

**Response to Robert Kraynak,  
“Heaven on Earth? Hegel and Voegelin on the Secular Religions of Modernity”**

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to respond to Professor Kraynak’s paper, because paper it is so deeply thoughtful and replete with excellent questions, considerations, and analyses.

I will divide my comments into five points.

First, I want to praise Professor Kraynak for his paper’s combination of accurate explanatory discussion and deliberative caution, as it addresses ideas of two very difficult thinkers in the context of a vast and unwieldy topic. I am particularly impressed by his attempt to explain briefly and in clear terms Hegel’s concepts of “subjective freedom” and the “free infinite personality.” Then, his rather more brief treatment of Voegelin as, in his words, a “phenomenologist of spiritual experiences” is very responsive to many of the complexities of Voegelin’s ideas from the 1940s and 1950s, as expressed, for example, in *The New Science of Politics and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Finally, I am impressed by his recognition of the necessarily incomplete character of his investigations. Unlike most scholars, he doesn’t appear to be prone to the compulsion to conclude a paper solely with answers, but allows the further relevant questions that naturally attend his analysis to be his focus as he comes to an end.

Second: with regard to those questions he concludes with in his paper’s final short section, I would like to focus on this one for a moment: and I quote: “How does a weakening of Christianity or ‘atrophied Biblical faith’ transfer or transpose spiritual features to a different[,]  
*worldly* plane?” I would suggest that he has himself offered the core of an answer to this question, about a page earlier, at the conclusion of the Voegelin section of his paper. There he explains that Voegelin focuses—and I quote again—on “the ‘symbolization’ of experiences of

the divine ground of being,” and that the “content” of these symbols can change when human “openness to transcendent being” is “closed down” as a result of “misguided . . . demands for false certitude.” What Professor Kraynak does not in these words explicitly state, but which his understanding of Voegelin’s thought certainly seems open to, is that for Voegelin the experience of the divine ground of being is not the privilege of certain persons; it is *structurally fundamental* to human consciousness. To use Voegelin’s terminology as it developed in the 1960s and after: human consciousness is constituted, always, as a “tension toward the divine ground of existence”; the tension toward the ground of one’s own and all reality is *always* present to every consciousness; the key question, then, is how adequately or inadequately the ground we are always aware of is symbolized, and, especially, whether that symbolization mediates for us the sense of mystery and supratemporal perfections that pertain to the true ground, or whether the ground becomes, for various reasons, misrepresented by its being imaginatively placed in one or another immanent, perhaps supposedly controllable, locale. Voegelin does identify one of the causes of such misrepresentation as a misleading demand for false certitude about transcendent mysteries. A second, intimately related cause he identifies are the effects of *libido dominandi*, the lust for power or desire to dominate—in this context, to dominate reality by claiming to fully comprehend the ultimate ground of meaning. Thus the answer to the question “how does a weakening of Christian faith transpose spiritual features to a worldly plane?” is already initially answered by Professor Kraynak, in his implicit grasp of the meaning of Voegelin’s comment in *The New Science of Politics* that the “fabric of [Christian]”faith” is too heavy a burden for those who “lust for massively possessive experience” in their relation to the ground of existence.

Third: any treatment of Voegelin’s analyses of the relationship between Christianity and modernity, of the sources and the manifold aspects of “secularization” in modernity, and of the

emergence of what Voegelin himself in his early and middle period work called “political religions,” is incomplete, and, unfortunately, unrepresentative of Voegelin’s mature philosophy, unless it takes into account his development of a sophisticated theory of consciousness and related philosophical anthropology during the 1960s and after, significantly beginning with the studies in his book *Anamnesis* from 1966, and continuing through 1974’s *The Ecumenic Age* and the major essays from the late 60s through the early 80s. It is in these works that Voegelin’s detailed philosophical analysis of human consciousness as a *metaxy*, a human-divine “in-between,” comes to the fore, along with his notion of the givenness of luminosity as a permanent structure of human consciousness, which shifted the basis of his analyses of historical and political developments away from the too-simple types of linear accounts properly questioned by Professor Kraynak, to more nuanced and complicated accounts of the sources and causes of symbols and systems. But Voegelin’s later work has, unfortunately, always been overshadowed by the burst of renown attending his earlier “gnosticism thesis” and the catchy phrase, “immanentizing the eschaton.” There is much more to Voegelin’s treatments of Christianity and to “secularization,” in all its meanings, than is to be found in his works of the 40s and 50s.

Fourth: Voegelin does not, as Professor Kraynak says, see “secularization” merely—and I quote—“as a betrayal of Christianity.” On the contrary, Voegelin’s philosophical critique of his own time is driven always by a careful and persistent distinction between accounts of how the *formative wisdom* in the traditions of Western culture have given rise to the stable Western democracies and their defense of human dignity and liberties articulated in secular political and legal terms, on the one hand, and on the other hand the *deformative ideas and images* of immanentist ideologies that have resulted in reductionist “secularisms,” including the so-called

“political religions.” Voegelin and Hegel are much more in agreement on the first of these aspects of secularization than Professor Kraynak’s paper might suggest.

Fifth and finally, Professor Kraynak aptly points out that analyses like Voegelin’s about the dependence of, say, Marxist-Bolshevist and National Socialist ideologies on prior religious and specifically Christian experiences and symbolizations are “difficult to prove or refute conclusively.” I would be stronger: they are impossible to prove or refute conclusively. They involve too many often obscure complexes of human experience, too many differentiating historical processes, altogether too many variables. But such theories can still be found to be cogent and convincing. How? By undergoing a long study of original texts that testify to origins and causes, and then, most importantly, by meditatively re-experiencing the experiences that gave rise to the symbols in those influential texts, and assessing their normative or deformative characters. But who is to decide on what is normative and deformative? The answer is easy but unwelcome: the quality of a philosopher’s judgments inevitably reflect the openness, authenticity, personal development, and capacities of consciousness of the philosopher. Objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity. And the only “proof” of one’s authenticity comes in the form of inward confirmation during the long course of ongoing dialogue with a vast range of authors of philosophical, religious and political wisdom, dialogue that illuminates so many ranges of data, and reveals so many relationships among them, that the gratifications of ongoing cognitive self-transcendence bring balance to the soul in its permanent tension of seeking.