

The Relationship Between Greek Philosophy and Christianity

in Eric Voegelin's Political Philosophy

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One does not have to read far into Eric Voegelin's work to realize that for him Greek philosophy and Christianity have an intimate relationship. One does not have to read much further to see that this relationship is quite complex.¹ [1] Voegelin recognized the fundamental importance of Christian revelation in the history of human understanding. He regarded it as "philosophy in its state of perfection."² [2] And yet, in spite of this acknowledgment, Voegelin often gave primacy to Greek philosophy. This deference is seen in both his reliance on the Greeks in his therapy of order and his critique of Christian revelation. This complex relationship leads to the question of this presentation: why would a thinker who acknowledges the epochal significance of Christian revelation give this primacy to Greek philosophy in his discussion of

1 [1] For further discussion on Voegelin's reading of Christianity see Bruce Douglass, "A Diminished Gospel: A Critique of Voegelin's Interpretation of Christianity," in *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History*, edited by Stephen A. McKnight (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 1978), 139-54; "The Gospel and Political Order: Eric Voegelin on the Political Role of Christianity," *Journal of Politics* 38 (1976): 25-45; Michael Federici, "Voegelin's Christian Critics," *Modern Age* 36 (1994): 331-40; Murray Jardine, "Eric Voegelin's Interpretation(s) of Modernity: A Reconsideration of the Spiritual and Political Implications of Voegelin's Therapeutic Analysis," *Review of Politics* 57 (1995): 581-605; Mark Miller, "Regaining the Balance: An Augustinian Response to Eric Voegelin," *Humanitas* 15 (2002): 4-31; James Rhodes, "Christian Faith, Jesus the Christ, and History," *Political Science Reviewer* 27 (1998): 44-67; David Walsh, "Voegelin's Response to the Disorder of the Age," *Review of Politics* 46 (1984): 266-87.

2 [2] Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, edited by Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 140.

human consciousness and political order? This presentation will suggest that Voegelin gave this primacy because he believed politics could be restored through a "noetically-controlled Christianity." By "noetically-controlled," I mean an expression of Christianity that takes into account the differentiation, or clarification of reality, of Christian revelation, yet guards against potential imbalance by giving primacy to Greek philosophy.

Voegelin certainly recognized the fundamental importance of Christian revelation for human consciousness and political order. For him, Christianity provided increased insight into reality (God and man, world and society), even beyond that of Greek philosophy. For example, Christian revelation illuminated the universality of man.³ [3] Voegelin writes, "The Platonic-Aristotelian man is the man of the polis and is, even for Aristotle, tied to the *omphalos* [belly-button] of Delphi ; precisely from the Hellenic position, a universal political science is radically impossible. Christianity and historical consciousness seem rather to be steps in the direction of the universalization of the image of man. . . . In my opinion that is the decisive reason for the superiority of the Christian anthropology over the Hellenic."⁴ [4] Greek philosophy maintained that the intracosmic gods are mediators between man and the Unknown God, whereas in the

3 [3] The choice to limit this discussion to Christology in no way restricts the insights of other symbols of Christianity or their political implications. In a fascinating letter written in response to long-time friend Alfred Schütz, Voegelin discusses some of these symbols in relation to their insights into the order of being: Christology (the incarnation), Theology (the Trinity), Mariology, and theological method itself. See Voegelin, "On Christianity (Letter to Alfred Schütz, 1 January, 1953)," in *Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness, and Politics*, edited by Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 453-56.

4 [4] Voegelin, "Letter to Leo Strauss (9 December, 1942)," in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, 9.

Christ event, those gods are removed. The Christ figure no longer allowed man to view his relationship to God as mediated by the deities of the Greek myths. Rather, man communes with God without geographical, political, or ethnic barriers. Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)." For Voegelin, this insight reveals "the dimension of spiritual singularity of every human being, so that we can no longer build a science of social order, for instance on the anthropologies of Plato or Aristotle."⁵ [5]

Even still with this maximal differentiation of Christian revelation, Voegelin gave primacy to Greek philosophy in his "new science" of political order. Almost without exception, Voegelin's work dealt with transcendence and its implications for human existence, including the *polis*. In his correspondence, he comments to friend Alfred Schötz that the "philosophical

⁵ [5] Though concrete political implications are not always spelled out in Voegelin's work as one might wish, at least two political implications seem to follow from Christian revelation. The first is an increased justification to critique political structures and ideologies. Voegelin writes, "[T]he tension between the institutions of the polis and the sentiments of the apolitical groups would recur in a Christian civilization in a more radical form because the Christian idea of the person in immediacy to God would prove the permanent irritant against the institutions" (See Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, vol. 4: The Renaissance and Reformation, vol. 22, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by David L. Morse and William M. Thompson (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 249-50). This increased justification is in part a result of man no longer needing mediation to the divine through a political or ethnic group. The second political implication is universal human dignity and rights. Though Greek philosophy's concept of political friendship provided notions of human dignity and rights, it was Christianity that provided the justification for the universalization of these notions. If Plato argued for a theological vision with the intracosmic gods of the Greeks, then it was impossible to develop a universal man, because the mediating divinities are bound to Hellas . Only a localized dignity could be constructed. Yet in Christian revelation, man has universal access to the Unknown God, not limited by the mediation of geographical divinities, providing justification for universal human dignity and rights. Voegelin, "The Theory of Legal Science: A Review," *Louisiana Law Review* 4 (1942): 554-71.

problems of transcendence [are] the decisive problems of philosophy."6 [6] His work was animated by a sense of political crisis, which he traced back to a spiritual crisis in the soul of modern man. This focus on transcendence was necessitated by a "decapitation of being," a rejection of transcendence in modern *politike episteme*. This recovery of transcendence became Voegelin's project. Yet he attempted this therapy of order, not by reliance on Christianity, but rather on Greek philosophy. Again and again, we find Voegelin used the latter as his touchstone.

This deference to Greek philosophy is nowhere more evident than in his theory of consciousness, particularly his recovery of the Platonic-Aristotelian account of the soul.7 [7] Voegelin believed that this order of being, articulating the hierarchical levels of reality (e.g. animals, man, and the divine), could not only provide clarity and insight into reality but could also penetrate deep into the spiritual disorder of the age. Thus, Voegelin not only diagnosed the modern problem (i.e. a rejection of transcendence) but also prescribed a recovery of transcendence without much mention of Christianity at all. This is not to say that Voegelin believed that Christianity could not provide a recovery of transcendence, nor is it to say that Voegelin made no advances beyond Greek philosophy. I am simply making the observation that Voegelin in his theory of consciousness gave primacy to Greek philosophy.

6 [6] Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, vol. 6, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by David Walsh (Columbia, Mo. : University of Missouri Press, 2002), 6.

7 [7] See Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, vol. 12, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, La. : Louisiana State University, 1990), 289-91.

Voegelin's philosophy of history also demonstrates deference to Greek philosophy. By emphasizing the movement of history towards a *telos*, Christianity (at least its Pauline expression) was much more interested in providing a meaning *of* history, than Greek philosophy. Voegelin writes, "The classic [or Greek] meaning *in* history can be opposed by Paul with a meaning *of* history, because he knows the end of the story in the transfiguration that begins with the Resurrection."⁸ [8] Christianity emphasized "the *movement* in the structure," in contrast to Greek philosophy's emphasis on "the *structure* in the movement."⁹ [9] That is to say, Christianity highlighted the eschatological direction of history towards its *telos*, whereas Greek philosophy focused on the constant human experience or condition.

Voegelin himself provided the meaning *in* history, a recovery of the *structure* in the movement. And it is this focus that demonstrates his deference to Greek philosophy. Two of the clearest examples are his attempt to identify the constants of human experience and his theory of equivalence. He sought to reclaim the human condition in its fullness that had been distorted by modern psychopathologies. By the removal of transcendence, modern man attempted to murder

⁸ [8] Voegelin, *Order and History, vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 17, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Michael Franz (Columbia, Mo. : University of Missouri, 2000), 324.

⁹ [9] Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, vol. 12, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, La. : Louisiana State University, 1990), 369.

God and become "super-man," driven by his *libido dominandi* (the lust for power).¹⁰ [10] But Voegelin demonstrated that man is "In-between" (*metaxy*), literally in between the animal and the divine. This is *the* human condition. And against those who attempted to divide history between a before and an after, culminating in their philosophy, Voegelin emphasized the equivalence between the human experience being symbolized. He writes, "the enthusiasm of renewal and discovery can be so intense that it will transfigure the new truth into absolute Truth--an ultimate Truth that relegates all previous truth to the state of *pseudos*, a lie."¹¹ [11] He continues, "[T]he enthusiasm can also be tempered by awareness that the truth emerging from the process is not entirely new . . . but a differentiated and therefore superior insight into the same reality." For example, man's "search for the ground," or an existential pull towards his source of existence, is a constant human experience. Though this expression has been demonstrated in a variety of ways (e.g. Heraclitus's "love, hope, and faith," or St. Augustine's *amor dei*), they are essentially equivalent--that is, they express the same movement of the soul in man. Thus, by emphasizing the *structure* in the movement, Voegelin's philosophy of history has Greek philosophy as its touchstone.¹² [12]

¹⁰ [10] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Wilmington, De.: ISI Books, 2004), 21-25.

¹¹ [11] Voegelin, "Experience and Symbolization in History," in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, vol. 12, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 1990), 125.

¹² [12] I acknowledge that it is possible that Voegelin's philosophy of history is more Christian than previously stated. There can be no question that Voegelin's philosophy is not Christian in the Pauline sense (or at least Voegelin's interpretation of Paul's Christianity). This is

Not only did Voegelin give primacy to the Greeks at crucial points in his political philosophy, he also critiqued Christianity using Greek philosophy. The most well-known is the critique of Paul's interpretation of his vision. In short, he accused Paul of being overly fixated on history's movement toward its *telos*.¹³ [13] That is to say, Paul had a certain expectation that the *eschaton* would break in time in the not too distant future. Unlike the Platonic expression, Voegelin believed that Paul did not maintain the balance necessary to guard against this expectation. By imbalance, I mean an ability to keep the tension between the constant structure of the order of reality and the movement of history toward transfiguration in check from an excessive fixation on the *eschaton*. Instead of clouding the future transfiguration in mystery (as Plato did), Paul articulated his vision in explicit fashion and even expected the event to occur

the point made above, but his philosophy of history could still be Christian. In discussing the rise of Christianity as a political power, Voegelin writes that a radical eschatological expectation (Pauline Christianity) would have kept Christian communities in obscurity. He argued that Christianity became a social force through two "Pauline compromises." The first was the realization that the world, including political powers, was not going to end next week. The second was the transformation of the church from its eschatological emphasis to the "historical *corpus Christi mysticum*." These compromises sound identical to Voegelin's remarks in "The Gospel and Culture." He writes, "If the community of the gospel had not entered the culture of time by entering its life of reason, it would have remained an obscure sect and probably disappeared from history" (See Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 140). In other words, Christianity incorporated "noetic-control" into its theology. If this is the case, my hypothesis is not altered. Voegelin's philosophy of history, if it is Christian, would be Christian, because it possesses these "noetic-controls," the very point I am making. (It should also be noted that for Voegelin these "compromises" were not outside Christianity but "implied as a possible evolution in the appearance and teachings of Christ.") Voegelin, "On Christianity (Letter to Alfred Schütz, 1 January, 1953)," 453.

13 [13] Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4: *The Ecumenic Age*, 303-39.

within his lifetime. Voegelin focused on Paul's treatment of *phthora* (perishing).¹⁴ [14] According to Voegelin, Greek philosophy maintained the balance between *genesis* (birth) and *phthora* (perishing) by leaving the future immortality of man in mystery. Yet due to Paul's apocalyptic ferocity, he allowed the balance of life and death, the constant human experience, to be distorted by arguing that man will be transfigured without death: "we shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we (*who have not yet died*) shall be changed [italics added]." Voegelin's deference to the Platonic balance (and thus Greek philosophy), over and against the Pauline imbalance, is certain. This deference is so much the fact that some commentators have accused Voegelin of forcing Christian revelation into Greek categories.¹⁵ [15]

This tension in Voegelin's thought between the superiority of Christianity and the deference to Greek philosophy brings us back to our initial question. Why would a thinker who acknowledges the epochal significance of Christian revelation give this primacy to Greek philosophy in his discussion of human consciousness and political order?

¹⁴ [14] *Ibid.*, 305-06.

¹⁵ [15] Jardine, "Eric Voegelin's Interpretation(s) of Modernity: A Reconsideration of the Spiritual and Political Implications of Voegelin's Therapeutic Analysis," 603; Marion Montgomery, "Eric Voegelin and the End of Our Exploring," *Modern Age* 23 (1979): 244, n. 9; Gerhart Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind," *Modern Age* 20 (1976): 35; Stephen Tonsor, "The God Question," *Modern Age* 35 (1992): 66.

Given the superiority that Voegelin ascribes to Christianity, perhaps Voegelin used Greek philosophy to build a philosophic foundation, ultimately seeking to restore political order through Christianity. Michael Federici suggests something to this effect:

Voegelin is primarily concerned with building a philosophical foundation on which to support a spiritual revival. He believes that the preliminary task is to recover the meaning of experience. With this as a precondition, Voegelin hopes to restore the primacy of meaningful spiritual conversion.¹⁶ [16]

In order for such a revival to take place, a Greek philosophic foundation must be laid. This relationship is reminiscent of Voegelin's statement in "The Gospel and Culture:" "[I]t will be necessary . . . to recover the question to which, in Hellenistic-Roman culture, the philosopher could understand the gospel as the answer."¹⁷ [17] It seems reasonable to conclude that Voegelin sought to use Greek philosophy as a *preparation evangelica*. Since the insights gained by Greek philosophy and Christianity have been distorted by modern psychopathologies, Voegelin believed it necessary to open up the soul to the order of Greek philosophy, so that in time Christianity could be viewed once again as an answer.

In this view, Voegelin's deference to Greek philosophy would not be a rejection of Christian revelation but rather its affirmation. Perhaps, in an earlier correspondence, Voegelin was getting at something similar to this, "Sometimes I have the feeling that my intellectual

¹⁶ [16] Michael Federici, "Voegelin's Christian Critics," 337.

¹⁷ [17] Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 142.

accomplishment for the church's problematic cultural situation (*Kulturproblematik*) is greater than the accomplishments of the professionals, whose job it is supposed to be."18 [18]

Even though this hypothesis highlights the epochal significance of Christian revelation, it has one weakness: it overlooks the significant criticism that Voegelin gave of Christianity itself. As a matter of fact, if Voegelin would have been given the opportunity to boil Christianity down into one word, it possibly would have been *dangerous*. It is somewhat presumptuous then to argue that Voegelin attempted to pave the way for a Christian "spiritual revival," while at the same time he suggested that it is one of the major factors in the "deforming of humanity."19 [19]

This criticism of Christianity brings us to a second hypothesis suggested by Murray Jardine, namely that Voegelin believed that the modern disorder is "not a rebellion against Christianity but precisely a more complete realization of Christianity's own essence."20 [20] In this answer, Voegelin would have given primacy to Greek philosophy over Christianity because in fact the latter is the spiritual root of the modern political mass movements. It would stand to

18 [18] Voegelin, "Letter to Friedrich Engel-Janosi (11 May, 1951)," quoted in *History of Political Ideas, vol. 1: Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, vol. 19, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 24, n. 28.

19 [19] Voegelin, *Order and History, vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*, 66.

20 [20] Murray Jardine, "Eric Voegelin's Interpretation(s) of Modernity: A Reconsideration of the Spiritual and Political Implications of Voegelin's Therapeutic Analysis," 600-01.

reason that any recovery of order would avoid incorporating the foundation of the problem into the solution.

There is no question that for Voegelin Christianity is much to blame for the modern disorder, as Jardine brings to our attention. Voegelin writes, "[T]he modern revolt is so intimately a development of the ♦Christianity' against which it is in revolt."²¹ [21] Ever since the Christ event, Christians have misinterpreted, distorted, and even manipulated its revelation. The deformations provide much justification for Voegelin's deference to Greek philosophy.

However, this hypothesis goes too far. It does not adequately account for the advancements beyond Greek philosophy that Christianity brings for Voegelin. So, how are we to reconcile this tension in Voegelin's reading of Christianity? Though at times Voegelin did argue for a connection between Christianity and the modern disorder, he also distinguished between the two. He writes, "For it must not be forgotten that Western society is not at all modern but that modernity is a growth within it, in opposition to the classic and Christian tradition."²² [22] It is at this point that a distinction must be made between the Christian revelation, or "essential Christianity" as Voegelin called it, and the distorted interpretations of that vision.²³ [23] This

²¹ [21] Voegelin, *Order and History, vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*, 336.

²² [22] Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 176. See also "Configurations of History," in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, vol. 12, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 1990), 107-08.

²³ [23] Voegelin, "On Christianity (Letter to Alfred Sch♦tz, 1 January, 1953)," 452.

very distinction is made in Voegelin's discussion of the Paul's vision.²⁴ [24] Voegelin argues that the valid expression of the vision is the feeling of the eschatological movement of history, yet Paul's interpretation goes awry when it is "used to anticipate the concrete process of transfiguration within history."²⁵ [25] Thus, Voegelin argued that Christian revelation, as experienced by Jesus and his followers (e.g. Paul), gave insight into reality, yet Christianity, that is interpretations of the event, are often mistaken and imbalanced. Voegelin believed that the Christ event must be a part of the restoration of order, and he acknowledged the superiority of the event. However, Christian revelation is one thing; its derailment is something else. It is more proper then to say that Voegelin believed that *some* interpretations of Christianity contributed to the modern psychopathologies but that Christian revelation (as Voegelin interprets it) does not necessary have to lead to disorder.

Jardine does not ignore this distinction I have just made, yet struggles to account for it adequately because he rejects Voegelin's interpretation as authentic Christianity. Jardine calls Voegelin's Christianity a radical reinterpretation. He even goes so far as to call it a "new religion."²⁶ [26] Jardine is not alone. Others have regarded Voegelin as approaching

²⁴ [24] Voegelin, *Order and History, vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*, 336-39.

²⁵ [25] *Ibid.*, 338.

²⁶ [26] Jardine, "Eric Voegelin's Interpretation(s) of Modernity: A Reconsideration of the Spiritual and Political Implications of Voegelin's Therapeutic Analysis," 585.

Christianity from a "standpoint extraneous to it."²⁷ [27] Yet regardless of one's like or dislike of Voegelin's Christianity, he took great pains to demonstrate that his reading, even his criticism, was not beyond Christianity itself. It rather developed within the Christian revelation. Voegelin writes in response to Thomas Alitzer, "I am equally conscious of not going beyond the orbit of Christianity."²⁸ [28]

Unfortunately, these two previous hypotheses fall short of adequately accounting for the tension in Voegelin's political philosophy. Each interestingly enough emphasizes what the other overlooks. The first highlights the contribution that Voegelin believed Christian revelation made for political order, yet does not emphasize enough his serious criticism of Christianity. The

²⁷ [27] Gerhart Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind," 35.

²⁸ [28] This response was to two points raised by Thomas Alitzer: (1) Voegelin's preference for translating the Greek word *theotes* as divine reality, instead of godhead, and (2) his use of the Christian medieval phrase, *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), to include every faith, not only Christianity. Concerning his translation of *theotes* as divine reality, he writes, "I have preferred *divine reality* because it renders best *the author's intention* to denote a nonpersonal reality which allows for degrees of participation in its fullness while remaining the God beyond the In-Between of existence [italics added]." In dealing with the equivalence of faith (properly understood), Voegelin again attempts to develop his interpretation from within Christianity, not from without. He writes, "Even this expansion of the *fides*, however, to all of the experience of divine reality in which history constitutes itself, cannot be said to go beyond ♦Christianity.' For it is the Christ of the Gospel of John who says himself, ♦'Before Abraham was, I am' (8:58); and it is Thomas Aquinas who considers the Christ to be the head of the *corpus mysticum* that embraces, not only Christians, but all mankind from the creation of the world to its end." Voegelin, "Response to Professor Alitzer's ♦'A New History and a New but Ancient God?'," in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, vol. 12, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 1990), 294. See also "The Gospel and Culture," 158.

second brings his criticism to the forefront, while not sufficiently accounting for Voegelin's affirmation of Christianity.

Thus, an answer is needed that accounts for all of the complexities found in Voegelin's thought. The proposed solution--"noetically-controlled Christianity"--does just that. Again, by "noetically-controlled," I mean an expression of Christianity that takes into account the differentiation of Christian revelation, yet guards against potential imbalance by giving primacy to Greek philosophy. This solution suggests that Voegelin was a Christian political philosopher, in the sense that he believed that the Christian revelation was necessary to a proper political order. And at least in the intellectual sense, he can be considered nothing less than Christian. He writes, "I would take it as a principle of philosophizing that the philosopher must include in his interpretation the maximally differentiated experiences. . . . Now with Christianity a decisive differentiation has occurred."²⁹ [29] Thus, Voegelin's philosophy is just that a "noetically-controlled *Christianity*."

Yet he also believed that, because of certain tendencies within the revelation itself, Christianity has played a significant role in the "deforming of humanity" and thus needs "noetic-control." Christianity's tendency toward imbalance by apocalyptic fixation provides a case in point. The Greek noetic differentiation maintained the balance between the structure and the movement; Plato surrounded the "noetic core with his belt of uncertainty" to guard against an

²⁹ [29] Voegelin, "On Christianity (Letter to Alfred Schmitz, 1 January, 1953)," 450.

obsession of the *eschaton*.³⁰ [30] In contrast, Christian pneumatic differentiation (particularly the Pauline interpretation) abolished this tension; Paul displays impatience in his apocalyptic assurances. These assurances later led to "egophanic revolts," attempts to bring the future transfiguration into history. Thus, while taking into account the insights of Christian revelation, Voegelin felt it necessary to provide a "noetic-control" to this tendency by emphasizing the structure in the movement (using Greek philosophy), rather than the movement itself. He provided a means by which this tendency might be controlled and not become an imbalanced political philosophy.

³⁰ [30] Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4: *The Ecumenic Age*, 298-99.