

The Open Society, from Bergson to Voegelin

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1 – Voegelin, Bergson and the Two Sources of Morality and Religion

Voegelin frequently proclaims his admiration for Bergson. He views him as one of the restorers of political science in its classic sense¹, following its destruction by the positivist, utilitarian, progressive and nationalist ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries². Bergson most often features within a list comprised mainly of Christian thinkers – Catholics such as Maritain, Lubac, Gilson and von Baltasar as well as Protestants such as Barth, Jaspers and Toynbee, and Orthodox (Berdyaeu). These lists vary in length from one work to another, and contain different names³. It is therefore all the more significant that Bergson is constantly featured among them⁴. Voegelin deplors the fact that this genuinely ‘great philosopher’, heir to the great spiritualists⁵, should receive such limited recognition in the world of the intellectuals⁶.

¹ See the 1953 article ‘The Oxford Political Philosophers’, in which Voegelin notes the renewal of interest among certain contemporary thinkers in political science as practised by Plato and Aristotle (*CW*, XI, p. 39 and p. 43), and also *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, *CW*, V, p. 259.

² See, for example the paper of 1946 on ‘Clericalism’, *CW*, XXIX, p. 709.

³ See, for example, *CW*, XI, p. 39; XXX, p. 148; XXIX, pp. 611 and 709.

⁴ Bergson is, on occasion, mentioned individually, as an exception to the general corruption of the age: see ‘Conversations with Eric Voegelin at the Thomas More Institute for Adult Education in Montreal’, *CW*, XXXIII, p. 324; ‘On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery’, *CW*, XII, p. 237; ‘On Classical Studies’, *CW*, XII, p. 260.

⁵ Among the great spiritualists, Voegelin frequently cites Bodin, Descartes, Hegel and James. See, for instance, *CW*, XII, p. 56; VIII, p. 131; XII, p. 56; XXXIII, p. 177. On the similarities between Bodin and Bergson, see *Anamnesis*, *CW*, VI, p. 392 *sq.*; *Corr.*, *CW*, XXX, pp. 682 et 780; *Autobiographical Reflections*, *CW*, XXXIV, p. 139.

⁶ Thus, in his 1973 article ‘On Classical Studies’, Voegelin denounces the ‘philosophical illiteracy’ that has, he writes, ‘progressed so far that the experiential core of the philosophizing has disappeared below the horizon, and is not even recognized as such when it appears in

Should this enthusiasm, however, be taken to indicate a commitment to the thought of Bergson? If we assume that to be the case, then that commitment is restricted to the final work by Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*⁷. Voegelin sometimes refers to other works, but in those instances a more neutral tone is adopted. Voegelin somehow agrees with the anti-intellectualism of Bergson and his deprecation of philosophical systems, as well as with his non-positivist empiricism⁸, without subscribing either to the immanentist and vitalist aspects of his metaphysics, or to the activist and decisionist tendencies of his moral anthropology⁹. This also means that when he reads Bergson's *Two Sources*, he does so without regard for the residual presence of these themes.

Voegelin thus appears only to have encountered the thought of Bergson at a late date¹⁰. The *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* is

philosophers like Bergson' (CW, XII, p. 260). See also the discussion following the 1965 conference 'In Search of a Ground' (CW, XI, p. 247), in which Voegelin revolts against the identification of 'contemporary philosophy' with intellectuals that he views as 'has-beens', contrasting them with 'the people who are good and do something new – for instance, Henri Bergson'. Voegelin clarifies that 'here you have a great philosopher. And a Bergson is worth all contemporary philosophy of the second raters'.

⁷ To this work we may add the 'gripping document' – namely, the explanations given by Bergson himself in an interview with the Dominican and Thomist Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges (*Avec Bergson*, 1941). See *New Science of Politics*, CW, V, p. 151 and *Corr.*, CW, XXX, p. 58.

⁸ On the contrast between the logical perfection and the truth of intuition, see for example 'Interaction and Spiritual Community', CW, XXXII, p. 64 *sq.*

⁹ Voegelin thus criticises Bergson (as he does elsewhere James) for devoting himself to a religion of vitality that he describes as 'commercial', as it locates the categories of change, development, activity and creation at the centre of reality (*On the Form of the American Mind*, CW, I, p. 115). See also the 1935 article 'Race and State', CW, IX, p. 43.

¹⁰ Voegelin thus says, in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, about his year spent in Paris (1926-1927): 'Curiously enough, I was not yet attracted by the work of Henri Bergson, though I was already familiar with his *Matière et mémoire* and his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. My real interest in Bergson only grew with the publication of his *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* in 1932' (CW, XXXIV, p. 63).

published in French in 1932¹¹. The work is translated into German in the same year, and into English in 1935. However, there are scarcely any references to this work to be found within the works of Voegelin prior to the end of the war (Bergson himself dies in 1941). The contexts in which Bergson is employed may be summarized in three major points:

1 / Firstly, as I have already mentioned, Bergson is used as a herald in the battle being waged for the restoration of culture against the pseudo-intellektuels who contribute to its destruction¹². It is in this capacity that he is most frequently cited by Voegelin, as he would be until the end of his life.

2 / In 1945, the work by Karl Popper on *The Open Society and its Enemies* is published. At first, Voegelin remains quite indifferent towards this publication¹³, but the controversy that the book triggers and the success it encounters among intellectuals and students lead him to react strongly against the Popperian interpretation of Plato (caricatured as a ‘sort of fascist, or generally totalitarian, thinker’¹⁴) and, more broadly, against the generalised use made of the Bergsonian

¹¹ *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*, Paris, PUF, 1932, republished 2012 [hereafter, ‘DS’]; Engl. Transl., *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter, New York, Hendy Hold and co, 1935, reed. 1954, reprint Notre Dame, Notre Dame Press Ed., 2010 [hereafter, ‘TS’].

¹² The context of the Cold War of course only succeeded in exacerbating the verbal vehemence of that controversy.

¹³ ‘I cannot say that I am impressed’, he contents himself with writing to a student in 1949 (CW, XXIX, p. 591). This leads us to conclude that Voegelin read the work by Popper between 1949 and 1950 (when he writes his famous letter to Leo Strauss on Popper, cf. infra).

¹⁴ Cf. the review of the works by Wild and Levinson published in 1954, three years before the appearance of his own work on *Plato and Aristotle* (CW, XIII, p. 186).

concept of the ‘open society’¹⁵. Bergson does not merely restore its dignity to the thought of Plato (seen as the authentic successor of Socrates, and not the betrayer of pristine Socratism): he is first and foremost the eulogist of the ‘true’ open society, against its falsification by contemporary ideologues, for whom Popper is the spokesman.

3 / 1949 sees the publication in German of the work by Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*. Voegelin, who is already familiar with *A Study of History* by Toynbee¹⁶, identifies the Jasperian ‘Axial Age’ with the period, described by Bergson, which saw the emergence of the open society under the impetus of the great prophets, philosophers and mystics, seeing Bergson as the source for both Toynbee and Jaspers. Moreover, Bergson corrects Jaspers, who has neglected the Judeo-Christian contribution¹⁷, seeing in the latter as the apogee of the spiritual movement of antiquity¹⁸. Combined with an understanding of Toynbee and Jaspers, his reading of Bergson will make it possible for Voegelin to clarify his own historical thinking, which had only been sketched out in the works of the 1930s, and which would find its full expression in the first three volumes of *Order and History*.

¹⁵ Concerning the critique of Popper see, in addition to the review of the works by Wild and Levinson already mentioned, that of the work by Verdross-Drossberg (CW, XIII, p. 179), as well as the particularly virulent 1950 letter to Leo Strauss (CW, XXX, p. 53).

¹⁶ Voegelin mentions this work as early as 1948 (*Corr.*, CW, XXIX, p. 576).

¹⁷ Yet, in a letter to John H. Hallowell of 1953, Voegelin also levels this criticism at Bergson himself: ‘I am in agreement with Bergson’s attempt, except that I take the Christian experiences more seriously than he did’ (CW, XXX, p. 139).

¹⁸ On the contribution made by Bergson to the definition of the age of the resurgence of mystical philosophies see, for example, *New Science of Politics*, CW, V, p. 151; ‘World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind’ (1962), CW, XI, p. 135; *History of Political Ideas*, CW, XXIV, p. 148; *Nature of the Law*, CW, XVII, 76); ‘What is History’, CW, XXVIII, p. 41 and the 1953 letter to Schöddekopf (CW, XXX, p. 145). On Bergson and Toynbee, see also the 1948 letter to Henri A. Moe (CW, XXIX, p. 576).

2 – The ‘open/closed’ duality prior to the interpretation of the Two Sources

During the 1940s, while Voegelin maintains his interest in the *Two Sources*, he had already elaborated the categories of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ as fundamental categories of his own thought. From the publication of his 1928 work *On the Form of the American Mind* onwards, Voegelin thus constructs the concept of the ‘open self’ in order to explain certain fundamental aspects of American pragmatism. As he writes in his introduction, he has based this concept on that of the ‘pluralistic universe’ of William James¹⁹. James uses this term to describe not only the indeterminate aspect of the universe itself, but also, and more especially, a certain form of openness of the human mind toward God and the world. In his 1907 work *Pragmatism*, James thus writes: ‘The actual universe is a thing wide open, but rationalism makes systems, and systems must be closed’²⁰. An ‘open’ universe may only be apprehended by an ‘open’ rationality, as opposed to the closed systematic rationality bequeathed by western philosophy. Equally, for Voegelin, openness indicates an existential orientation in which ‘the human being is not alone but is open to [God] and continuously approaching him’. Mankind is thus able to overcome the anxiety of being alone and self-sufficient (*‘the suffering of loneliness*

¹⁹ ‘One personal category, developed from the materials and from the interpretations of them, is the category of the open self. Found in analyses of the problem of time and existence in English and American philosophy, the open self describes the form given to the problem of dialectics in the United States [...]. Projects that legitimize the dialectic, especially in its modification as a problem of self-consciousness, were universally assigned to the personal category of a closed self, while efforts to avoid it were given the name of open self’ (CW, I, p. 9). In this instance the term ‘closeness’ must not of course be understood negatively as a feeling of self-sufficiency, but rather in a positive sense as a desire for deep relational intimacy.

²⁰ *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, New York, Longman Green and Co, 1907, p. 27, republished in *The Works of William James*, vol. I, Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 20.

and skepticism'), in an act of consciousness that 'brings together the self and the world into a nonmysterious, finite, temporal process of pure experience'²¹.

These categories of openness and closedness, whose socio-political consequences for American pragmatic and institutionalist thought are described by Voegelin, would develop into fundamental categories within his own philosophy. This was continued in two significant areas during the 1930s:

1 / The Jamesian critique of closed intellectual systems extends into a critique of the closed nature of the 'pure' legal theory of Hans Kelsen and his disciples²². According to Voegelin, the legal system cannot be explained satisfactorily without an openness to meta-legal semantic contexts – ethical, sociological, historical, religious, etc. Here we are able to discern the outline of a conflict between a form of systematic rationality that remains closed in on itself and a form of rationality that is 'open' to the foundation²³. This idea would come to fruition in

²¹ 'The intuition of the universe and the humankind expressed in the dialectic is dissolved and unfolded into naïvely structured historical courses in a finite time. God himself has such a history – and the human being is not alone but is open to him and continuously approaching him. The demonic nature of individualism, the suffering of loneliness and skepticism, which lead us to plumb the depth of the present moment, have all dissolved. Knowledge has itself changed from an act that in mysterious ways brings together the self and the world into a nonmysterious, finite, temporal process of pure experience' (CW, I, p. 62).

²² On the concept of the 'closure' of the self-normalized legal system, see for example the 1930-1 article on 'The Unity of the Law and the Social Structure of Meaning Called State', CW, VIII, p. 112 *seq.* Concerning the contrast between Voegelin and Kelsen, see my study 'Le fétichisme de la norme : Eric Voegelin critique de Hans Kelsen', online journal *Dissensus*, n°1, Brussels, 2008 (<http://popups.ulg.ac.be/dissensus/document.php?id=368>).

²³ Bergson would later be cited as one of a group of philosophers who attempted to create an existential foundation for law and politics. See, for instance, the 1931 letter to John van Sickle, CW, XXIX, p. 80.

Voegelin's mature works, with the redefinition of the terms *ratio* and *nous*²⁴.

2 / From the publication of *Race and State* in 1933 onwards, Voegelin analyses the role played in the formation of modern states by the destruction of the symbol of the '*corpus mysticum*', to be replaced by that of modern states conceived as closed entities. The 'dissolution' of the *sacrum imperium* proceeds from a new vision of human existence remaining 'closed in on itself' and of the individual life that is, according to Voegelin, 'increasingly closed off and that becomes finite'²⁵. The article of 1940, 'The Growth of the Race Idea' gives a definition of the terms 'open' and 'close': 'By "closing" of a substance I mean the process in the course of which the transcendental point of union is abolished and the community substance as an intramundane entity becomes self-centered. The formerly open group with spiritual threads running from every single member beyond the earthly reality into another ontological realm closes by the transfer of the center from the beyond into the very community itself'²⁶. Fichte (one of whose works, cited by Voegelin²⁷, bears the significant title *The Closed Commercial State*) is presented as the pioneer of this new concept of the partial and closed-off community – engaged in a struggle against the other communities, conceived as satanic.

²⁴ See, for example, the article 'Reason. The Classic Experience', *CW*, XII, pp. 273-274, and also *Corr.*, *CW*, XXX, p. 125

²⁵ *Race and State*, *CW*, II, pp. 142-144.

²⁶ 'The Growth of the Race Idea', *CW*, X, p. 46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

3 – *The open society: historical ideal or anthropological fact?*

Voegelin therefore meets Bergson after an intellectual career that is quite different to his²⁸. The open-closed duality provides structure to the thought of Bergson in the *Two Sources*, and is in general applied either to the soul or society²⁹. Their encounter is not simply a matter of lexicography: for both Bergson and Voegelin, the openness of society towards the whole of humanity is accomplished only through the soul's openness to divine transcendence. This proximity appears sufficiently important to Voegelin, within the different polemical contexts he encounters, that he remains discreet regarding the fundamental differences between his own philosophy and that of the French thinker.

The most obvious differences relate to the vision of history that is presented. It is this aspect to which Dante Germino has devoted the greatest attention³⁰. Voegelin himself only emphasises these differences on rare occasions, and does so discreetly, preferring for the most part to emphasise the similarities³¹. Thus, in *Anamnesis*, he

²⁸ Voegelin describes the intellectual path followed by Bergson as far as *The Two Sources*, in a 1969 letter to Hensingen (*CW*, XXX, p. 616), as a passage from the identity of personality to the dissolution and reconstitution of that personality through an openness towards transcendence.

²⁹ It is also on occasion applied to the concept of justice (*DS*, p. 81 / *TS*, p. 80-81). It also eventually appears in substantivized form in the dichotomy between 'the closed' and 'the open' (*DS*, p. 58 / *TS*, p. 59).

³⁰ See especially *Political Philosophy and the Open Society*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1982, pp. 166-169, and the article 'Preliminary Reflections on the Open Society: Bergson, Popper, Voegelin', in D. Germino (ed.), *The Open Society in Theory and Practice*, La Haye, M. Nijhoff, 1974, pp. 1-25.

³¹ Voegelin contents himself with writing that the open society and the closed society represent two opposite states ('World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind', *CW*, XI, p. 121). Similarly, in 1961, in a dialogue with Raymond Aron, he summarizes Bergsonian thinking on this issue by stating, without any further explanations, that history is subject to a succession of periods in which the soul is open to transcendence and periods in which it is closed (*CW*, XI, p. 121). At

writes that the type of history described by Bergson incorporates an age in which the soul remains open succeeded by an age of ‘ossification’ and closedness, and a (present and future) age of ‘renewed openness’³². It is quite obvious that we are dealing here with a reappropriation of Bergson by Voegelin, for Bergson repeats that before philosophizing, it is necessary to live: closed societies, formed by the pressure of vital, instinctive forces of individual and collective preservation, must have preceded the open society, created by the aspiration of the soul towards an ideal transcending these instinctive forces³³.

Thus, for Bergson primitive societies remain closed. The intuition of great prophets, philosophers and mystics was necessary for society to open itself to humanity. Bergson emphasises that this opening of the soul and society did not occur as the result of ‘gradual development’, but as a ‘sudden leap’³⁴. Voegelin, who at this point is probably inspired by Bergson, is also of the opinion that the prophets, philosophers, and especially mystics, are the bearers of a ‘leap in being’; however, this ‘saltus’ is not of an identical nature. Indeed, for Voegelin primitive societies are not in the least closed societies, created as a result of biological pressures and entirely unacquainted with the experience of transcendence. What differentiates them from the societies that Bergson describes as ‘open’ is that they express this

this level of generalization, it is clear that there is no real disagreement between the two authors.

³² *Anamnesis*, CW, VI, p. 395.

³³ ‘The closed society is that whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defense, bound, in a fact, for a perpetual readiness for battle. Such is human society fresh from the hands of nature [...]. The open society is the society which is deemed in principle to embrace all humanity’ (*DS*, pp. 283-284 / *TS*, p. 266-267).

³⁴ *DS*, p. 73 / *TS*, p. 73.

experience of transcendence through compact symbols, whereas in the great prophets, philosophers and mystics it is expressed via differentiated symbols. Thus, the ‘leap in being’ is not a leap towards the experience of the divine, since the divine is always experienced, but constitutes a leap as regards the way in which the divine is experienced and represented in various symbolic expressions. As Voegelin writes in 1953 to John H. Hallowell, ‘history thus becomes the description of the development of experiences from compactness to differentiation’³⁵. That leap occurs on the basis of an equivalence between symbols – differentiated to different degrees – as varying expressions of the same fundamental experience – that of the *eros* of the human soul towards transcendence. Humanity, thus, does not have to be radically transformed, as Bergson says³⁶, but simply to recall its fundamental experiences through the work of *anamnesia*.

Viewed from this perspective, there can, properly speaking, be no ‘progress’ in history. The most articulate symbols (those produced by Greek philosophy and Christianity³⁷), which represent divinity as transcendent over man and the world, are also the most fragile – a single step separates the God beyond the world from the God stranger to the world, and at any moment the distension between God and the world may break. The closed society cannot therefore be identified with primitive societies and their methods of mythical symbolization; on the contrary, for Voegelin, it never represents, as it does in Bergson, a form of regression towards the archaic – it is, rather, a fruit of modernity.

³⁵ *CW*, XXX, p. 139.

³⁶ *DS*, p. 253 / *TS*, p. 239.

³⁷ See, for example, *New Science of Politics*, *CW*, V, p. 151, in which Voegelin appears to attribute this concept to Bergson himself.

History cannot therefore be interpreted using the Bergsonian phrase stating that ‘before man can philosophize man must live’³⁸. Individuals are born if not as philosophers then at least endowed with a spiritual capacity. There is indeed for Voegelin something akin to a human ‘nature’, but it refers to ‘a defined structure of existence’, that is its dimension of openness to transcendence. Paradoxically, the representation of this human ‘nature’ as biological constitutes one of the characteristic symbols of the closing down of the soul and society³⁹.

Bergsonian historical philosophy thus remains in thrall to the progressive principles inherited from the Enlightenment – a fact that is made clear by the extremely positive vision of modernity and its secular values that Bergson has. Society is, in his view, directed towards a moral ideal to which it moves progressively closer, via a succession of advances and regressions, over the course of its history⁴⁰.

³⁸ *DS*, p. 111 and 185; *TS*, p. 108 and 176.

³⁹ This represents one of the major themes of the 1940 article, ‘The Growth of the Race Idea’. It is already to be found in muted form in the 1935 article ‘Race and State’ (*CW*, IX, p. 43).

⁴⁰ If we were to look for the origin of the Voegelinian concept of history, we would find it in Plotinus (‘On the three primary hypostases’, *Enneads*, V, 1, ch. 9-10). Plotinus wishes, in particular, to demonstrate that his theory of the transcendence of the One-Good, of nous and of the soul does not constitute a ‘novelty’. For Plotinus, as for Voegelin, the veracity of a thought cannot be assessed according to its ‘novelty’, for truth is eternal. The Presocratic thinkers (Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles) furnished correct, although still imprecise, expressions for it. Plato expressed it in the most precise manner. History is thus a history of the expressions used to describe the experience of transcendence; if there is progress in history, it exists only in the clarity of that expression. For Plotinus, as for Voegelin, this clarity also represents a crucial turning point. After Plato, philosophers are no longer able to achieve improvements in clarity. The field is left open to the action of a new force – the psychological force embodied in rebellion against order, which Plotinus calls *tolma* (boldness) and which translates into a sort of desire to ‘do something new’, by adding something of oneself to truth. Preferring that which is one’s own to the truth – that is the nature of the boldness that, according to Plotinus, governs the beliefs of the Stoics and, to an even greater extent, that of the Gnostics.

For Voegelin, the historical relationship between open and closed societies is very different. If the open society is a permanent feature of human existence, there can be no closed society except in relation to the open society and in opposition to it. The voluntary openness or closing of the human soul has as its prerequisite condition the non-voluntary opening of the soul to its transcendent foundation of meaning⁴¹. History for Voegelin is therefore the history of the responses made by mankind in response to the call of transcendence, and to the various symbolized forms of the existential experience of openness, in their capacity to structure its existence. The open society is not, consequently, in the first instance a moral ideal, nor is it an end that is obtainable in history. It is, writes Voegelin, a fact³⁷ – that is, an anthropological fact. When Voegelin writes that the history of human society is the open society (adding ‘Bergson’s, not Popper’s’⁴²), he does not mean that history is the history of the appearance, or construction of, the open society, but rather that history is regulated by the openness of human existence to transcendence. The open society thus has a primarily transcendental value: it provides the background upon which historicity may be deployed.

⁴¹ The term ‘open’ thus translates a certain ambivalence in Voegelin, referring sometimes to the part played by the will in the experience of transcendence (as opposed to the revolt against the same experience), and at other times to the actual content of that experience, as an openness of the existence towards its divine foundation. The text of the 1970 article ‘Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History’ is significant in this respect. Voegelin describes the terms of the tension by relating them to the two anthropological poles represented by the finiteness of existence and divine transcendence (life and death, time and eternity, perfection and imperfection); at other times he relates them to the two mutually antagonistic moral forces of openness and closure (order and disorder, truth and falsehood, meaning and the loss of that same meaning, amor Dei and amor sui, the open soul and the closed soul, the virtues of openness towards the foundation and the vices associated with hubris and rebellion, etc.). Cf. *CW*, XII, pp. 119-120.

³⁷ ‘The Theory of Governance’, *CW*, XXXII, p. 291.

⁴² ‘Immortality: Experience and Symbol’, *CW*, XII, p. 73.

In truth, Popper is not so far removed from Bergson as Voegelin believes, nor indeed as Popper himself believes³⁹: since the ‘mystical’, as Bergson understands it, does not represent, as Popper incorrectly interprets it, a regression towards the religious irrationalism of primitive societies, but rather a broadening of rationality beyond the confines of a narrow intellectualism, in order to encompass the full extent of human experience. Furthermore, Bergsonian society is not closed to the field of progress and of human praxis: religion is no more than a condition (which in no way excludes philosophy) of that progress. Also, when Voegelin emphasises, in his 1967 article ‘Immortality. Experience and Symbol’, that he is speaking of open society in the Bergsonian sense, not that of Popper, he tends to understand the open society of Bergson from the perspective of his own categories.

4 – Mysticism and the political: the democratic question

These differences regarding the interpretation of history point towards a deeper divergence at the politico-anthropological level. Here, as elsewhere, the differences are almost hidden by the similarity of the terminology. When one, for instance, refers to their thought by employing the term ‘mysticism’, one must be aware that this term does not hold precisely the same meaning for the two thinkers. The reasons for this are essentially twofold.

The first is that the Bergsonian mystic reaches a state of perfect union with God, in which his will merges with that of the divine. This union of wills represents the fundamental condition of the ‘open society’ –

³⁹ The article by Jean-Claude Dumoncel, ‘Popper et Bergson’ (*Revue de l’enseignement philosophique*, February-March 1982, pp. 37-48) underlines these similarities, despite the conflict that Popper himself chooses to emphasise.

that the love of God spreads out in a ‘universal love’⁴⁰ towards the whole of his creation, and especially towards ‘humanity in general’. Nevertheless, this state of perfection, which removes the distance between God and mankind, is for Voegelin neither necessary nor desirable. What matters instead is that mankind maintains itself in a position of openness towards God; in other words, in a state of striving towards the transcendental foundation – without, however, ceasing to assume the finite condition of mankind. The finiteness of the world and the divine transcendence are two opposing poles of a tension, and not terms that may be hypostatized. The open society is a society striving towards the beyond, a beyond that cannot be embodied in reality, either individually or collectively, at the historico-political level. From this perspective, there is, properly speaking, no philosophy of *metaxy*, or of the ‘in-between’ in Bergson. Conversely, it seems that it is only through a certain extension of the language that it becomes possible to speak of ‘mysticism’ in Voegelin. The second difference has a more direct bearing on the political question. For Bergson, perfect mysticism is the privilege of a human élite, that of the ‘great and good men’, who are able to move beyond their instinctive urges in order to align their wills with that of the divine will. They are, accordingly, the creators of the open society. Bergson lays emphasis on the fact that ‘the modern concept of justice has therefore progressed via a series of individual creations’, implemented by ‘moral creators’⁴¹. As for the rest of mankind, they are not drawn towards an equally elevated ideal, but attracted by the concrete example of moral asceticism provided by these great mystics. In this, Bergson is following an ‘institutionalist’ pattern, such as may

⁴⁰ *DS*, p. 240 / *TS*, p. 227.

⁴¹ *DS*, p. 80 / *TS*, p. 80.

be found, for example, in Maurice Hauriou⁴². For Hauriou, the institution is constructed through the incarnation of an ideal norm in the mind of a people. That ideal is, at first, apprehended by a singular individual: with time it is progressively subscribed to by all, and becomes a motive for collective action. Equally, for Bergson, the ordinary members of mankind find an ‘echo’ of the experience of the mystic in themselves, but are only capable of acting according to a mediated form of dynamic morality, insofar as it is not God himself that is the object of their aspiration, but the great men whose example they imitate, and who inspire in them a new passion. These men are like dormant mystics: ‘If a word of a great mystic [...] finds an echo in one or another of us, may it not be that there is a mystic dormant within us, merely waiting for an occasion to awake’⁴³. This awakening will only occur in response to ‘the call of a personality’. However democratic it may be in its functioning, society remains led by a ‘spiritual dux’, as Dante Germino describes it.

Speaking more generally, we might ask whether the democracy, which Bergson presents as a fundamental structure of the open society, is not recovered through this structural aristocratism, which sets the spiritual heroes apart from the mere followers? In Bergson, democracy is, primarily, expressed in the content of the intuition of the fully accomplished mystic. The love which ‘consumes him’, he writes, ‘is no longer simply the love of man for God, it is the love of God for all men. Through God, in the strength of God, he loves all mankind with a divine love’⁴⁴. How can this idea of the equality of mankind before the love of God apply to those individuals who are

⁴² Maurice Hauriou also claimed that he drew inspiration from Bergson.

⁴³ *DS*, p. 102 / *TS*, p. 100.

⁴⁴ *DS*, p. 247 / *TS*, p. 233.

incapable of attaining such mystical love in union with the divine will? How is it able to produce the modern secular values of human rights, liberty, equality or social justice? I am not certain that Bergson answers these questions in a convincing manner.

In Voegelin, the connection between the religious and the political affects the democratic question in a different manner. Voegelin is somewhat indifferent to the issue of the actual modes of functioning of political society. He is no democratic idolator, insofar as he does not believe that the assent of the people must necessarily be channelled through a particular democratic or liberal institution (such as direct or indirect universal suffrage, or parliamentary representation)⁴⁵; he even concedes that force may, in situations where society is subject to high levels of corruption, constitute a legitimate instrument of government. Nor is he an idolator of modern values. He would probably agree, along with Bergson, that modern normative concepts such as the ‘rights of mankind’, ‘equality’ or ‘liberty’, have a Christian origin; but this secularization of Christianity does not for him represent evidence of its success, but rather the mark of a soul that remains closed to the experience of transcendence.

That being the case, for Voegelin, there is a form of democracy that may be termed ‘structural’, in the sense that the whole of mankind, and not merely an élite, is open to the experience of the sacred. Religious experience, which can in a way be called mystical, is an experience that is common to all people: ‘It is not *one* person – writes Voegelin – who opens toward the objective spirit, but many, and all

⁴⁵ Thus, Plato, writes Voegelin in 1954, in his review of the works of Wild and Levinson, ‘was neither a democrat nor a fascist, neither a totalitarian nor a humanitarian, neither a friend nor an enemy of the open society [in the Popperian sense], for the good reason that he was a philosopher, not a political ideologue’ (CW, XIII, p. 189).

open, it is to be assumed, toward the same transcendent content, each according to his capacity to receive the objective spirit'⁴⁶. The community of persons is therefore a community of individuals open to the same experience. This fundamental equality does not, however, imply uniformity: if every individual is open to the same transcendent content, each individual also reacts differently to the call of that transcendence, by grasping that very experience with his or her personal symbols and by deploying different charismata as part of his or her social and personal activities. However, these differences emerge only against the background of equality between persons. Hence, Voegelin understands the model of the *sacrum imperium* to be the symbol of a hierarchical society, whose foundation is nevertheless in a certain sense egalitarian.

As in the case of the open society, democracy is not, for Voegelin, a political ideal, that is grasped at the outset by a human spiritual élite, to ultimately spread itself, by mysterious means, to the whole of humanity, as the outcome of a historical process; it is an anthropological fact and, as such, the transcendental condition of any political order, beyond particular political or social structures.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I will return briefly to the discretion exercised by Voegelin regarding the points of divergence between his thought and that of Bergson, which becomes all the more apparent when contrasted with his manifest contempt for Popper. For Voegelin, as for Bergson, the symbol of the 'open society' is above all else the symbol of a moral requirement, representing the final completion of an alternative that remains present in every individual. Within this

⁴⁶ CW, XXXII, p. 367 sq.

context, it acts as a bulwark against the corruption of a society that is still closed in its particularisms. Moreover, for both thinkers, this openness towards humanity cannot be achieved without a transcendent mediation – religion thus functions as a safeguard against the autonomizing of the political and its reconstitution as an earthly absolute.