graz:Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1974). See also, Ilse Roloff, Meister Eckharts Schriften zur Gesellschaftsphilosophie (Jena:Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1934) = Vol. 20 of  Die Herdflamme: Sammlung der gesellschaftlichen Grundwerke aller Zeiten und Voelker", ed. By Othmar Spann.

ground of the world, if we meditate the ground of our own soul. 7 [7] This is the way to science that Voegelin took.

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7 [7] Georg Simmel, Hauptprobleme der Philosophie (Berlin/Leipzig:G.J.Goeschen, 1913), 15. The exact wording of the passage alluded to is: "[S]ie erscheint als die intellektuelle Wendung jenes, wie es scheint, in allen Epochen des tieferen Menschheitslebens auftauchenden Gefuehles: dass wir in den Grund der Welt gelangen, wenn wir uns in den Grund der eignen Seele versenken."