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The Gospel and Political Order: Eric Voegelin on the Political Role of Christianity

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Source: *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Feb., 1976), pp. 25-45

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Southern Political Science Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2128960>

Accessed: 07-05-2018 09:18 UTC

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*The Gospel  
and  
Political Order:  
Eric Voegelin on  
the Political Role  
of Christianity*

BRUCE DOUGLASS

CHRISTIANITY WAS ONCE a dominant influence on political theory in the West. As the periodization of Western political thought is commonly interpreted today, this era of Christian dominance was a comparatively long one, and it is widely acknowledged to have exercised a considerable influence on subsequent political thought and practice. What significance does this fact have for contemporary theoretical reflection on politics? If the prejudices of modernity are accepted, especially in the extreme form in which they appear in positivistic thinking, the answer is "not much." Interest in the Christian period is minimal because it is perceived to be merely a part of the history of error that preceded the advent of modern wisdom. Modernity has brought the "emancipation" of political theory, so that the most that can be expected from attention to the Christian era is a sense of how political thought developed when it was under the constraints imposed by religious

\* The author wishes to express his debt to Professor John Hallowell of Duke University for his guidance as an interpreter of the thought of Eric Voegelin.

superstition. "Demythologized," these older ideas might have some utility for political theory, but they can hardly be accepted on their own terms.

Eric Voegelin's view of political theory has led to a dramatically different handling of this matter. One of the many reasons for the distinctiveness of Voegelin's work as a student of politics lies in the considerable interest which he has shown in making theoretical sense of the place of the Christian era in the development of the Western tradition. This interest derives in the first instance from the peculiarly historical character of his theoretical work. In contrast to the ahistorical tendency which prevails among theorists in contemporary American political science, Voegelin has shaped his work in the light of the judgment that "a theory of politics, if it penetrates to principles, must at the same time be a theory of history."<sup>1</sup> His concern with Christianity is hardly simply historical, however. It is inspired equally by the conviction that Christian thinking represents a fund of wisdom which the contemporary theorist ignores only to his own loss. Repudiating the modern attempt to "bracket" theological considerations as a procedure which has resulted in the impoverishment and deformation of political theory, Voegelin has designed his work as an attempt to restore the wisdom of the classical tradition, including both Christian thought and classical philosophy.

To many such language sounds reminiscent of theology, and thus Voegelin is sometimes confused with confessional thinking. But for some time now it has been evident that Voegelin's work is of a distinctly different order. Not only is it not based on a doctrinal position, in the manner of either Catholic or Protestant thought; it also involves a critical and at times even ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. Already in *The New Science of Politics*, published in 1952, it was evident that while Voegelin viewed the Christian Gospel as a step beyond Plato and Aristotle in the development of human self-understanding, he also held Christianity as a religion and cultural force to be an important contributor to the modern "derailment" of reason into gnosticism.<sup>2</sup> In subsequent writings, particularly a 1971 paper on "The Gospel and

<sup>1</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-161.

Culture"<sup>3</sup> and the recently published fourth volume of *Order and History*,<sup>4</sup> he has amplified this interpretation, and the evidence is increasingly clear that he appraises Christianity with a mixed mind. His primary commitment is to philosophy, and while in principle Christianity is viewed as an ally of philosophy in the quest for a rightly ordered existence, it is also considered a somewhat unreliable ally. The utility of the resources it might contribute to solving the problems created by modernity is offset by its vulnerability to gnostic corruption. There can be no question of going back to a pre-Christian mentality, but it would seem to be Voegelin's view that only the discipline of philosophical reason can challenge effectively the modern predicament.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the logic of this interpretation of the historical role of Christianity developed in Voegelin's writings over the past two decades. We shall be focusing in succession on the following problems: (1) the common "noetic core" shared by classical philosophy and the Christian Gospel; (2) the Christian Gospel as the fulfillment of philosophy; (3) the problem of doctrinalization in modern Christian thought; (4) the Christian origins of modern gnosticism; and (5) the need for a philosophical critique of Christian thought.

## I

Voegelin is concerned in the first instance to emphasize the continuity between Christianity and philosophy. In *The New Science of Politics* he speaks briefly of the incarnation of God in Christ as the "fulfillment" and "confirmation" of the movement of the spirit which finds expression in classical philosophy,<sup>5</sup> and in both "The Gospel and Culture" and *The Ecumenic Age* he expands substantially on this theme. The Gospel is presented as a continuation of the process of illumination of existence which previously produced philosophy, and Christianity in turn is interpreted as a fusion of the Gospel and philosophy.<sup>6</sup> "By absorbing the life of reason in the

<sup>3</sup> Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, ed. Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), 59-101.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Voegelin, *New Science*, 78.

<sup>6</sup> The term "Gospel" is used by Voegelin as a symbol for an event—the

form of Hellenistic philosophy, the Gospel of the early *ekklesia tou theou* has become the Christianity of the Church." Each stood in need of the other:

If the community of the Gospel had not entered the culture of the time by entering the life of reason, it would have remained an obscure sect and probably disappeared from history; we know the fate of Judeo-Christianity. The culture of reason, in its turn, had arrived at a state that was sensed by eager young men as an impasse in which the Gospel appeared to offer the answer to the philosopher's search for truth; the introduction to Justin's *Dialogue* documents the situation.<sup>7</sup>

Thus it was that Christianity came to be seen not as an alternative to philosophy but rather "philosophy itself in its state of perfection."<sup>8</sup>

The reason why this union was possible and successful, Voegelin suggests, is that the Christian Gospel and philosophy have a common noetic core. They derive from the same basic mode of experiencing human existence, and they result in similar modes of articulating this experience. Both begin with the sense that existence confronts men with a problem—a problem and not a fact, Voegelin remarks, in a critical note on Sartre. It is experienced as a field of movement in which one is subject to competing pulls and counter-pulls coming from different directions. Existence is experienced as a tension-filled "in-betweenness," in which there emerges a sense that a direction is to be found or missed. This in turn produces an intense questioning as to the meaning of human existence. It also produces anxiety, experienced as a fear of losing the right direction.

At issue in this interplay of pulls and counter-pulls is the choice between life and death. The questioning derives from a sense that there are modes of existence which promote life and others which do not. But for both classical philosophy and Christianity, Voegelin emphasizes, "life" and "death" are complex symbols. If the questioning is allowed to pursue its natural course and is not derailed, it soon becomes evident that the everyday meanings of these sym-

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extraordinary presence of God in the person of Jesus *and* the recognition of this presence by his followers. It is "the symbolization of a divine movement that went through the person of Jesus into society and history." ("The Gospel and Culture," 92) It is *not* synonymous, it should be emphasized, with the message or doctrine of the church.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

bols must be revised. In Euripedean tragedy, in Plato's Dialogues, in the Gospels, and again in the Pauline letters the same conclusion is reached: "If you live according to the flesh, you are bound to die; but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."<sup>9</sup> Thus "life" conventionally understood is death, and "death" life. "There is direction in existence; and as we follow it or not, life can be death, and death life eternal."<sup>10</sup>

Both philosophy and the Gospel arise as symbols of the possibility of an answer to the questioning which is experienced as truth. They are symbols, in other words, of the fact that "the play of the pulls . . . is luminous with truth."<sup>11</sup> Being pulled in various directions, each of which leads to a different mode of existence, men must choose, and the Gospel and philosophy hold out the promise that a right decision is possible. If one follows those pulls which lead towards a life of pleasure and/or power-seeking, he will live in a state of alienation. His life will be experienced as "not his own and true life."<sup>12</sup> If on the other hand he chooses the way of philosophy or the Gospel, he will know the genuineness of his existence, and will live in harmony with himself.

The decisive insight which both philosophy and the Gospel share is the awareness that human existence points beyond itself, and that only in relation to what is beyond can it be fulfilled. They both bear witness to the fact that the truth of existence is to be found in "existence experienced as part of a reality which extends beyond the In-Between."<sup>13</sup> For both the way of truth is experienced as an attraction, to the point of compulsion, exercised by this Beyond.

This divine pull, says Voegelin, is the source as much of the questioning as of the answer. The very possibility of right pursuit of the question is a result of the attraction exercised by the ground of being. Voegelin observes that "both Plato's eroticism of the

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:13.

<sup>10</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *The Republic* 495c.

<sup>13</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 76. Voegelin clarifies this in a recent article: "With their discovery of man as the *zoon noun echon*, the classic philosophers discovered man to be more than a *theotos*, a mortal: He is an unfinished being, moving from the imperfection of death in this life to the perfection of life in death." "Reason: The Classic Experience," *Southern Review* 10 (April 1974), 252.

search (*zetesis*) and Aristotle's intellectually more aggressive *aporein* recognize in 'man the questioner' the man moved by God to ask the questions that will lead him toward the cause of being."<sup>14</sup> The same view is present in the Gospels: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws (*helkein*) him."<sup>15</sup> "The divine Sonship is not revealed through an information tendered by Jesus, but through a man's response to the full presence in Jesus of the same Unknown God by whose presence he is inchoatively moved in his own existence."<sup>16</sup>

The pull of the divine cord does not eliminate human responsibility, however. Nor does it eliminate the tension of counter-pulls. In order for the divine pull to prevail in human existence, "it needs the support of man who must counter-pull (*anthekein*) to the counter-pull of the lesser cords."<sup>17</sup> The human self is presented as "the force which must decide the struggle of the pulls through cooperation with the sacred pull of reason (*logos*) and judgment (*logismos*)."<sup>18</sup> There must be a human seeking and response to complement the divine pull. Even when the answer to the question of the meaning of life and death has been given, existence remains a war, and life is given only through combat. "The Saving Tale is not a recipe for the abolition of the *anthekein* in existence but the confirmation of life through death in this war."<sup>19</sup> So long as human existence remains human existence, it remains in-between.

For both philosophy and Christianity, Voegelin suggests, what is experienced in this movement of the soul is the mutual indwelling of humanity and divinity (though, as we shall see, there is a difference as to the degree of mutuality experienced). "The Beyond of the *metaxy* reaches into the *metaxy* in a participatory event."<sup>20</sup> The symbolism which this experience engenders is in turn both human and divine, and no attempt should be made to separate the human and divine components, in the manner of Christian theologians' distinction between reason and revelation. "This theological doctrine is empirically untenable," observes Voegelin. "Plato was just as conscious of the revelatory component in the

<sup>14</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 62.

<sup>15</sup> John 6:44.

<sup>16</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

truth of his *logos* as the prophets of Israel or the authors of the New Testament writings.”<sup>21</sup> One must accept the symbolism whole, as the articulation of the mythical imagination of the consciousness of the Beyond of consciousness reaching into human existence.

There is no way other than myth, Voegelin continues, to express this consciousness, and its contents can be nothing other than the story of the questioning and of the answering. “The symbols developed in the movement,” he emphasizes, “do not refer to objects in external reality, but to the phases of the movement as it becomes articulate in its self-illuminating process.”<sup>22</sup> They

have nothing to express but the experiences enumerated, the placement of the reality experienced in the wider context of the reality in which the differentiated movement occurs, and the self-conscious movement as an event in man’s existence in society and history in which hitherto it has not occurred.<sup>23</sup>

## II

The Gospel does not represent, therefore, complete innovation. It is wrongly interpreted if it is conceived as an impingement on human consciousness of a God who previously was altogether hidden and unknown. It is rather part of an unfolding historical drama of revelation, a fact of which, Voegelin contends, the New Testament writers were generally aware. They did not present the presence of God in the figure of Jesus as an entirely novel event, but recognized that “the *preparatio evangelica* of the millennial Movement had created the readiness of both experiential response

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 75. Voegelin’s insistence upon the interdependence and interpenetration of reason and revelation is consistent throughout his work, and must be grasped if his work is to be understood. His reasons for holding this position are elaborated in some detail in a recent essay, “Reason: The Classic Experience.” The argument is built on the premise that although reason is the “constituent of humanity at all times,” it was discovered by Plato and Aristotle, and it is to them that one must look for the normative understanding of its proper use. Voegelin then proceeds to argue that the discovery of reason was itself a revelatory event—a divine-human encounter—and was understood as such by Plato and Aristotle. This is an improvement over the simplistic distinctions which are commonplace in discussions of this topic; but it is clear, I believe, that more needs to be said. Reason and revelation may be interdependent, but they are also distinguishable. Dante Germino is correct when he says that Voegelin has yet to provide a fully satisfactory statement on this topic. “Eric Voegelin’s *Anamnesis*,” *Southern Review* 7 (January 1971), 85.

<sup>22</sup> Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” 74-75.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.



and mythical imagination for the Son of God."<sup>24</sup> Their reliance on inherited symbols in particular is evidence of this awareness.

Nonetheless, the Gospel does represent a major innovation. It represents as fundamental a departure in the development of existential truth as the movement from cosmological truth to philosophy. Though the noetic core is essentially the same, the spiritual dynamics change in the movement from philosophy to Gospel because of "the experience of an extraordinary divine eruption in the existence of Jesus."<sup>25</sup>

The distinctiveness of the Gospel derives, first, from the greater degree of differentiation which it affords. Philosophy involves a major break from the cosmological mode of symbolization, but the Gospel represents an even more complete separation. It brings into even sharper focus the universality and transcendence of divinity and the opening of the soul towards divinity as the measure of reality. Consciousness becomes even more keenly aware of *itself* as the locus of the truth of reality, and the experience of a cosmos full of gods is much more radically displaced by the experience of divine presence in the soul. In both cosmological and classical philosophical symbolism there is reflected, says Voegelin, some awareness that divinity is one and that it transcends mundane existence. But this awareness is complicated by other competing considerations. In cosmological symbolism it remains in the background, and even as it moves to the foreground in philosophy, it is mixed with elements drawn from cosmological culture. Despite the break with cosmological myth in Plato, for example, he continues to use cosmological symbolism, and never quite breaks with the idea of divine presence being mediated through intracosmic gods. It is significant, Voegelin observes, that the only real parallel to the Christ of the Gospel in the Dialogues is the cosmos.<sup>26</sup>

This progress in differentiation is in part a result of the impact made by philosophy on the culture of the Greek and Roman world. "A culture in which the sacrality of order, both personal and social, is symbolized by intra-cosmic gods," says Voegelin, "will not easily give way to the *theotes* of the movement whose victory entails the desacralization of traditional order."<sup>27</sup> The resymbolization is a

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

task "requiring centuries of sustained effort," and the ability of early Christian thought to depart so decisively from cosmological symbolism is a measure of the success of philosophy. By the time of Christ, the thinking of Plato and Aristotle had penetrated the Hellenistic-Roman world so decisively that it had become the accepted self-understanding of man.

The key thing about the Gospel, however, is that it represents a more complete knowledge of the Unknown God. Plato's image of a God who plays with man as a puppet is replaced by the Christian image of a God who undergoes incarnation. Through the "divine eruption" in the person of Jesus the millennial process of differentiation of the God above gods from cosmological divinities is thrust forward to a new level of awareness. This "revelation of the unknown God through Christ, in conscious continuity with the millennial process of revelation . . . is so much the center of the Gospel movement that it may be called the Gospel itself."<sup>28</sup> The decisive point here is the awareness of the divine response to human aspiration and, in turn, of a mutuality in divine-human relations. As Voegelin summarizes the matter in *The New Science of Politics*, "The experience of mutuality in the relation with God, of the *amicitia* in the Thomistic sense, of the grace which imposes a supernatural form on the nature of man, is the specific difference of Christian truth."<sup>29</sup> Classical philosophy, he remarks, places its emphasis on the human side of the divine-human relation, and does not find it possible to go beyond the notion of God as transcendence. The Gospel symbolism, in contrast, emphasizes equally divine initiative, and arrives at the notion of a God who "becomes man to gain his life by suffering death."<sup>30</sup>

Accompanying this more complete knowledge of God is a fuller understanding of the meaning of history. Plato and Paul agree, says Voegelin, that history is meaningful as the directional movement of reality, and that it is constituted by the events in which this directionality is made apparent. The Christian sense of history as being meaningful because of the revelation in Christ is in this respect parallel to the sense of Before and After generated by the appearance of Plato's philosophy. But at the same time there is a major difference. Paul differs from Plato in that he is able to artic-

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Voegelin, *New Science*, 78.

<sup>30</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 76.

ulate the goal of the directional movement. By virtue of his vision of Resurrection he is able to penetrate the mystery of history to present reality as moving beyond itself towards a state of transfiguration. "The classic meaning *in* history can be opposed by Paul with a meaning *of* history," says Voegelin, "because he knows the end of the story in the transfiguration that begins with the Resurrection."<sup>31</sup> This requires an eschatology, of course, and the resulting eschatological consciousness is one of the primary distinguishing characteristics of Christian thought.

### III

Voegelin attributes the sharp decline in cultural influence which Christianity has suffered in modern times in the first instance to the deformation of Gospel symbolism as a result of doctrinalization. In the development of Christian thought symbolic truth gradually shrank into propositional dogmatics, with the consequence that the truth of the Gospel has been cut off from its experiential foundations. The symbols have been treated as mere pieces of information, so that the questioning and the anxiety to which the Gospel was addressed originally have been eclipsed. The result is an answer without a question. The revealed God of Christianity is taken for granted as a matter of course, without any sense of the mystery previously symbolized by the Unknown God. Indeed, in a situation of increasing defensiveness for the churches, even to consider the question is to raise the suspicion of a "non-Christian" attitude.

The general trend of Christian thought has been, in short, towards a denial of the validity of the inquiring mind, and the consequences have been disastrous. Believers believe at the cost of their humanity. Though originally the Gospel held out its promise to the "poor in spirit, that is to minds enquiring," today believers cling to a faith which involves no spiritual or intellectual restlessness.<sup>32</sup> On this Voegelin remarks: "a believer who is unable to explain how his faith is an answer to the enigma of existence may be a 'good Christian' but is a questionable man."<sup>33</sup> For those inside the churches who cannot so easily shut off the questioning, the re-

<sup>31</sup> Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 258.

<sup>32</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

sult is an uneasy restlessness. For those outside, the Gospel becomes a dead letter, provoking indifference if not contempt. Scepticism, Voegelin argues, is the natural fate of any living truth which suffers doctrinalization.

In the contemporary situation the defensiveness of belief towards the inquiring mind is not, he recognizes, entirely without reason. The loss of the question of life's meaning is not peculiar to Christianity; it is little short of an all-pervasive phenomenon in modern culture. The centuries-old process of deculturation which modernity has produced has so badly deformed reason that the inquiring mind rarely asks any longer the question which the Gospel answers. The questions which it does ask, in fact, usually are so designed as to prevent the possibility that the Gospel could be the answer. In modern philosophy the form of the search remains (e.g., in existentialism), but the original substance is lost. Thus it is not mere philistinism which discourages believers from openness towards philosophical questioning. "An acculturation through the introduction of contemporary philosophy into the life of the Church, the feat of the Patres in the Hellenistic-Roman environment, would today be impossible," Voegelin believes.<sup>34</sup> The churches naturally have no use for deformed reason.

Understandable as it may be, however, defensiveness towards inquiry is no solution to the problem of Christianity in modern culture. On the contrary, this only exacerbates the problem. "Least of all," says Voegelin,

can anything be achieved by pitting right doctrine against wrong doctrine, for doctrinalization is precisely the damage that has been inflicted on the movement of the search. There would be no doctrine of deformed existence today, unless the search of both Philosophy and the Gospel had been overlaid by the late medieval radical doctrinalization of both Metaphysics and Theology.<sup>35</sup>

The way forward can only be to rediscover the search through a re-formation of reason.

Given his sense of the continuity between Gospel and philosophy, Voegelin does not suggest that doctrinalization was the inevitable

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 66. For a more general statement of Voegelin's views on the problem of doctrinalization, cf. the paper "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (July 1967), 235-241.

fate of Christianity or that a recovery of the search within Christian thought is impossible. Nor does he suggest that doctrinalization is a problem peculiar to Christian belief.<sup>36</sup> He does suggest, however, that the loss of the question is a danger to which Christianity has proved to be particularly vulnerable.

The reason for this vulnerability is that the Gospel movement itself is characterized by a tendency towards the deprecation of earlier truth—including reason as embodied in philosophy. In the Gospels, for example, one finds a bias against the articulate wisdom of the wise. Though the New Testament supplies rich evidence of a sense of the Gospel as an extension of a revelatory process which antedates the coming of Christ, there is also evidence of a sense that the Gospel represents a refutation of what has preceded it. This is particularly true of the Pauline literature:

Paul is a quite impatient man. He wants the divine reality of the primary experience of the cosmos right away differentiated as the world-transcendent divinity that has become incarnate in Christ; he considers it inexcusable that mankind should have passed through a phase in history when the immortal God was represented by images of 'mortal men, of birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles'; and he can explain such horror only by a deliberate suppression of the well-known truth. Moreover, in his Jewish disgust with pagan idols he makes the historical phenomenon of the cosmological myth responsible for cases of dissolute life he can observe in his environment and considers further adherence to them, with consequent moral dissolution, God's punishment for having indulged in idolatry in the first place. (Romans 1:26-32).<sup>37</sup>

Every new moment in the unfolding process of revelation tends to produce a symbolism of Before and After which exaggerates the novelty of the new and the untruth of the old, but with the Gospel this problem is particularly acute. The eschatological expectation which it brings promotes a powerful sense of innovation which is difficult to put in proper perspective because of the lack of noetic controls.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the deformation of philosophy into doctrine, cf. *The Ecumenic Age*, 36-43.

<sup>37</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 81-82. A much more extensive assessment of Pauline thought is presented in chapter 5 of *The Ecumenic Age*. The primary emphasis there is on the parallels between Paul and Plato. At the same time, however, Voegelin detects in Pauline thought two defects which are important for understanding the relationship between Christianity and the subsequent gnostic derailment: an element of apocalypticism and a lack of noetic controls.

## IV

The fundamental problem of modern culture is not, however, scepticism but gnosticism.<sup>38</sup> Yet the two things are closely related in Voegelin's interpretation because he treats modern gnosticism as a specifically Christian heresy, made possible by the weight of Christian influence on Western culture. Modern scepticism does not occur in a vacuum; the measures taken to deal with the loss of belief by those afflicted are directly conditioned by a cultural environment bearing this mark of Christian influence.

Voegelin does not say that Christianity is the only source from which gnosticism can derive. As a matter of historical fact, gnosticism originally arose prior to and independent of Christianity. It appeared as one of a number of diverse responses to the problem of re-creating meaning in the "ecumenic age," the time of civilizational breakdown occasioned by the process of empire building.<sup>39</sup> This fact invalidates any interpretation which makes gnosticism into simply a Christian heresy.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, however, Voegelin recognizes gnostic influences at certain key points in the New Testament, and he argues that *modern* gnosticism bears what would appear to be unmistakable evidence of Christian origins. He suggests, moreover, that in retrospect one can see that the danger of a gnostic derailment was present in Christian belief from the beginning, and that the Gospel greatly enhanced the possibilities of a major eruption of gnosticism in Western culture.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> This is not the place to enter into a prolonged discussion of Voegelin's concept of gnosticism. The central idea, however, is that of a deliverance from an evil world which is largely or entirely a human achievement. The gnostic is an individual who experiences the world as alien and hostile, who believes that it is possible through human initiative to achieve a different kind of world, and who believes himself to be in possession of the knowledge of how this can be accomplished. It is Voegelin's conviction that such efforts are always doomed to fail. For a convenient summary of Voegelin's view, cf. *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1968), 85-88.

<sup>39</sup> The era of empire construction as the setting for the emergence of gnosticism in its original form is discussed extensively in *The Ecumenic Age*. The specific issue of the emergence of gnosticism is discussed most explicitly in 20-27.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 85-86.

<sup>41</sup> In his most recently published statement Voegelin says: "Considering the history of Gnosticism, with the great bulk of its manifestations belonging to, or deriving from, the Christian orbit, I am inclined to recognize in the epi-

The Gospel itself is not gnostic. It promises no heaven on earth made by human hands and facilitated through the instrumentality of human knowledge. Jesus was not a political revolutionary, and his appeal to the "common man" can only be misunderstood if it is interpreted as a political appeal. The reason why he speaks so generously of those of mean condition, in comparison with the wise and the powerful, it not sectarian. The point is only that the Kingdom of God is more accessible to those who have little stake in this-worldly concerns. The Kingdom itself has nothing directly to do with this world: unlike Plato, Jesus does not address himself to the question of political organization.<sup>42</sup>

There remain, however, tendencies within the Gospel which easily lend themselves to a gnostic derailment. For one thing, the symbolism of Christian thought was from the beginning complicated by the intrusion of apocalyptic motifs, suggesting an immanentist solution to the problem of human existence. The interpretation of Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecy meant that within the earlier Christian thinking there appeared these themes reminiscent of both pre-Christian Jewish apocalypticism and later millenarian movements. In orthodox doctrine these themes undergo a transformation which purges them of their this-worldly political connotations, but the transformation is not always as thorough as it might be. Even within the New Testament there appears evidence of the apocalyptic mentality. This is particularly true of Revelation, where the passions evoked by the persecutions find expression. In Revelation 19, for example, one finds the Son of God presented as the sword-wielding "Field-Marshal of the Pantocrator."<sup>43</sup>

The results of this inclusion of apocalypticism in the canon were fateful: it gained a permanent foothold within Christian thought. As long as orthodox Christianity remained dominant as a cultural force, the aspirations generated by this apocalypticism were con-

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phany of Christ the great catalyst that made eschatological consciousness an historical force, both in forming and deforming humanity." *The Ecumenic Age*, 20.

<sup>42</sup> Voegelin is vulnerable to criticism, I believe, for over-stating the "other-worldliness" of the Christian idea of the Kingdom of God. An Old Testament scholar, Bernard Anderson, has made a similar point with reference to Voegelin's reading of the Old Testament. Cf. Bernard Anderson, "Politics and the Transcendent," *The Political Science Reviewer* 1 (Fall 1971), 25-29.

<sup>43</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 95.

fined to the fringes of social and intellectual life. But once the influence of orthodoxy began to wane, these aspirations surged forward with a vengeance. As a heresy which Christianity had sustained in spite of the opposition of the Church, apocalypticism provided the cultural ground from which modern gnosticism would draw its vitality.

There has been thus on the edges of Christian thought the persistent danger of a drift towards violent this-worldly solutions to the problems of human existence. Closer to the Gospel itself, and therefore a more fundamental problem, is the threat of a radical alienation from existence, born of the hope of transfiguration. Here once again we touch on the problem of an exaggerated sense of novelty and the lack of noetic controls. It is not inevitable, but very likely, Voegelin suggests, that the type of revelation represented by the Gospel will result in a deprecation of earlier symbolism and a failure to attempt the task of re-symbolizing the order of the cosmos. Instead of being interpreted as an essential part of the revelatory process, with enduring significance for human self-understanding, the cosmological part of experience and symbolization is dismissed as untruth. Instead of being treated as one level of the truth of being, the Gospel is treated as the whole, with the result that those areas of experience previously interpreted through cosmological symbolism cease to be meaningful. The emphasis on the center of truth—God as known through the opening of the soul—becomes so intense that “its relations to the reality of which it is the center are neglected or interrupted.”<sup>44</sup> The primordial field of consciousness suffers a contraction so that only God and man matter; society and nature cease to play any significant role in the symbolization.

The Gospel itself, it is worth repeating, does not require such a contraction. It builds, we have seen, on a noetic core which is shared with classical philosophy, and it involves a sense of the revelation of the Son of God as the culmination of a millennial process of revelation in history. In principle therefore it admits

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 99. As indicated earlier, Voegelin believes that the apostle Paul fell victim to some of the errors listed here. Paul is interpreted as being so captivated by the vision of a transfigured reality that he allows it to become a prediction about the course of history in his own time—clearly a mistaken metastatic expectation. This by itself does not make Paul a gnostic, but it is symptomatic of the dangers to which Christianity is vulnerable.



the possibility of a resymbolization of the full range of consciousness. As Voegelin observes, "The god of the Gnostics is certainly not the God of the Gospel who suffers death in man to raise man to life." Yet the fact remains that with the emergence of Christian symbols, the possibility of a gnostic derailment is greatly enhanced. "Though the possibility of the Gnostic derailment is inherent in the Movement from the beginning, only the full differentiation of the truth of existence under the Unknown God through his Son has created the cultural field in which the extra-cosmic contraction of existence is an equally radical possibility."<sup>45</sup>

The likelihood of a gnostic derailment is also a function of the intellectual and spiritual insecurity which Christianity creates, a theme which Voegelin discusses mainly in *The New Science of Politics*. The problem here is the tension between the spiritual demands imposed by the Gospel and the universalism of its missionary thrust. "Uncertainty," he writes, "is of the very essence of Christianity." As the world is de-divinized, the feelings of security established by the older symbolism are lost. One's hold on truth

is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, in the sense of Heb. 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen. Ontologically, the substance of things hoped for is nowhere to be found but in faith itself; and epistemologically, there is no proof for things unseen but again this very faith.<sup>46</sup>

The link is tenuous, and it can snap easily. The life of the soul in openness towards God, even for those most dedicated to the search, is precarious. It trembles "on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss."<sup>47</sup> Yet on the other hand the Gospel makes a universal appeal, and the history of Christianity as a movement is characterized by the attempt to penetrate and dominate wider and wider civilizational areas. The more it has succeeded in the project, Voegelin suggests, the greater has been the likelihood of a breakdown of faith. "The more people are drawn or pressured into the Christian orbit, the greater will be the number among them who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity."<sup>48</sup>

What distinguishes the gnostic mentality is the incapacity to live

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>46</sup> Voegelin, *New Science*, 122.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

with the uncertainty of Christian faith. The fragility of the spiritual and intellectual "home" which the Gospel provides proves to be "too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience."<sup>49</sup> So a new, more secure home must be created. The gnostic is a man who seeks, almost at any cost, a firm grip on the world.

Modern gnosticism is distinguished by its immanentism. Original gnostic religion solved the problem of spiritual and intellectual insecurity by recourse to a surer knowledge of God, designed to liberate men from the in-betweenness of existence through flight from the world. Modern gnosticism solves the problem through recourse to a surer knowledge of human existence, designed to liberate men from the conditions of existence by changing the world. Whereas the former "solves" the problem created by the contraction of consciousness through a resymbolization of society and cosmos as evil, the latter "solves" the problem by attempts at resymbolization of society that deny transcendence.

These gnostic attempts to redivinize society point, says Voegelin, to a key political weakness of Christianity—namely, its difficulty in providing a durable substitute for the civil theology it undermines. As long as civil society exists, he argues, it requires something approximating a civil theology. The order of society inevitably requires some form of legitimation beyond itself. The symbols by which it interprets the meaning of its existence are meant to be *true*—which is to say, in harmony with the nature of reality.<sup>50</sup> The need for such legitimation is not overcome when the truth of the soul is differentiated from cosmological truth. Plato recognized this when he provided a type of civil theology in the *Laws* as a concession to human frailty. But Christian thought, from the early Fathers on, has not really come to grips with this problem ade-

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> The logic of this argument, which is of critical importance for understanding Voegelin's work, is outlined succinctly in the introduction to the second volume of the *Order and History* series: "Human existence in society has history because it has a dimension of spirit and freedom beyond mere animal existence, because social order is an attunement of man with the order of being, and because this order can be understood by man and realized in society with increasing approximations to its truth. Every society is organized for survival in the world and, at the same time, for partnership in the order of being that has its origin in world-transcendent divine Being," *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 2.

quately. It has tended to focus attention on the church and neglect the legitimation of civil society. In the classic formulation of Augustine, which remained effective until the end of the Middle Ages, the tendency towards de-divinization of society was so radical that the power organization of society was reduced to the status of a mere holding action. The order of society thus had only negative legitimation at best; it represented merely that part of human nature from which men eventually would be redeemed.

The same observation can be made about Augustine's philosophy of history. Holding fast to the Pauline insight that the fulfillment of history lies beyond history, Christian thought has tended towards an indifference to secular history. Its eschatological sense "narrowed its intellectual horizon so badly that it never developed an adequate philosophy of history."<sup>51</sup>

The consequence was a vacuum which had to be filled. Once civilizational activity gained momentum, as it did in the high Middle Ages, the pressure for redivinization became irresistible. There *had* to be a more positive appreciation of civil society and secular history. Given the lack of an orthodox Christian alternative, it was virtually inevitable that the redivinization would take the form of gnosticism.

## V

Voegelin does not speak frequently about the way forward from the current situation, and when he does speak, it is usually cryptically. His work has been designed more to accomplish the movement forward than to talk about means. The implicit message which his writings would appear to carry is that only through extensive historical investigation can one begin to determine the nature of the current crisis and discover the resources within the traditions of Western civilization for overcoming it. He speaks with scorn of those who "stir around in the rubble," making small repairs, putting on patches here and there, "criticizing this or that author whose work is a symptom of deculturation rather than its cause."<sup>52</sup>

It is not always clear, moreover, that he feels it will be possible

<sup>51</sup> Eric Voegelin, "World Empire and the Unity of Mankind," *International Affairs* 37 (April 1962), 186.

<sup>52</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 66.

to move forward beyond the world created by gnosticism. There are passages in his writings, such as the closing paragraphs of his paper on the origins of scientism, which imply an unmitigated pessimism.<sup>53</sup> But for the most part his arguments point towards the conclusion that modernity can and will have an end, and that the re-formation of reason is possible.

The realization of this possibility rests on two conditions. The first is a revolt of the human spirit, prompted by the excesses of gnosticism. However pervasive and powerful the influence of gnosticism may be, Voegelin suggests, it has not destroyed and it will not destroy entirely the resources for resistance. It "can repress the truth of the soul, but it cannot remove the soul and its transcendence from the structure of reality."<sup>54</sup> If such repression is prolonged and severe, there is bound to arise a powerful counter-movement. One of the encouraging things about the twentieth century, he feels, is that the excesses of gnosticism, particularly totalitarianism, have produced just such a reaction.

The second condition is the development of intellectual resources to nourish and guide the reaction against gnosticism towards a re-formation of reason. Thus the quest for the new science of politics. Here again, Voegelin believes that recent history gives reason for optimism. "The reconstruction of a science of man and society," he announces, "is one of the remarkable events of the last half-century, and in retrospect from a future vantage point, will perhaps appear as the most important event in our time."<sup>55</sup>

In general terms, what the quest for a new science implies is the attempt to transcend modernity through a return to the classical and Christian tradition. "Only the millennial life of reason can dissolve its secular deformation," he observes. "We do not have to stay in the ghetto of problems prescribed by the de-formers as contemporary or modern. If the destruction can go back for centuries, we can go back for millenia to restore the question so badly damaged in our time."<sup>56</sup> This does not mean, however, a simple revival of ancient teaching. Rather, by the restoration of political science is meant:

<sup>53</sup> Eric Voegelin, "The Origins of Scientism," *Social Research* 15 (December, 1948), 462-494.

<sup>54</sup> Voegelin, *New Science*, 165.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>56</sup> Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," 66.

a return to the consciousness of principles, not perhaps a return to the specific content of an earlier attempt. One cannot restore political science today through Platonism, Augustinianism, or Hegelianism. Much can be learned, to be sure, from the earlier philosophers concerning the range of problems, as well as concerning their theoretical treatment; but the very historicity of human existence, that is, the unfolding of the typical in meaningful concreteness, precludes a valid reformulation of principles through return to a former concreteness.<sup>57</sup>

So it is a matter of restoring the mode of thinking and the enduring insights of classical philosophy and Christian thought rather than becoming a Platonist or an Augustinian. It is a matter, moreover, of setting each in a broader, more comprehensive historical perspective than the original symbolism allowed. Thus the attempt in the multi-volume *Order and History* to elaborate a history of the symbolization of order, out of which a philosophy of history begins to emerge.

This development of a philosophy of history rooted in detailed, catholic study of the history of the symbolisms of order is Eric Voegelin's distinctive contribution to political theory and his answer to the problems posed by modern gnosticism. The logic of his work would seem to be that the only way to challenge effectively a defective view of history is to provide an alternative that is philosophically sound. If the appeal of gnosticism derives from its capacity to meet a felt need for a civil theology, then it is incumbent upon those who would defeat gnosticism to provide a theory which meets this need more adequately.

The idea of a philosophy of history has its origin, of course, in Christianity—because of the blending of the traditions of Israel and Hellas which the early Christian Fathers accomplished. But, as we have seen, Voegelin believes that the attempts of Christian thinkers to provide a philosophy of history have left something to be desired, and that the deficiencies of these attempts are a principal reason for the success of modern gnosticism. So the "Augustinian construction"—which Voegelin takes to be the paradigm of a Christian philosophy of history—must be transcended. In important respects the Augustinian view has enduring validity—e.g., the sense that the fulfillment of history lies beyond history or that mankind is constituted through the representative initiatives of particular civilizations. But at the same time it is essential to go

<sup>57</sup> Voegelin, *New Science*, 2.

beyond it. In particular its disregard for the problem of legitimation of the order of civil society must be transcended.

Voegelin does not appear to be unconcerned about the restoration of the vitality of Christianity as a cultural force. His appreciation of the truth embodied in Christian revelation precludes that. But it is clear that it is primarily to philosophy to which he looks for the therapy modern culture requires. At issue is the re-formation of reason, and this is mainly a philosophical task. Christianity can help in this process to the extent that it absorbs philosophical criticism. But to the extent that it does not, it only contributes to the problem.