

**Eric Voegelin's Immanentism:
A Man At Odds With The Transcendent?**

by

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ABSTRACT

My objective in this paper is to present an alternative interpretation of the thought of the renowned political philosopher, Eric Voegelin (1901-1985). He has been understood by many of his most devoted followers as a classically based Christian thinker, and sometimes simply as a deeply spiritual person, who was critical of modernity for its abandonment of Christian-inspired political and social standards. In this article, I demonstrate that Voegelin was not only not a Christian in any sense of the term that is acceptable, but he was not a theist or even a deist. I argue rather that Voegelin was a modern thinker and an atheist, who, curiously, unlike a number of modern thinkers who are also atheists, rejected the idea of any kind of immanent or earthly fulfilment for mankind. Of course, any kind of transcendent fulfilment was also out of the question for him. I further argue that his seeming support for Christianity in his writings stemmed from his desire to use a modified or immanentised understanding of Christianity as the basis on which to erect a civil theology that would serve as a substitute for what he viewed as the contaminated civil theologies of the left and right that issued out of the Enlightenment era, and which, according to Voegelin, have proven to be so very devastating for political order and common civility in our time.

Eric Voegelin's Immanentism: A Man at Odds With the Transcendent?

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*

It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we
have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The
very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot
rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree.
Annie Dillard, *Teaching A Stone To Talk*

Introduction

I have been interested in the thought of Eric Voegelin for longer than I care to recount, and, during most of this time, I have had a rather traditional understanding of what many perceive to be at the core of the thinking of this great master of the last century, namely, his experientially based focus on *the Ground* of being. In short, like a good many North American Voegelin scholars, I understood Eric Voegelin to be a deeply religious person, not in any denomination

sense of the term, to be sure, and he was certainly not a Christian, as far as I could tell—in this regard, I differed with those Voegelin scholars who believed then, and still believe today, that he was deeply Christian—but he was, in my estimation, someone who was dedicated to retrieving God from the exile into which He had been sent by modern man. I also understood him to be saying that many of the most serious problems of our age—problems both of a personal and societal nature—are directly attributable to modern man's refusal to accept the implications of something about which he is all too aware, namely, the ineluctable experience of the presence of the Transcendent in man's life. Here the focus, for me, was on the word and the reality that is the “Transcendent.” In the interests of being adult, mature and free, Voegelin informed us that modern man elected to shun God by denying His existence. In fact, modern man surfaced when, like the Marquis de Sade, he concluded that his enemy was not the establishment, not the state and not the Church, but God Himself, and that he (man) could neither be fully human nor wholly free unless and until he banished God from his life. God was the enemy of mankind, and as long as He was around, man would never be who he is called by destiny to be. And so, God would have to go. Of course, coming to this decision was one thing, successfully achieving the objective was quite another, and, in my estimation, Voegelin made this patently obvious. In fact, Voegelin saw both the decision to pursue this goal and the efforts made to achieve it as megalomaniacal, the essence, for him, of the modern dementia.

Now, were I to have written on this subject a few years ago, I would also have gone on to say that Voegelin's entire corpus was driven by the need to challenge this modern mental illness, which has had such devastating consequences, at its source.¹ More than that, I would have said that Voegelin's writings were largely directed by his need to demonstrate that not only was this effort to dismiss God wrong in some abstract sense, that is to say, feasible but undesirable, but, most importantly, it was impossible experientially, in the sense that it was not even feasible. The experience of the transcendent is not something that man can choose to have or not to have. Yet, it was precisely this that was being proposed by the modern and misguided intelligentsia who saw in this move something that was intellectually worthy. Of course, this was an exercise that was fundamentally pathological inasmuch as it sought to have us deny the very existence of an important element of our experiential life, and, as such, it was the source of many of the personal, social and political diseases and even disasters of our times. I would also have informed you that Voegelin held that when modern man attempted to become the equal of God in part out of pride and in part out of his felt need to dismiss Him in order for man to realise his calling, he, in fact, always ended-up lowering himself to a level that was beneath his dignity as man. I would additionally have pointed to the fact that Voegelin believed that we have all been paying the price personally and collectively for this affront to the truth about our condition as human beings. And so, in order to return to some sort of harmoniousness within ourselves and with our fellow human beings, in order for us to get a proper fix on just who we are, and what it means to be human, I would have held that Voegelin's entire undertaking revolved around modern man's need to invite the eclipsed Transcendent back into our world, which is ultimately His world. Finally, I would have stated that Voegelin's objective here was not for us to return to some past and more humane

¹ I still hold to this belief. In fact, I am more than ever convinced that the entire body of Voegelin's work, *even as reinterpreted in the manner in which I propose to reinterpret it*, is comprehensible only as a response to the atrocities of the modern era.

era, and forget about everything having to do with the modern era. That would be impossible and fatuous if it were. Rather, it was for us to explore who we are anew, beyond the confines of modern ideological thinking, which so distorts our modern vision of ourselves and the world, and reacquaint ourselves with the achievements of the past in this regard, not so as blindly to copy these advances, but in order for us to see how what was done in the past might be of help to us in the resuscitation of our human dignity.

However, of late, I have been having second thoughts, disturbing second thoughts, you might say, about Voegelin's thesis and the enterprise that flows from it.² While I still think very highly of Voegelin—indeed, how could it be otherwise when even “the errors” that Voegelin makes can be repeatedly mined for the profundity of their insights into the predicament that is modernity³—I have become aware of a dimension of his thinking that makes him out to be a more contemporary and very different sort of thinker from the one I had initially understood him to be—a thinker who has a share in sustaining the problem that he correctly identifies as well as a share in its solution.⁴ Now, in itself, this may not be a problem for some, but it is a problem for me owing to the direction I now see Voegelin's thought taking. This direction, unfortunately, leads him, and would lead me too, onto a terrain on which I cannot comfortably travel.

I

Let me begin my critique of Voegelin by stating that everything that I have said about his thinking in my opening paragraphs is both true and false—depending upon how it is read—and this, I have come to believe, is an ambiguity on which Voegelin counted. Voegelin very much did want to invite the experience of the *Ground*, or the Transcendent, back into the lives of modern human beings. He very much did want to end the eclipsing of the experience of the Transcendent. I do not think that there can be any doubt about this, for he repeatedly says so. However, I have come to realize that it is our explicit acknowledging of the *subjective experience of the Ground* that Voegelin wished to invite back into our lives, and not the *Ground* Itself, or, more appropriately, Himself. This is an important difference that we cannot allow ourselves to

² The fact is that I was never completely happy with the traditional approach to Voegelin. I sensed that it was forcing Voegelin to say things that he was likely not saying. I even sensed that Voegelin's thinking did not resonate well with orthodox Christian thought. Yet, I compelled myself to believe that I was on the right track. Since the majority of North American Voegelin scholars, not to mention, Voegelin's most vehement critics as well, held that Voegelin was deeply orthodox and Christian in his thinking, there had to be something that I was overlooking. And so, at the time, I would not let myself entertain the possibility that Voegelin's supporters and critics might be wrong about Voegelin's religiosity.

³ I am reminded here of a short phrase by Nietzsche in *Fragment of a Critique of Schopenhauer*, dated 1867. See *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, p. 30. Nietzsche writes “...The errors of great men are venerable because they are more fruitful than the truths of little men...” It is difficult to imagine that truer words could have been spoken or written about Voegelin.

⁴ This is something that the majority of Voegelin's supporters in North America will have difficulty to accept, but I cannot see how it can be otherwise.

ignore or elide.⁵ As regards the Reality that is the *Ground* or the Transcendent, and the invitation of that Reality back into our lives, Voegelin reasoned in a thoroughly modern fashion. Voegelin did not think that any kind of human contact with that Reality, at any point in history, was even a remote possibility. He made it patently clear that there was no communication or contact possible between man, on the one hand, and the actual *Ground* or Transcendent, on the other. What contact there was between man and the Ground was entirely intra-personal, and the Ground, for him, was a subject-based experiential phenomenon that was proper to, and that unfolded within, the structure of man's "alienated and alienating" consciousness.⁶ Actually, Voegelin said more than this. He acknowledged that he did not believe in the independent existence (that is, existence apart from its presence in the structure of man's consciousness) of the *Ground*—when he spoke against the hypostatisation of *the Ground*—and this too he made unequivocally clear in both his writings and particularly in his private conversations.⁷ But, as we

⁵ When I use the word "subjective," or one of its variants, in connection with "the Ground," I am not saying that the experience of "the Ground" is a subjective thing in the sense that some people experience the Ground and others do not. Nor am I saying that is a matter of choice whether a person chooses to experience the Ground or not. Suggesting that this *is* what I am saying would be nothing but a wilful misinterpretation of my words, particularly when I go out of my way to write: "The experience of the transcendent is not something that man can choose to have or not to have," (see above), and when I reiterate this a number of times in this piece. The experience of "the Ground" is something that all men have, whether they like having it or not. Whether they will all admit to having it is, of course, quite another matter. In other words, man's experience of "the Ground" is a distinguishing feature of the structure of human consciousness, which means that it is the experience of an experiential reality that is shared by all human beings. And so, in that sense, it could be said to be the case that experiencing "the Ground" is experiencing something that is "objective," in the sense that it is the experience of something that is real and common to all human beings. However, if one says that it is the experience of something that is "objective," one has also to acknowledge that it is also *not* the experience of something that exists, or is capable of existing, apart from, or in the absence of, human consciousness, according to Voegelin. Where there is no human being and no human consciousness, there is no "experiencing of 'the Ground,'" and much less is there an existing Ground. "The Ground" is a something that is intrinsic to the structure of human consciousness, according to Voegelin, and that is all that it is. It does not exist in the world beyond the structure of human consciousness. Why else would Voegelin have gone out of his way repeatedly to signify that he objected to its hypostatization. And so, it is in this sense that it can be said that "the Ground" is the experience of something that is subjective (i.e., intrinsic to the structure of the consciousness of the species called *man*) and wholly immanent. This is something with which Voegelin scholars—particularly those who insist that Voegelin was a deeply *religious* and *spiritual* person, in the common sense understanding of these two terms—will have to come to terms. It is not by adopting a dogmatic and intimidating attitude when faced with the claim that Voegelin was an atheist—as unfortunately some are wont to do—that they will resolve this problem.

⁶ When I speak of "'alienating' consciousness," I aim to draw attention to the fact that for Voegelin human consciousness is structured in such a fashion as to give rise to two symbols, the symbol *man* and the symbol *Ground*, and the symbol *Ground* is experienced as wholly apart (i.e., alienated) from the symbol called *man*. Of course, the crucial word here is the word "experienced," for the symbol *Ground*, according to Voegelin, is not really wholly apart from the symbol *man*. In fact, these two symbols can not exist independently of one another. Their seeming independence from one another is a feature of the structure of consciousness. In short, Voegelin is speaking about subjective and experiential matters when he speaks of "the Ground" and "man," and he is not speaking about the reality who is man alienated from the reality who is Ground or God. The meaning of these remarks will become clearer as we move further into this paper.

⁷ I have to say here that I prefer Michael Polanyi's handling of this complex matter that is the issue of the *Ground*. Polanyi was a philosopher and a true theorist in the original sense of the Greek term *theoria*. He did not fall into the trap that is modern experiential subjectivism. In his famous work *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958), as well as in his numerous articles on the subject of consciousness and knowing, Polanyi makes it

say this, notice also that we are not dealing with a simple-minded denier of God, who belligerently argues that there is no God and who makes it plain that he is at war with religion, when we are dealing with Voegelin. We are dealing with an extremely sophisticated thinker, that is to say, with one who is by no means aggressively atheist, and who understands both the need for religion, and the role that it plays in man's life and in society, as well as the fact that religion is one of the symbolic expressions of the structure of human consciousness which is eclipsed at the cost of human decency and civility. Indeed, it is owing to this latter point that Voegelin speaks so knowingly and even positively about religion, despite his being of the view that "there is no God," and in the process puzzles many of his followers as well as opponents about his true views.⁸ And so the central question for us is: How do we correct the confusion around the question of Voegelin and "the spiritual," where the word "spiritual" is conventionally understood?⁹ We do this by taking into account everything that Voegelin said, and not only those things that seemingly satisfy our personal and present political needs.

Specifically, the best way to approach this is for us to state forthrightly that it is time that we open up new territory—which was not "new territory" for Voegelin—and speak candidly about Voegelin's Ground. This will not only lead us all to address the issues in a serious manner—in a manner that will oblige us to cease referring to Voegelin over and over again as being an enigmatic thinker where religion is concerned¹⁰—it should also lead us to reconsider whether or

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patently obvious that he believes that practitioners of the natural sciences, while relying on their subject consciousness, are able to transcend their subject consciousness in their quest to know the real and the true, and, hence, they do make contact in some sense with what is real, i.e., with what *is* as it exists independently of their subject consciousness. By relying on what Polanyi refers to as "tacit knowing"—the kind of knowing, which, with the passage of time, roots itself in the very way of being of a scientist and transforms his way of being so as to dispose him or her (properly) to know *the other*—a scientist comes to know—inadequately, to be sure—a something and ultimately a Someone Who transcends subject consciousness. Simply put, a scientist comes into contact with the other—the real—that exists apart from himself. Thus, he transcends his *self*, i.e., his subjectivity. As I interpret Voegelin's position, this sort of knowing and knowledge is simply not possible (he will say as much in a passage I quote later, see footnote 15), and hence science (*épistémé*), as it is understood by Polanyi and the great classical tradition, is not possible for Voegelin. For Voegelin, man's knowledge is restricted to what is available to his *subject* consciousness, and, thus, man's knowledge sadly does not achieve the quality of being *theoretical*.

⁸ It is interesting to note here that it is not only a majority of his Christian followers who hold that Voegelin was a Christian. His atheist opponents also think this to have been the case, despite the fact that Voegelin is much more in accord with them than they realise. The fact is that he differs from his "atheist opponents" only to the extent that he wishes to draw on his immanentised understanding of Christianity—read solely as a civil theology—to mitigate what he sees as the disastrous effects of the civil theology that is modern millenarianism. In short, he is more prudential than they, but he is not less an atheist.

⁹ I speak of the word "spiritual" in its conventional sense, because I am well aware that this is a word that has lost almost all of its meaning over the past fifty years, to the point where self-acknowledged atheists speak of "their spirituality," when the expression "atheist spirituality" seems wholly inappropriate by any reasonable standard. For an analysis of the shifts and turns that the word "spirituality" has undergone in recent times, see Charles Taylor, "Spirituality of Life—and Its Shadow: Today's spiritual innovators turn away from the transcendent," *Compass*, Vol. XIV No. 2 (1996).

¹⁰ It is not true that Voegelin was an enigmatic thinker when speaking about religion and spirituality. There is little that is enigmatic about his views on religion and spirituality if one starts out holding the right set of assumptions. His views are all very clear and consistent, as we will see. He appears to be enigmatic only if one begins with the

not it is time for us to reposition Voegelin in the history of western intellectuality. Needless to say, I do not think that this is likely to be territory on which Voegelin himself would have felt uncomfortable or would have even viewed as alien. To the contrary, as we will see, he felt perfectly at home in this land where there is no independently existing real *Ground*, for he knew it to be, after all, a land that is well trodden by many present-day men, including himself.¹¹ And what is most important is the fact that there is a good deal of evidence to show that Voegelin knew exactly what he was up to in his speculation. He left us a number of far-from-hidden clues, and, in some cases, outright affirmations of his views regarding these matters that were of ultimate concern to him.¹²

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assumption that he was someone who was deeply spiritual, and then discovers that this is something that cannot be squared with his words, and yet one wants to hold on to both one's belief in Voegelin's spirituality and his words.

¹¹ In a letter to his friend Alfred Schütz, dated January 1, 1953, Voegelin makes it very clear that his "concern with Christianity has no religious grounds at all," and he goes on to demonstrate just how true this is by speaking about a number of symbols that are central to the beliefs of an orthodox Christian from an entirely immanentist and secular perspective. At no point in this letter does Voegelin affirm the trans-personal truth and reality that these Christian beliefs and symbols point to. He is simply exploring the connections between and implications of these Christian symbols as they bear on the universal structure of human consciousness, and, in the process, assessing whether or not the Christian symbols are more articulated than the comparable non-Christian or secular symbols. And, he often finds that the Christian symbols are more articulated. But nowhere is he saying that owing to the degree of their articulation, Christianity is superior to other religions or that he is a Christian or even a religious or spiritual person on this or any other account. It is a purely intellectual assessment that he is carrying out. Any atheist, with a range of interests similar to Voegelin's, could and would have expressed himself or herself exactly as Voegelin does here. More to the point, we have to acknowledge that immanentist interpretations of normally transcendent symbols like the ones in his letter to Schütz abound throughout Voegelin's writings, and it is inappropriate to denature them by attempting to give them a special religious status within Voegelin's thinking. Cf., Eric Voegelin, "On Christianity" (letter to Alfred Schütz, January 1, 1953), in *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness, and Politics*, ed. Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 449-50; also in *Collected Works, Vol.30, Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, letter #38, Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2007, pp. 122- 132.

¹² Speaking of the North American scene, a small minority of Voegelin scholars will, when questioned, acknowledge that Voegelin was an atheist. However, the great majority of them believe him to have been deeply spiritual, and maybe even Christian, "although not in the conventional sense," they add, and amongst these, there are those who want to see him as Christian, but have difficulty viewing him as such, and do not quite know how to make sense of it all, and they say so. They frequently make reference to Voegelin's treatment of Christianity as "deeply disappointing," and Voegelin himself is described as "enigmatic." It seems to some that their disappointment could easily have been overcome had they begun their study of Voegelin with a different set of assumptions about who Voegelin was. See Gerhart Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind," *Modern Age*, 20 (Winter 1976), 34-35; David Walsh, "Voegelin's Response to the Disorder of the Age," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 46, no. 2 (April 1984), 266-287; David Walsh, "Review: Eric Voegelin and Our Disordered Spirit," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 133-134; Harold L. Weatherby, "Myth, Fact, and History: Voegelin on Christianity," *Modern Age*, (Spring 1978), 144-150; The one person who appears to have read Voegelin correctly on this issue almost from the start, and who also wrote about what he saw, was Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, a man much disliked for his clearly intemperate attacks on Voegelin. See Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "The New Voegelin," *Triumph Magazine* (January 1975), 33-35. Wilhelmsen understood that Voegelin was an atheist. However, he apparently did not detect (or did not care about) the motive behind Voegelin's advocacy of an immanentised Christianity, namely, Voegelin's desire to have "his" Christianity act as the basis on which to erect a new civil theology, a civil theology that would be less millenarian than were the civil theologies that issued out of the Enlightenment. All Wilhelmsen saw was that Voegelin misrepresented Christianity, which was, of course, true and very much intended by Voegelin, for Voegelin saw orthodox Christianity as contributing to the problem that culminated in the violence of the Enlightenment era and after.

As an example of what I have in mind when I say that Voegelin did not affirm or believe in the separate or independent existence of the Transcendent, consider what he said to his long-time friend Robert Heilman, the great Shakespeare scholar of the 1940s and '50s.¹³ In a memoir entitled *The Professor and the Profession*, recently published by the University of Missouri Press, Professor Heilman reported that Voegelin, on one memorable occasion, said to him: “*Of course there is no God. But we must believe in Him.*” Now, if the issue here is whether Voegelin believed or did not believe in the independent existence of the *Ground*, in short, whether he was or was not a deeply spiritual person in the traditional, and, some might even say, naive sense of the word “spiritual,” namely, a person who wished to rekindle man's relationship with the independently existing Reality Who is the Divine, then the answer, it seems to me, is unambiguous. His words to Heilman are clear.¹⁴ He was neither a spiritual person in the traditional sense, nor was he someone who sought to revive man's relationship with an independently existing Divine Reality. Voegelin was a variation on the modern atheist, who may have had an experience of the *Ground*, but, for him, the *Ground* that he experienced did not exist in the world beyond the experiencing subject, namely, the specific human being doing the experiencing. It (the *Ground*) existed only as an expression of the existential consciousness of that experiencing subject. It had existence only as a subjectivity for Voegelin, a shared one perhaps—shared with all other human beings—but still only a subjectivity. We will return to this point when we speak of Voegelin's theory of consciousness.¹⁵

¹³ Eric Voegelin came to know Robert Heilman while both were teaching at Louisiana State University in the 1940s and '50s, and both men remained friends for the remainder of their lives. It was Heilman who introduced Voegelin to Henry James' short story *The Turn of the Screw*, which caused Voegelin to produce, within a space of twenty-four hours, one of the most insightful essays ever written on James' story. See Eric Voegelin, “The Turn of the Screw,” *The Southern Review* (Winter 1971), 3-48.

¹⁴ Note that this is a casual conversation that Voegelin is having with Heilman. Voegelin and Heilman are not discussing whether it is appropriate to attribute “existence” to God. He is not saying to Heilman that existence is not one of the attributes of God, in the way that it is of all things material and empirically knowable to man. One cannot save oneself from having to recognise that Voegelin was an atheist by this sort of intellectual slight of hand. He very bluntly, and in an almost matter-of-fact way—the way friends exchange basic information with one another—says “*Of course, there is no God.*” Could the meaning of his words be clearer?

¹⁵ Note here that if I am right when I say that Voegelin was a modern atheist, then we should see this reflected in his understanding of the metaxic experience—man's experience of living in the *in-between*, i.e., man's experience of himself as “being in the world, but not [wholly] of the world.” The metaxic experience for Voegelin should have a completely different meaning from the one it has for Christians and religious people generally. The point I am making here is that man's experience of “being in the world,” but also of being “not of the world,” ought not to be an experience that speaks of a trans-personal reality for Voegelin, a reality other than the reality of the experience itself. It ought only to be an experience that man has—an experience that has man as its subject and its object—and that is all it is. It ought to say absolutely nothing about what is real about man's other-worldly or transcendent calling. It is an experience that unfolds entirely within the immanent order of subject consciousness, and thus we are not justified in arguing that it says something about man's trans-mundane connections. And Voegelin confirms precisely this when, in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, he writes: “The term *consciousness*, therefore, could no longer mean to me a human consciousness which is conscious of a reality outside man's consciousness, but had to mean the in-between reality of the participatory pure experience which then analytically can be characterised through such terms as the poles of the experiential tension and the reality of the experiential tension in the *metaxy*. The term *luminosity of consciousness*, which I use increasingly, *tries to stress this In-Between character of the experience as against the immanentising language of a human consciousness which, as a subject, is opposed to an object of experience.*” (My italics) See Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 73. Notice how Voegelin immanentises

Now, we need not imagine here that by speaking in this way Voegelin was trying to shock his friend Heilman, the way many people today try to, and, indeed, enjoy shocking a partner in conversation, or, more commonly, an audience that is listening to them speak. Voegelin was not irresponsible in that way. Indeed, the truth is that he knew the consequences of speech like this, and he did not casually speak it to the masses, as he explained to John East.¹⁶ And yet, for him, this was not a secret to be known only to the few. It was far too important a matter to be dealt with in this way. So important was this that he himself chose *knowingly* to live by a standard that he knew to be no standard at all, that is, he chose to live his life by placing all of the emphasis and focus on his *experience* of a Ground that, for him, did not exist independently of his experiencing consciousness. Moreover, he would have the rest of us *knowingly* do likewise, for he understood that the repercussions of our *not* living in a manner true to our *experiential life*, but instead living the truth, namely, that “there is no God,” were just too horrendous for him, and for any of us who are decent, to contemplate. He had the Twentieth Century to prove it. Man must acknowledge God, not because there is a God, but because our consciousness, and the concomitant experiential life that arises therefrom, is structured that way, and also because if we were not to acknowledge this Subjectivity, this Ground, and instead live by the truth, we would become savages of the worst sort, of which there are a large number of examples in modern times.¹⁷

Echoes of Leo Strauss’s esotericism, only softer, some might think. Not really. Strauss, if we are to believe Allan Bloom, would and did recommend that we keep secret the fact that there is no God, a secret to be spoken of only amongst those called “philosophers.” Had Strauss been speaking to Heilman, we might have heard him say: “*Of course, there is no God, but let us not tell everyone. Let us keep it a secret, a secret to be discussed only amongst the cognoscenti.*” For Strauss, non-philosophers, the lesser beings, those who have not been or who are yet to be metastatically transformed, i.e., the great majority of human beings, are to be encouraged to believe that there is a God. Only the transmogrified philosophers know the truth as regards this all important matter. Now, this is not and never was Voegelin's position. Voegelin, to his credit,

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and subjectivises the expression “the in-between.” Now the expression “the in-between” does not refer to man’s being and entity who is “in the world, but [is] not of the world,” as many might expect. Rather, it is about the character and quality of human consciousness and experience. If there is any doubt about this, consider the following passage from Voegelin’s article “The Gospel and Culture.” Voegelin writes: “There is no In-Between other than the *metaxy* experienced in a man’s existential tension toward the divine ground of being; there is no question of life and death other than the question aroused by pull and counter pull; there is no Saving Tale other than the tale of the divine pull to be followed by man; and there is no cognitive articulation of existence other than the noetic consciousness in which the movement becomes luminous to itself.” There is nothing enigmatic here. This is very clear, and the implications are as well. (See also “The Gospel and Culture,” in Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian, ed., *Jesus and Man’s Hope*, (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), p. 75.) This is hardly the view of a theist or even a deist, not to mention, a Christian.

¹⁶ See footnote no. 18.

¹⁷ Notice that what is experiential is real, and what is real is experiential. But what is real and experiential may not be true. So, “Of course, there is no God [true]. But we must believe in him [experiential and real].” At this point, some might even wonder, “from where does the phrase ‘Of course, there is no God...’ originate?” Presumably not from Voegelin’s experiential life. But if not from there, then from where?, one asks.

never saw the philosopher as a transmogrified being—for him, there were not two types of human beings, ordinary human beings and the cognoscenti—and he never claimed that the philosopher was in possession of esoteric knowledge. And so, Voegelin was prepared to speak the truth about this matter to all, to philosophers and non-philosophers alike, provided they were prepared to do what was required of them to receive it, i.e., undergo conversion (*metanoia* and not *metastasis*), and then act discreetly, responsibly, and without any intention of shocking. The truth should not be bruited about when the occasion does not demand it, or when all one wants to do is titillate one's audience. However, when the occasion does call for it—as he clearly thought it did when he was speaking to his friend Heilman, and also often when he spoke to an academic audience—although even here he shows discretion by speaking the truth to those who know how to listen (consider the discretion he exercised in his words to John East)—he tells both philosophers and non-philosophers that, although *there is no God* as such, if we mean to have political stability and be humane in our dealings with one another, all of us have to abide by the standards of our experiential life and maintain the pretence that “there is a God,” i.e., in his own words to Heilman, “*but we must believe in Him*”—even when we all know it to be otherwise—for the preservation of our own sanity and the well being of the community.

Parenthetically, one of the implications of Voegelin's prudential approach to this most important of issues is that it forces us to conclude that Voegelin was primarily not a philosopher, if, by “philosopher,” we mean someone who devotes himself to speaking candidly about as much of the truth as is available to him regarding the human condition, and damn the consequences. Voegelin never damned the consequences. Voegelin was a social and political thinker who deeply wanted his fellow human beings to experience civility in their relations with one another (a far from unworthy goal in these modern and violent times) more than he wanted them to know the truth, and unfortunately this civility, in Voegelin's estimation, could only be purchased by their *knowingly* pretending to credit what he, and they, conceived to be an untruth. This is the cost of civility, for Voegelin, and we have no choice but to pay the price if we mean to be decent and moral. Simply put, the origin of civility is in the lie that we knowingly tell ourselves about this most important matter, namely, “*there is no God, but we must believe in him*” even if there is no God, for the alternative is too terrible to live through. And so, in a subtle way, Voegelin was a specifically *modern variant* of Aristotle's “continent man” (*spoudaios*) more than he was a philosopher. He was someone who believed that under current conditions, which may be the norm at all times, it is not appropriate to dwell solely on speaking the truth. In fact, it may be reckless for us to do so, which is something that one ought never to be. It would almost seem as if Voegelin's sense of morality demanded that the horrendous consequences of speaking the truth be brought to the attention of those who may be inclined to be irresponsible and improvident enough to want to speak it, and this alone should suffice to induce them to be prudent where speaking the truth is concerned. Evidently, Voegelin saw a conflict between being moral and being truthful, which is something that no classicist or scholastic would acknowledge.

I would hold that Voegelin's deeply prudent and deeply moral character goes a long way towards explaining the widespread misconception amongst Voegelin's many followers to the effect that he was a Christian, when powerful indications are that he was not a theist, or even a deist, and, hence, far less a Christian. Almost every Voegelin scholar has heard this story. Voegelin informs us that when asked about what sort of Christian he is by people who pestered him after a

talk, his answers invariably skirt the question at first, in an effort to keep the matter private and unresolved, and, if pressed, he frequently replies that he is “a pre-Nicene Christian.” Voegelin's Christian supporters—Voegelin himself informs us, in a tone that almost sounds boastful—are always delighted to hear this, ...and, it seems, many still are. “See,” they say, “Voegelin himself says that he is a Christian, indeed, a pre-Nicene one,” and all are confident that they have things right and that he is someone whom they can trust. But this is not how I read Voegelin's reply to his interrogators. I see this as an example of Voegelin's effort to be both prudent and to tell the truth. To decompress all of this, we need to ask ourselves: What is there precisely about the Council of Nicea that offends Voegelin's sensibilities to the point that he feels forced to hide his beliefs, and, if pressed to speak, say that he is a pre-Nicene Christian? I submit that what there is is that prior to the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) it was possible to hold that Jesus was strictly human, and nothing more than human, and still be recognised as Christian (at least in Arian circles, and maybe even outside of Arian circles as well), whereas, after the Council, those who held this view were formally no longer Christians. They were Arians and heretics. The Council of Nicea declared Arianism to be heretical and its adherents to be “outside” of the Church. Nicea affirmed that Jesus is both Divine and human (*homoosios*), and Voegelin rejected this and its implications, and thus rejected the principal affirmation of the Council of Nicea. For Voegelin, Jesus is *strictly* human, namely, a being who likely realised a maximal measure of the human potential, but it is His human potential that was maximised. Indeed, on a few occasions, Voegelin stated that Jesus exhibits the maximum of illumination to date. Of course, how could it be otherwise since, as he says in his words to Heilman, “...there is no God...”? And so, Jesus is still a being who is very much like the Buddha, Socrates, the Hebrew prophets, and the others. Indeed, He is someone who is fundamentally like the rest of us. Simply put, the fact is that for Voegelin, there can be no other way of being human. Jesus is fully man, and He is most certainly not God incarnate.¹⁸ And so, by the standards of the Council of Nicea, Voegelin knew that he was not a Christian at all, and, more generally, not a religious person either. Hence, his artful

¹⁸ In Voegelin's own words, see how, in a calculated way, he disguises his thinking about these matters. In a letter Voegelin sent to North Carolina's Republican Senator John East, he writes: "The 'pre-Reformation Christian' [label you mention] is a joke. I never have written any such thing. These canards arise because I frequently have to ward off people who want to 'classify' me. When somebody wants me to be a Catholic or a Protestant, I tell him that I am a 'pre-Reformation Christian.' If he wants to nail me down as a Thomist or Augustinian, I tell him I am a 'pre-Nicene Christian.' And if he wants to nail me down earlier, I tell him that even Mary the Virgin was not a member of the Catholic Church. I have quite a number of such stock answers for people who pester me after a lecture; and then they get talked around as authentic information on my 'position.'" Letter from Eric Voegelin to John P. East dated 18 July 1977 (in *Hoover Institution Archives, Eric Voegelin Papers*, microfilm reel 10.23.) The question that we have to ask ourselves here is: What is the great secret that Voegelin feels he has to covered-over by these dexterous moves? Might it be his atheism? But why should he worry about revealing that he is an atheist? We no longer burn people at the stake for being atheists. Perhaps not, but were Voegelin and others to declare outright that they sanctioned atheism, it could—in the long run, and were the majority of the population to follow them down this path—have the effect of destabilising the moral life of the state, which is something that Voegelin fears more than anything else. So, why be transparent about one's atheism. Is it not of greater benefit to be silent about this matter and allow religious faith to be placed at the service of the state? In other words, let religion be a stabilising civil theology, i.e., a stabilising element in society, which is all it can ever be in any case. Notice how what was originally a Protestant inspired Reformation idea, namely, the subordination of religion to the state, becomes a philosophically mandated idea in the hands of the Voegelin. In light of the “fundamentalist Christian” versus so-called “liberal” conflict presently raging in the U.S., notice also just how right Voegelin was in his advocacy of prudence around the issue of atheism.

answer to his would-be followers. Of course, in reply to this, Voegelin's Christian supporters will say that Voegelin is deeply religious and Christian, and that he only affirms his "pre-Nicene" beliefs in order to draw attention to his opposition to dogmatic thinking and dogmatism of the sort that emerged following the Council of Nicea. I do not dispute the fact that Voegelin himself said something like this, and I also acknowledge that Voegelin did oppose the congealing of man's experiential life which he associated with dogmatism's gaining the upper hand on occasion, perhaps on too many occasions. But I also do not accept that his stated reasons for defining himself as a "pre-Nicene Christian" are as straightforward as this. For one thing, interpreting the decisions of the Council of Nicea as dogmatic, i.e., capricious, seems to me to be a little too reminiscent of beliefs that were popular in the Nineteenth Century to the effect that God could not act "unnaturally," and that if it were said by some that He acted in an "unnatural" fashion, then that had to be a dogmatic and therefore suspect statement which ought not to be credited. In addition, we must not forget that Voegelin was well aware of the differences between the realities "dogma" and "dogmatism." He himself recognised that dogma, as opposed to dogmatism, does not necessarily eclipse the experiential. In fact, on rare occasions, he even acknowledged that dogma is important inasmuch as it registers and thus preserves for posterity a correct linguistic formulation or articulation of man's experiential life.¹⁹ And so, why, in this instance, does Voegelin simply assert, without offering any reasons for his assertion, that the dispute between the Arians and the followers of Athanasius involved dogmatism, and was not a matter of dogma, i.e., a matter of registering the experiential life of the early Church? Might it be because Voegelin thought *ab initio* that the experiential life of many of the early members of the Church was an impossible experiential life, impossible, of course, because it was at odds with modern immanentist thinking, and specifically *his* modern immanentist thinking? I submit that Voegelin arrived at the view that there was dogmatism, and not just dogma, present at and following the Council of Nicea for reasons having more to do with his immanentism and with his theory of consciousness, rather than for reasons having to do with the facts. In fact, I would go further and suggest that what Voegelin really wished to convey by speaking of dogmatism here, and by his use of the expression "pre-Nicene Christian," and other similar expressions from his repertory of phrases, was his support for an experiential life that is immanentist, which was what was present in the Arian belief that Jesus was strictly human, and was not God incarnate.²⁰ Although Arians were not atheists, Voegelin here recognised that the Arians—and not the followers of Athanasius—said the sorts of things that he would say about who Jesus was, although perhaps not for the reasons that he would proffer. Voegelin's modern immanentist belief that there is no world transcendent God was what led him to the view that Jesus was a man like all others, and so, Jesus—as the Arians contended—had to be strictly human and nothing more than that. More generally, it can be said that Voegelin's opposition to dogmatic thinking and dogmatism had little to do with Voegelin wanting to interpret correctly the events surrounding the founding of Christianity and the first few centuries in the history of the Church, and a great deal more to do with his opposition to modern ideological thinking, which he equated

¹⁹ But, on balance, Voegelin saw dogma in a negative light, that is to say, as the congealing of our experiential life in a constraining formulation, and in that respect he deemed that dogma had overstayed its welcome.

²⁰ It is Voegelin's modern immanentist views that dictate the meaning of the dispute between the Arians and Athanasius.

with dogmatism, and may even have believed had its source in Christian dogma, which Voegelin associated with *the will to believe the impossible*. Voegelin correctly feared ideology, it having destroyed so many human lives in the past century and a half, and so, if ideology had to go in order for us to live in an more experientially focussed and humane manner, so did dogma—at the cost even of misrepresenting it as dogmatism, if need be—according to Voegelin. One has to question Voegelin’s decision here. The fact of the matter is that Voegelin would have done much better had he distinguish between dogma, on the one hand, and dogmatism and ideology, on the other, *in a consistent and sustained fashion*, if his objective was to speak the Christian experience and reality, something which he apparently found difficult if not impossible to do, despite his stated desire to do just that.²¹

One final quotation from Voegelin may be in order here. It is a quotation that was recently drawn to our attention by someone wishing to demonstrate to us Voegelin's profoundly Christian character. In *The Collected Works*, Vol. XXXIII, p. 85, Voegelin wrote: “...one can have the spirit of Christianity without being a church member.”²² Again, more evidence of just how non-dogmatically Christian Voegelin is, it is said. Now, if Voegelin were a superficial person, given to making superficial statements, we would agree. It would be correct to read this sentence, and sentences like it, in a superficial way, and thereby come to the conclusion that Voegelin was affirming his allegiance to Christianity, although not to any specific Christian church. But, as we know, Voegelin was very far from being a superficial person. Nor was he someone who was given to speaking in a thoughtless way. And so, this is a statement that has to be placed in the context of Voegelin's thinking. What this means is that when one takes into account Voegelin's theory of consciousness, and his interest in “symbolic equivalences,” this phrase by Voegelin, has a meaning that is completely different from the one that Voegelin's Christian supporters believe it has. What I mean here is that, for Voegelin, the expression “the spirit of Christianity” is not specific to Christianity. It is a spirit that is present in the thought of all who live an open experiential life. It is present in the thought of Plato, the Hebrew prophets, the Buddha and Buddhists generally, etc., and so, of course, one does not have to be a member of a church to express “the spirit of Christianity,” as far as Voegelin is concerned. The truth of the matter is that one does not even have to be a religious person of any sort to express “the spirit of Christianity,” according to Voegelin. One can be a non-dogmatic atheist and exhibit “the spirit of Christianity.” The expression “the spirit of Christianity” is completely disconnected from Christianity, and hence is utterly devoid of any specifically Christian religious meaning and content. In fact, the expression “the spirit of Christianity” is a euphemism for *non-dogmatic thinking*, for *openness to the world*.²³ And so, the sentence in question could easily have been

²¹ I will return to this matter in Part II, for there is more to this than I am able to express at the moment.

²² Originally written in German, this passage is from an essay entitled, in English, “The Spiritual and Political Future of the Western World,” delivered by Voegelin at the *Amerika-Haus* in Munich on June 9th, 1959. William Petropulos is responsible for the English translation.

²³ There is a growing literature on the relationship of Voegelin’s thought to the thought of Henri Bergson. By way of an example, see references to Bergson in Eugene Webb’s piece entitled “Eric Voegelin at the End of An Era: Differentiations of Consciousness and the Search for the Universal.” in *International and Interdisciplinary*

phrased as follows: “One can be a good man without being a church member.” Indeed, one can be. Religiosity of whatever sort, and more specifically Christian religiosity, is not essential to one’s being a good man. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were good men. Voegelin himself was a very good man in a century in which there were many very evil men. Today, many atheists are good men—indeed, some are better men than are many Christians—but this does not make them Christians in disguise, nor does it entitle Christians to claim them as theirs.

One cannot help but draw attention here to certain affinities between Voegelin and Spinoza. In a letter to Heinrich Oldenburg, Spinoza wrote: “I say that for salvation, it is *not* absolutely necessary that we know Christ according to the flesh [i.e., know Christ as the Incarnation of God on earth]; whereas it is quite another thing in regard to the eternal son of God, which is the eternal wisdom of God, which has manifested itself in all things and in supreme fashion in the human mind, and in an altogether particular way in Jesus Christ.” (My italics.) There is more than just a resonance of this view in Voegelin’s writing. Spinoza and Voegelin here are almost speaking the same language and are almost coming to the same conclusion, namely, that Jesus had a particularly well articulated *experience* of the transcendent, but this does not make Him the one who Christians believe Him to be, that is to say, God incarnate. And so, the result is that one can have the “spirit of Christianity” or “the eternal wisdom of God, which is manifest in all things...,” without being formally a Christian, namely, without believing in what Christians believe, i.e., in the Divinity of Jesus, or even that there is a God. The one place where Voegelin and Spinoza differ is with regard to whether one need be non-denominationally religious at all to have “the spirit of Christianity.” In conformity with “the climate of opinion” of his times, Spinoza would likely have said “yes,” whereas Voegelin, I hold, says “no.” For Voegelin, one can have “the spirit of Christianity” and yet be an atheist.²⁴

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Perspectives on Eric Voegelin, ed. Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 159-188.

²⁴ For this quotation from Spinoza, I am indebted to Massimo Borghesi, who in an article entitled “Gnosis, a Faith Without Reality,” *30Days*, No. 5 (1996), speaks of “idealism, or modern gnosis, as the speculative basis of ‘the philosophy of the non-event,’ the philosophy of the resurrection without the bodily risen Christ.” In this article, Professor Borghesi argues that David Friedrich Strauss in his famous work *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (1835), as well as Rudolph Bultmann, a century later, along with many other great luminaries of the German enlightenment, in the interests of defending the view that “God cannot act in history through ‘particular actions’ (miracles), or even less can he become a ‘particular man,’” completely denature the Gospel story by having “faith make real what never happened”—Voegelin would have said “dogma made real what never happened”—and could not happen, given what we know of modern science. In short, according to D. F. Strauss, *et al.*, faith (dogma) created the object, which, in this case, is the resurrection, and not vice-versa, as the Gospel account very explicitly states, when it informs us that the resurrection gave rise to faith. Now, I am not saying here that Voegelin was in agreement with D. F. Strauss’ scientism. He very clearly was not. But I am saying that Voegelin did arrive at a remarkably similar conclusion to that arrived at by D. F. Strauss, Bultmann, *et al.*, as regards what is and what is not possible for God and for man, and this is assuming that he believed in God’s existence, which was not the case, if we credit his words to Heilman, which find support in the overall structure of his thought. (Parenthetically, was Frederick Wilhelmsen’s disagreement with Voegelin not precisely over Voegelin’s interpretation of the Resurrection as a “non-event”? Wilhelmsen’s oft repeated question to Voegelin was “But is He risen? [for] ...if He [Jesus] is not risen”—in the words of St. Paul—“then I for one don’t give a damn about St. Paul’s experience of Him.” (Voegelin had focussed on Paul in the fourth volume of *Order and History: The Ecumenic Age* [1974].) Voegelin, we are told, remained silent when confronted with Wilhelmsen’s often too aggressive questioning, ...a prudential silence, one suspects. Others report that Voegelin said that he would discuss this matter with Wilhelmsen in private. And so, if Borghesi is correct, does this mean that Voegelin shared something in common with “idealism” and “modern

II

Let us now turn our attention to Voegelin's theory of consciousness. It is the key to understanding Voegelin's thought in general, and particularly as it relates to the issues that I have raised above. By way of a preliminary remark, it ought to be noted that Voegelin was both strangely sympathetic to and at odds with existential phenomenology.²⁵ (He would likely have described certain features of his thinking as examples of "experiential" phenomenology, rather than "existential" phenomenology.) We not only have his word for this. In addition to his critical assessment of Edmund Husserl's thought in his correspondence with his long-time friend Alfred Schütz—where he makes it patently clear that while originally he thought there was much to be admired about Husserl's thinking, he came to realise that he was in disagreement with Husserl²⁶—we also have Voegelin's very own approach to understanding what is involved in thinking philosophically to guide us, an approach which has affinities with phenomenological thinking in general.

One of these affinities relates to how Voegelin understood philosophy. On more than one occasion, Voegelin reminded us that philosophy is not concerned primarily with the exploration of the architecture of our ideas and cerebral constructs, with a view to proving or disproving their referential character to something in some ideal world, or, in more modern times, with a view to saying something about the consistency or inconsistency of these ideas and cerebral constructs with one another. To put it simply, philosophy, for Voegelin, has nothing to do with the creation of a rationalised edifice of ideas and concepts. Rather, philosophy, for him, is primarily concerned with the exploration, articulation and elucidation of our experiential life as human

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gnosis"? Is Voegelin's philosophy "the philosophy of the resurrection without the bodily risen Christ"? See Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "The New Voegelin," *Triumph*, January 1975.)

²⁵ It should be observed here that there is a world of difference between the type of phenomenological descriptiveness associated with the thought of Aristotle, for example (although Aristotle, of course, would never have used the word "phenomenology" to speak of his descriptive approach), and the existential phenomenological descriptiveness of Voegelin. Aristotle saw no radical discontinuity between his descriptions of the order that he knew experientially and the world beyond his subject consciousness. He believed that with his descriptions, he was describing the order that transcended his subjectivity. In short, he saw no radical epistemic break between knowing what modern Kantian and post-Kantian thinkers would characterise as the phenomenal order and knowing the noumenal order. Of course, this is far from being the case with modern existential phenomenology and phenomenologists. The point I am making here is that Voegelin's phenomenological approach is based *in* the modern era, and very explicitly on aspects of the thinking of Husserl, which itself was in turn based on the thinking of Immanuel Kant. As such, Voegelin's descriptive approach is one that applies only to the phenomenal order, and he is of the belief, it seems, that either there is no noumenal order, or if there is a noumenal order, then it is wholly ineffable, i.e., beyond man's capacity to speak about in an intelligible way. At best, the noumenal order is a world apart from the world in which human beings live and know, and, at worse, it does not exist. As we will see in the course of our exploration of these matters, Voegelin seems to favour the latter stance, at least as regards the *Ground*, although, it is true that he occasionally appears not to want to force to the surface (make explicit) the issue of whether the noumenal order is or is not.

²⁶ See Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, Translated and edited by Gerhardt Niemeyer (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1978), pp. 14-35. See also Gregor Sebba, "Prelude and Variations on the Theme of Eric Voegelin," in *Eric Voegelin's Thought: A Critical Appraisal*, Edited with an Introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1982) pp. 17-20.

beings. That is to say, Voegelin thought that philosophy is rooted in man's need to make sense of the life that he lives on a daily basis, and not in the ideas that man happens to have in his mind and that he thinks about as he lives and goes about his day-to-day "un-illuminated" and "un-illuminable" affairs. In short, philosophy is intimately connected with the life that man lives as a human being, and not with the ideas that go through his mind as he lives a banal and monotonous life. As Voegelin saw it, the problem with viewing philosophy as though it were about abstractions is that the ideas that man holds in his mind are two steps removed from their experiential origins. Between the experience and the idea is the pliable word which momentarily fixes the even more pliable human experience, which is really what philosophy seeks to illuminate. And so, philosophy must be as true, as is it possible to be true, to experience, and not to some abstract edifice of concepts or ideas.²⁷ In short, it must illuminate experience and not thought and thinking. *In fact, "thinking" and "thought" is what we call the linguistic elucidation that does not trump experience.* For Voegelin, the truth is that if thinking and thought trumps experience, it is ideology and not philosophy. Of course, this type of elucidation goes way beyond the merely empirical in the modern and positivist sense of the term, and Voegelin does not tire of reminding us of this too.

Now, one of the core elements of our experiential life as human beings that needs elucidation is man's experience of alienation, which is commonly expressed in our experience of being insufficient and inadequate, and, concomitant with this, in our driving *quest* to complete ourselves, i.e., to achieve fulfilment and wholeness, to become one with "the standard" against whom we measure ourselves. This quest is expressed and reflected in man's search for, and in his experience of, a more intimate relationship with completeness, however that is understood, or with what Voegelin called *the Ground*. This quest is, of course, synonymous with the effort we, as human beings, put into almost melting into *the Ground*, and, yet, fortunately, never quite succeeding. Like philosophy itself—with which it is intimately associated—man's *quest* for *the Ground*, for Voegelin, cannot be treated as if it were an enquiry into an idea that some of us happen to have, and have chosen to entertain, but which we could just as easily not have and choose not to entertain, and we would be none the worse for wear. That is to say, this *quest* is not an experience that some amongst us opt into on a whim, and can just as easily opt out of, if the fancy strikes us. Rather, it is a *quest* that is an identifier of us all as *persons*, and, whether we like it or not, the best that we can do to suppress the experience of questing is attempt to dismiss it from our explicit awareness (Polanyi), or, as Voegelin would say, eclipse it.²⁸ This is what most, if not all, of us indeed do to some extent and in some fashion or other, if only in order to get on with our daily material cares. But eclipsing the questing in this way does not eliminate

²⁷ Voegelin's relationship to subjective idealism is a complex one, and cannot be discussed at length here. Suffice it to say that while he is certainly critical of subjective idealism, it is not its subjectivism that troubles him most. It is the idealism that poses a problem for him. In truth, he is quite at home with subjectivism, provided it is experientially focussed and not ideationally focussed.

²⁸ Note that ideological thinking in all of its forms is an attempt to eliminate the experience of questing through capturing the reality for which human beings quest. See Eric Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality," in *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schütz*, edited by Maurice Natanson, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970). See also my piece entitled "Ideology: A Commentary on a Definition," *Appraisal*, Vol. VI No. 2 (October 2006), pp. 10-29.

our experience of questing for completeness and fulfilment. It only suspends our awareness of it for a while. The experience of questing always resurfaces, most of the time in deeply rewarding ways, but sometimes also, as Voegelin never fails to inform us, in the most contorted and unrecognisable of ways, causing us to suffer mildly and sometimes severely from various pathologies of the spirit.²⁹ So we had better deal with it straight-forwardly, according to Voegelin, and participate fully in the quest, not because it is a quest that can be satisfied in the here-and-now, because it cannot be quenched, neither in the here-and-now nor in the beyond,³⁰ but because our questing marks us off as a human being, and leads us to live a more fully human life.

To make things more explicit still, the expression “*the Ground*” is also the name that Voegelin gives to one pole in the human bi-polar experiential complex that is consciousness which includes both *man* and *the Ground*. As Voegelin points out umpteen times, “man” constitutes one pole in the experiential complex in question, and “the Ground” with whom man is in contact searchingly and tensionally the other.³¹ This “Ground” is experienced by us as being beyond us,

²⁹ A parenthetical remark seems in order at this point. Voegelin’s repeated efforts to speak of the various “pathologies of the spirit” that afflict human beings living in an eclipsed state are redolent with a kind of immanent subjectivism that characterises much of his thought. As Voegelin characterises and explores the diseases in question, one senses that he is concerned with the elucidation of a psychic imbalance within man. But more traditional thinkers would say that it is not solely or even primarily a subjective psychic imbalance that is the issue here. It is a great deal more than that. It is the rejection of the real, of transcendence and the Transcendent. But Voegelin does not appear to be concerned by this. And so, the expression “pathologies of the spirit” fails to capture or do justice to the reality of what is taking place in the modern eclipsed state. My point is that Voegelin’s focus is all too much on psychology and psychologising and not enough on the reality of what is occurring.

³⁰ In fact, believing that the quest can be satisfied in the here-and-now finds expression in what Voegelin viewed, at one point in his scholarship, as modern gnosticism, a disease of the spirit that afflicts those who believe that human alienation can be overcome in the here-and-now. As for the quest being satisfied in the Beyond, Voegelin is totally silent, and one suspects that he does not believe that there is an independently existing Beyond, any more than he believes that there is an independently existing *Ground*. In fact, one can do better than suspect this. One can affirm it. The Beyond is an experiential event. It is not a reality. To say that it is would be to hypostatise it.

³¹ Read Eric Voegelin’s long essay entitled “Structures of Consciousness” which appeared originally in *Voegelin—Research New*, Vol. II, No. 3, (September 1996). See alcor.concordia.ca/~vorennews. Allow me to quote a short passage from the talk “Structures in Consciousness” delivered by Eric Voegelin at a conference whose theme was “Hermeneutics and Structuralism: Merging Horizons” held at York University, in Downsview, Ontario, in November 1978, and transcribed by Professor Zdravko Planinc of McMaster University’s Department of Religion in Hamilton, Ontario. Voegelin writes:

“Let me use here a simple diagram: The tension goes toward the “[Ground],” in Plato and Aristotle; and at the other end of the tension is “man;” and there is a movement and counter-movement. And, we might say, the area of that movement [and counter-movement], that is what Plato and Aristotle would call the *psyché*.

So the tension reveals [itself] therefore as a tension between these two poles; and the poles are not known as givens independent from the tension in which they are experienced as poles. We are again here coming into the problem of the complex. The tension (as a polar tension) [and] the poles (the god pole and the human pole) belong together. One can not, therefore, hypostatize [...] the [god pole] as the divinity, into a god about whom we know something, short of that tension; and [one] cannot hypostatize man into an immanent entity, short of that tension in which man experiences himself as man in the tension—that is his

and it is this Beyondness that we know as the reference point against “whom” we assess our actions and ourselves. It is the measure against whom we evaluate all that we do, say, and, in the end, are.³² In our daily lives, we speak of this “Beyond,” this Measure, this Pole, in the experiential complex in a multiplicity of ways, according to Voegelin. It is Yahweh for some, God, Dieu, Deo for others. It is Allah for still many more, and, for Plato, it was the Divine Sophon. Of course, it has to be remembered that, from Voegelin’s point, the *Ground* is, like the quest for it, also not an idea or a concept that some human beings happen to have, while other human beings do not, or could as easily not have, if they have had it in the past. Were this so, it would imply that the *Ground* is not rooted in our experiential life, but is something that we select and deselect at will. However, the truth is that we do not choose or refuse to choose it at will. Moreover, it would imply that man has identity and meaning as a human being independent of the tension with the *Ground*, and this too is not so, according to Voegelin. Man's identity is relational, and the pole *man* has no identity in the absence of any tension with the pole *Ground*, any more than the pole *Ground* has any identity in the absence of any tension with the pole *man*.

It has further to be noted that this experiential complex, and the tension resulting from it, is a troubling one for man, for it propels him to change his way of living. It insistently invites him to abide by norms that are in conformity with the exigencies that the man pole experiences as set by the Ground pole in the complex. Plato draws attention to this, as Voegelin would have it, when he speaks of man’s need to “turn himself around” (*périagogé*), i.e., to change his way of life, “to undergo conversion” in response to what he experiences as the exigencies set by the complex. (Of course, Plato does not speak of “exigencies set by the complex.” This is Voegelin’s language. But Plato, according to Voegelin, nonetheless, expresses the same experiential structure.) It is also troubling in another way, Voegelin informs us. It is troubling in the sense

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existential reality. So anthropologists and theologians have their good reason, as long as they become aware of this tension as a tension in process. When the linguistic terms used for describing that tension are hypostatized into entities which can be explored independent of the tension, the luminous reality of the *psyché* is lost and one gets into empty speculation and theoretization. [...]

Voegelin will also say that the hypostatizing of the poles in this tension leads to dogmatism and ideological thinking, inasmuch as it speaks only a partial truth about, on the one hand, *man*, and on the other, the *Ground*. That is, man is not man independent of the tension, and the Ground is likewise not the Ground independent of the tension. Against, this argument, I ask, is this not immanentism dressed up in the language of philosophy, *philo sophon* (love of the sophon)?

Finally, notice Voegelin’s almost pejorative use of the word “theoretization,” where “theory” becomes almost a synonym for idle speculation or dreaming. But is having a *theory* not having an insight into the *real*, and is having an insight into the *real* not a laudable thing for the ancients, i.e., Plato and Aristotle? And does such an insight not involve the transcendence of the self, which Voegelin wants to characterise as “empty speculation”? If Voegelin means what he says in this paragraph, it seems that having theoretical insight into what is real is not a possibility for him—which would be news to great natural scientists (i.e., consider Michael Polanyi in this connection)—and presumably he must not see himself as a theorist in the classical sense. This is a curious conclusion to have to arrive at, especially when it is said about someone who is associated with the rebirth of political theory.

³² Another word that Voegelin uses to characterise the experience that human beings have of being in a relationship with a Someone is “the Beyond.” Man is at one end of the experiential complex and “the Beyond” is experienced as being at the other end. But “the Beyond” is really not beyond. It is *within*, ... within consciousness.

that it often causes many erroneously to want to hypostatise the poles of the tension, and to speak of *man*, as if the *man* pole could exist independently of the *Ground* pole, and the *Ground* pole independently of the *man* pole. The truth, however, as I mentioned above and as Voegelin himself points out repeatedly, is that neither pole, the *Ground* pole and the *man* pole, can exist independently of one another. This is what it means to speak of man as a relational being. Now, this latter remark by Voegelin is deeply revealing, since it goes some way towards demonstrating that Voegelin was a deeply modern thinker, that is to say, a thinker who did not leave open the question of the existence of the Transcendent as a reality independent of human subject consciousness. The Transcendent, the *Ground*, can be, for Voegelin, nothing more than a function of the structure of consciousness, which is who man is as well. In short, the structure of consciousness brings the *Ground* (who is otherwise known as God, the Transcendent One) and *man* into being for him whom we conventionally call man.³³

From here, Voegelin goes on to explain that his understanding of these matters is descriptive of the structures in consciousness of all of humanity and most especially of the great sages of the past. This, for example, is the essence of the message of the Buddha, of the Hebrew prophets, of Socrates, and even of Jesus Himself. All of these sages had no choice but to operate within the confines set by the structure in human consciousness described above, and particularly in view of the fact that they also possessed deeply articulated consciousnesses. It was from within this type of experiential or existential framework that each learned of and accepted his calling, which might be characterised as an “encounter” of sorts with that part of their respective consciousnesses called *the Ground*.³⁴ Indeed, so transformed by his initial encounter with the

³³ This was not a late blossoming idea for Voegelin. In *Order and History*, Volume I, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 2, while speaking of the man pole, Voegelin writes: “There is no such thing as a “man” who participates in “being” as if it were an enterprise that he could as well leave alone; there is, rather, a “something,” a part of being, capable of experiencing itself as such, and furthermore capable of using language and calling this experiencing consciousness by the name of “man.” Almost the same might be said of the *Ground* pole, with the added proviso that this part of being, unlike the experiencing consciousness that calls itself by the name of “man,” has its being as a function of the experiencing consciousness we call “man.”

³⁴ Parenthetically, I should draw attention here to an interesting and critical comment that relates to the very phenomenon we are discussing written by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI). In an article on relativism that Cardinal Ratzinger authored for a meeting with the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America, held in Guadalajara, Mexico, in May 1996, Cardinal Ratzinger writes:

The situation [regarding the effect of relativism on our thinking] can be clearly seen in [the writings of] the American Presbyterian John Hick. His philosophical departure point is found in the Kantian distinction between *phenomenon* and *noumenon*: We can never grasp ultimate truth in itself, but only its appearance in our way of perceiving through different “lenses.” What we grasp is not really and properly reality in itself, but a reflection on our scale.

At first Hick tried to formulate this concept in a Christ-centered context. After a year's stay in India, he transformed it—after what he himself calls a Copernican turn of thought—into a new form of theocentrism. The identification of only one historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, with what is “real,” the living God, is now relegated as a relapse into myth. Jesus is consciously relativized as one religious leader among others. The Absolute cannot come into history, but only models and ideal forms that remind us about what can never be grasped as such in history. Therefore, concepts such as the “church, dogma” and “sacraments” must lose their unconditional character. To make an absolute of such limited forms of mediation or, even more, to consider them real encounters with the universally valid truth of God who reveals himself would

pole that is *the Ground* was each of these sages that each spent whatever was left of his life after his initial encounter attempting to convey to the rest of mankind the overwhelming satisfaction that descended upon him as a result of his knowing that he was in some type of relationship with “the Ground,” as well as the implications of his particular encounter with what he felt was ultimacy, not only for himself, but also for all men. This leads Voegelin to speak about the deeply rooted *equivalences* amongst the encounter experiences, as well as amongst the recommended ways of being that flow from the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, Socrates, and Jesus the Messiah. Indeed, so deep are these equivalences for Voegelin, that he is led to affirm that although each one of these sages may appear superficially to be saying something different from his fellow sages, the truth is that, apart from the culturally based differences, each differs in what he is saying only with respect to the degree of articulateness and differentiation contained in his understanding of the experience of *the Ground* and its implications. In short, because they are all operating with the same structures in consciousness, if one excepts culture, only the analytical capacities of the sages vary, and, as a result, each says more or less analogous things, in the sense that some are more differentiated in their expression of this analogousness, and, thus, more illuminating than are others.³⁵

Now, so fundamental a matter has consequences, according to Voegelin, and one of these consequences relates to the whole question of the relationship of reason to revelation, or of Athens to Jerusalem, as others would have it. Despite the inclination that some may have to want to distinguish between philosophy and revelation, it is of paramount importance, Voegelin warns us, that, based on his theory of consciousness, we not draw this distinction, for it is a completely meaningless one. Whether we be speaking of reason or revelation, both have their origins in the structure of man’s consciousness, and in the attempts that all men make, and particularly that sages make, to elucidate the driving force behind their lives and their thought. In short, man is the source of both reason (philosophy) and revelation (religion). As a result, philosophy, or reason, Voegelin very explicitly tells us, is what might be referred to as the revelation of the Greeks, and revelation is what might be seen as the philosophy of the Hebrews and the Christians, and presumably the Muslim world as well. (With reference to this point, see Voegelin’s article “The Gospel and Culture” in the location mentioned in footnote 37.) In short, the difference between philosophy and religion is a stylistic one, and not a difference based on origin. It is simply not so that reason originates with man and revelation with God. Both reason and revelation originate with man, and Aquinas, amongst others, was wrong in arguing that philosophy is the product of human reasonableness and rationality, whereas revelation is given to man by God. This simply cannot be, given that “[o]ne can not, . . . hypostatize [...] the [god pole] ..., into a god about whom we know something, short of that tension; and [one] cannot

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be the same as elevating oneself to the category of the Absolute, thereby losing the infiniteness of the totally other God.

With appropriate modifications to account for a different agenda, one can hear John Hick echoing the views of Spinoza (mentioned above) and Eric Voegelin, assuming that Cardinal Ratzinger’s interpretation of Hick is correct.

³⁵ In light of Cardinal Ratzinger’s remarks (see footnote 34), we cannot help but ask the question: “Was Voegelin a relativist?,” and the answer seems to be “yes, he was.” How could it be otherwise given Voegelin’s belief that Jesus was but “one ‘religious’ or ‘philosophical’ leader amongst others, all of whom were concerned with the same issues as He”?

hypostatize man into an immanent entity, short of that tension in which man experiences himself as man in the tension—that is his existential reality.”³⁶ In other words, God—He Who has long been mistakenly seen as being Wholly Other, but Who is obviously not Wholly Other—cannot, and, hence, never did, reveal Himself to man; only the *Ground*, who “has its being as a function of the experiencing consciousness called “man,” can “reveal” itself to man. Of course, this is not revelation *qua* revelation, no matter how Voegelin wants to interpret it. *It is fundamentally one dimension of the human spirit, experienced as other, speaking to another dimension of that same spirit, experienced as self.* The point here is that Voegelin’s theory of consciousness gives rise to and is the expression of a Twentieth Century version of “the philosophy of the non-event”—as Massimo Borghesi speaks of in a different context—wherein revelation, understood in the traditional sense, is “a non-event” and is robbed of its essence as revelation (which robbery is, of course, also a non-event), and reduced to nothing more than human reasoning, where reasoning is understood not in the Enlightenment sense, but in the existential phenomenological sense.³⁷

Now, as we can see, this raises a number of questions on a wide range of levels. Simply in terms of Voegelin’s project, it causes one to question the extent to which Voegelin can make sense of the life and thought of Plato, whom he held in such high regard. For instance, Plato, from Voegelin’s perspective, now has to be seen as nothing more than a philosopher *qua* immanentist prophet, who is at once concerned with the rational *qua* revelational elucidation of man’s experiential life. And why do we say this? We say this because, for Voegelin, there is no substantial difference between immanent revelation and rational elucidation. One is the other. As for revelation, understood in the traditional sense, it does not figure anywhere in Voegelin’s thinking. How could it? But more can be said here. We have to ask ourselves, was Plato really someone who did not believe in the independent existence of man and the *Ground* (the Real), i.e., in the autonomous existence of the Sophon, as Voegelin must mean to suggest, given his theory of consciousness? Did Socrates and Plato really think that the Divine Sophon was an intra-personal entity constituted by the structure of human consciousness? In short, did Plato really believe that the Divine Sophon was nothing more than a subject based experience that had no reference point in the world beyond the subject’s consciousness? Can we really credit this? In fact, is this not an all-too-modern understanding of Plato’s Divine Sophon, and an understanding that presupposes, at the very least, that Plato was an advocate of something akin to Kantian subjectivism, minus Kant’s noumenal order? Where is the evidence for this in Plato? Would it not be more accurate to say that in a manner that is somewhat similar to the speculation of Michael Polanyi, Plato did believe that human beings are, through contemplation, capable of making contact with the Real and with an order that transcends the self, and, hence, for Plato, there is a Reality that is symbolised by the expression “Divine Sophon,” a Reality that may be known in and through a *contemplative* human consciousness, but also a Reality that exists independently of it and is not the consequence of hypostatisation, a Reality that chooses when to reveal itself to the *contemplative* person—no human can, through manipulation and technique,

³⁶ See Voegelin’s article “Structures in Consciousness” *op. cit.* (See footnote 31).

³⁷ See Massimo Borghesi, *op.cit.* See also “The Gospel and Culture,” in Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian, ed., *Jesus and Man’s Hope*, (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), pp. 59-101.

i.e., through his will-power, force the Real to speak³⁸—and a Reality to Whom man owes commitment and loyalty in some sense?³⁹

Voegelin's approach also obliges one to question the extent to which he can make sense of Judaism and Islam, inasmuch as both religions hold that the Divine, Who exists apart from man, reveals Himself to man through the Hebrew prophets in the case of Judaism, and via the Hebrew prophets, Jesus and Mohammed in the case of Islam. The point here is that in their dealings with Yahweh, the Hebrew prophets clearly did not understand themselves to be exploring aspects of their consciousness or experiential complex. The fact is that they would not have understood what that meant—any more than Plato would have—and, if they had, they would have been horrified. They understood themselves to be involved in an activity that led them to transcend their respective *selves*, and they knew themselves to be in some sort of contact with what they understood to be *Wholly Other*, as it existed independently of their *selves*. *Mutatis mutandis* for Islam. As regards orthodox Christianity, Voegelin's thesis is even more problematical than it is

³⁸ Voegelin almost never uses the word “contemplation,” a word that symbolises the theoretician’s reaching out, in a state of expectancy and trust, to the Real that he seeks to contact, in the belief that the Real will reveal itself if he (the theoretician) has properly disposed himself? This is not an inadvertency on Voegelin’s part. Voegelin believes that contemplative theory is not possible because there is no Real that is available to us—no Real that can be in complicity with the contemplative person in response to his or her having made the appropriate changes to his or her way of being (*periagogé*). *Contemplation* is not part of Voegelin’s vocabulary because *periagogé* for Voegelin is not what it is for Plato, or, if we think of a more contemporary thinker, what it is for Michael Polanyi. *Périagogé*, for Voegelin, has to do with the resuscitation of our awareness of the bi-polar tension *within* human consciousness, and is not about our directing our attention towards a trans-personal Real. (One of the rare instances when Voegelin speaks of “contemplation” is in *Conversations I* “In Search of the Ground,” in *Conversations with Eric Voegelin*, The Thomas More Institute, (Montreal, 1980), where he mentions “the contemplative life,” and then only to represent it, not as something he favours, but as a possible position that one can defend. His exact words are: “In every society there are such opinions” (*doxa*) about how one might lead one’s life. In other words, Voegelin is not saying that he is positively disposed towards the *doxa* that is “the contemplative way of life.” He is just saying that in every society there are those who hold favourably *opinions* of the contemplative way of life. As to how he feels about this *doxa*, we are left to speculate, but his choice of the word “opinion” (*doxa*) when speaking about the contemplative way of life reveals a great deal.)

³⁹ In this connection, we find ourselves somewhat in disagreement with Professor Zdravko Planinc of McMaster University's Department of Religion, who says, in a comment on his transcription of “Structures in Consciousness,” which appeared in *Voegelin—Research News*, Vol. II No. 3 (September 1996):

Despite these difficulties in Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness, it is nevertheless roughly Platonic in character. But it is Platonic in character only as a manifestation of Voegelin's own character, and not as a result of any close textual analyses of the dialogues....

My question here is: “Is Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness...nonetheless roughly Platonic in character?” And my answer is: “No it is not, unless Plato was a modern post-Kantian thinker.” Since writing the above, Professor Planinc *may* have modified his views. See his article entitled “The Uses of Plato in Voegelin's Philosophy of Consciousness: Reflections Prompted by Voegelin's Lecture, “Structures of Consciousness,” which acts as an addendum to “Structures in Consciousness,” *Voegelin—Research News*, Vol. II No. 3 (September 1996), located at alcor.concordia.ca/~vorennews/.

for either the Jews or the Muslims. If it is imaginable, it makes less sense of Christianity than it does of Judaism or Islam.⁴⁰

Orthodox Christianity views Jesus as Someone Who is a great deal more than a famous prophet or sage engaged in the exploration of the dimensions of His experiential complex. In fact, for the orthodox Christian, Jesus is more than who a prophet is for the Hebrews and the Muslims, and revelation involves much more than a man's intra-personal "encounter" with the Voegelinian *Ground*. The orthodox Christian holds that God Himself, in the person of Jesus, enters into man's world, into history, and reveals Himself to mankind in history, not through some intermediary, as is the case with the Hebrews and the Muslims, but directly, in His Person, and in doing so, He both validates and redeems that history and the singularity of a human life that exists within it in a manner that goes way beyond whatever validity it may achieve as a result of man's acknowledging Him from afar as a being who is Wholly Other, and infinitely more than as a result of man's participation in experiential *equivalences* across cultures and across ages. Indeed, the value that a human life has for the orthodox Christian is the consequence of God's having honoured it by assuming its corporeality, and is not the consequence of man's potential contact with the pole in the structure of human consciousness called *the Ground*. The point here is that in the orthodox Christian context, it is nothing less than the specificities and the singularities of a human life that are redeemed as a result of God's deigning to become a man. Of course, what this means is that Voegelin's theory of consciousness, not only cannot do justice to Plato's claims and to the claims of the Jews and the Muslims—although it maybe does a slightly better job of coming to some sort of understanding of both Judaism and Islam than it does of orthodox Christianity—the fact is that it cannot begin to grasp the extraordinary character of the world of the orthodox Christian. Orthodox Christians claim that the *Wholly Other* revealed Himself to man in history in a real and singularly spectacular and totally unforeseeable, uncontrollable and humanly unsanctioned way at the time of the Incarnation—in a way that has no parallel, i.e., no equivalence, in history—and that thereby He elevated the singularity of every human being to a level that would have been incomprehensible before that time, and is almost not comprehensible after it. Henceforth, a human being is not worthy because he or she participates noetically in a subject-based experience of orderliness and meaning that is the essence of worthiness since time immemorial, but he or she is worthy because a Being no less than the Almighty Himself chose to become human and participate in man's way of being, and in His doing so, every man's way of being is both validated, honoured and redeemed. But, of course, Voegelin's theory of consciousness does not permit him to make sense of this understanding of the origin of human dignity, for it precludes from the beginning the possibility that something like this could happen, let alone be the source of human dignity and worth. In fact, it is because of this original preclusion that Voegelin has to represent the presence of the Transcendent in time as a product of dogmatic thinking. Dogmatic thinking, for Voegelin, is not solely thinking that expresses a congealing of a person's experiential life.⁴¹ It is, maybe first and

⁴⁰ Notice here that we are not faulting Voegelin for not being a Christian or for being a philosopher. We are faulting him for not following a standard that he set for himself when he asserted that philosophy and philosophers need to do justice to the culture of the community that they seek to explain, and that they ought not to root their assertions in some abstract imaginative schema that is not related to any known existential order.

⁴¹ See the relevant section in Part I above.

foremost, but certainly also thinking that is open to the possibility that man can be in contact with the Transcendent, which is deemed by Voegelin to be an impossibility. This is the general rubric under which all of these problems fall. In fact, a close reading of Voegelin voluminous writings will show that to the extent to which religion prescriptions can be seen to have a human and immanent origin, then they are lauded. However, if they cannot be said to have an immanent origin, or cannot be provided with one, but are clearly said to have an origin that is Transcendent, then they are seen as dogmatic, potentially ideological and dangerous, and in the end, undeserving of attention. Needless to say, this has to have a very important bearing on the thought of one whose intention it was to illuminate the Christian experience. And so, can Voegelin accurately represent orthodox Christianity—which was one of the things he set out to do—if he insists on speaking this language? It would appear that the answer to this question is unambiguous.

If I might, at this point, make a tangential and deeply relevant remark about Voegelin and dogma, now that we have a sense of the *étendu* of Voegelin’s theory of consciousness; Voegelin’s difficulties with dogma are somewhat more complicated than what I was able to convey earlier. Voegelin’s opposition to “dogma” (which is a synonym for “faith-based knowledge”) is very much affiliated with what we have come to recognise as our contemporary and deeply modern hubris, that is to say, with our inability to accept the view that *God intervenes into the world of human affairs at His discretion, and not ours*. Man does not have a say in approving and controlling God’s coming into the world of men. Man does not manage the *if*, the *when* and the *how* God will make his appearance amongst us. But this “desire to manage” is ultimately what is behind the modern world’s and Voegelin’s denigration of dogma and revelation. He, like many of our contemporaries, is trying to manage the *if*, the *when* and the *how* of Plato, the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians, with a view presumably to suppressing the entire issue of who is in charge so that, in the end, it entirely drops out of sight.

We need to remind ourselves here that modern man is driven by the will to power and the belief that it is his duty to control and take charge of all aspects of *his* world.⁴² In practice, what this means is that revelations that are unsanctioned by man, i.e., that do not originate with man, but with a seeming capriciousness on the part of a doubtfully existing Transcendent, are not welcomed affairs amongst modern men. How dare this Transcendent, whose existence is questionable, challenge or contest modern man’s will to control by engaging in bogus and unscheduled interventions into man’s world, interventions which have the effect of disrupting man’s plans? To be precise, how dare God reveal Himself—*however that revealing is conceived*—without being invited to do so? How dare He “crash” this party, which modern man views as *man’s* party? What I am proposing here is that Voegelin’s opposition to dogma and faith is not so much an opposition to dogmatism as such, although it masquerades as this, and Voegelin himself may even have thought that it was, in part, so. Rather, Voegelin’s attack on dogma originates in his modern and deep-seated affinity for immanent explanations. The fact is that like most modern people, Voegelin is uncomfortable with man’s creaturely being, which translates into his need to oppose the failure on the part of the Transcendent to ask for man’s

⁴² See my paper entitled “Ideology: A Commentary on a Definition,” *Appraisal*, Vol. VI, 2 (October 2006), pp. 10-29.

permission to intervene into the world of human affairs, so that ultimately it might be said of the interventions that are the Jewish and Muslim revelations, and that is the Christian Incarnation, that they were controlled and sanctioned by man. Man sets the hour, the minute, the second of his salvation. He saves himself. (Have a thought for Voegelin's interpretation of "the saving tale" at the end of Plato's *Republic*.) In short, Jesus the Messiah's (as opposed to Jesus, the man) coming into the world was an unsanctioned event—unsanctioned by nature, by rationality and by man—and so it has to be interpreted as a non-event, i.e., Jesus is not God incarnate, he is only a man. This is why the Arians were, broadly speaking, right. This is why Voegelin identifies himself, when pressed, as a pre-Nicene Christian. However, since some amongst us insist on speaking about this non-event as if it were an event, i.e., Jesus is God and Man, then they who speak this way have to be seen as propagating dogma and charged with being unrealistic, i.e., unscientific, and hence, dogmatic. As a result, the Incarnation becomes dogma for Voegelin, something that is not real because it is not endorsed by nature's order and by man.

We now also have a much clearer understanding of why Voegelin has to fuse reason (philosophy) and revelation (religion), and why he has to argue, unlike Aquinas, that the distinction between the two is essentially stylistic, as he informs us in his article "The Gospel and Culture" (see footnote no. 36 above). The fact is that, for Voegelin, revelation cannot be other than the Hebrew and Christian version of what philosophy is for the Greeks, viz., the exercise of human reason in the exploration of mankind's experiential life, because it cannot have anything to do with a Divinely initiated intervention into the world of man, and this for two reasons. One, for a reason that Voegelin does not specify, but that he appears to hold, namely, there is no God, and even if there is, He cannot act to suspend the laws of nature (see footnote no. 24 above). Hence, revelation, understood in the traditional sense, revelation *qua* revelation, has never taken place *because, of necessity, it cannot take place for there is no one to do the revealing*. Hence, it has to be the analogue of philosophy for the Hebrews, the Christians and Muslims. Two, were revelation *qua* revelation, that is, revelation as understood by the Hebrews, the Christians and the Muslim to take place, it would signify that man is off-centre (*ex-centric*) and ultimately not in complete *control* over his world; but (modern) man, of course, cannot be off-centre in this way. He cannot see himself as a creature and not as a creator. He has to see himself as someone who is at the centre of things and in total control, since this is part of the essence of what it means to be a (modern) person. Revelation, therefore, has to be a form of immanentist reasoning, and hence an expression of the structure of consciousness. And if it is not that, then it is of necessity *dogmatic* thinking, and, hence, it is not about something that is real, where "real" is understood in the modern sense.⁴³

⁴³ Basing himself on his theory of consciousness, Voegelin very clearly asserts that what the main body of orthodox Christians characterise, and have characterised for millennia, as revelation, that is, revelation *qua* the intervention of the Transcendent into history, is not intrinsic to very early Christianity. It is something that infiltrated the beliefs of the Christian community during the first few centuries of the Christian era, and it did so as a means of stabilising the experientially based gains that were achieved by the early Christian community, and perhaps also—although this is not as clear in Voegelin's analysis of this matter—as a way to enable the authorities in the community to gain control over the community. The effect of this was to elevate what were originally human experiential gains to pronouncements emanating from outside of the human context, which pronouncements were in turn elevated to the status of dogma, at which point all or almost all experientially based life and thinking was drained from the community. But, of course, we argue that one ought to be sceptical of Voegelin's reading here, since much of this

Turning our attention now to those things that Voegelin refers to as “experiential equivalences”—key features of Voegelin’s theory of consciousness—we will gain an insight into the essence of his philosophy of history, i.e., something that he is often said not to have had by some scholars.⁴⁴ Though very much a modern thinker in most respects—as I have sought to show in the previous pages—history, according to Voegelin, is not composed of a logical procession of periods, phases or eras which culminate in some kind of utopian or idyllic dénouement, or its opposite, as is the case with a great many modern thinkers. Nor does history end, for Voegelin, in any kind of faith based dénouement either in this world or in the world to come. The point is that in Voegelin’s estimation there is no technological or other utopia in man’s future, no communist phase in history where people will read a book in the morning, fish or play games in the afternoon and lounge about in the evening discussing the higher points in life, no thousand year Reich where the racially acceptable worthies will know nothing but pleasure, the racially damned having been dispatched long ago. In short, Voegelin tells us that there will be no “city of the sun,” no heaven on earth, indeed, no heaven at all, in man’s future. Rather, history is, throughout its course, a great repetitive undertaking wherein man’s experientially-based revelatory insights into the human condition, that are always characteristic of a particular moment in time in terms of the character of their explicitness, have repeatedly to be discovered anew and elaborated upon by man in order for them to exhibit their freshness and their revelatory character, otherwise they become routinised and stale. These are the highest orders of meaning with which a human being will be acquainted. As for discovering the truth in the world to come, there is not point to discussing this, since there is no life after death and there is no world to come. And what is most troubling of all is the fact that Voegelin accepts that there is no absolute standard against which to measure the truth content of what we humans characterise as “insights” or “losses of insight” into our condition. Rather, what there is is a standard that is very much a relative one which has to do with the extent of articulation or differentiation of the insight at the experiential level. A more articulated experiential insight is felt by man as a gain because it draws out into explicitness and light a dimension of man’s being and identity that he experiences as less present in a less well articulated experience insight, or

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sort of thinking emerges out of 19th Century “higher criticism,” and has nothing to do with the early years of the Church. See Voegelin’s article entitled “The Gospel and Culture,” in *Jesus and Man’s Hope*, edited by Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian, (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971).

⁴⁴ There is a good deal of confusion about whether Voegelin had or did not have a philosophy of history versus whether he had or did not have a theology of history. Some of his followers hold that he had no philosophy of history, but did have, in the manner of St. Augustine, a theology of history. As one might suspect, based on what has already been said, we very much disagree with this view. If by “philosophy of history,” we mean a conviction that the course of time follows a logical trajectory towards an idyllic dénouement that is discernable long before we arrive at its realisation, then Voegelin very definitely does *not* have a philosophy of history. However, if by “philosophy of history” we mean something as simple as the idea that during the course of time mankind will live through meaning-filled high and low points which play themselves out in a wholly unpredictable manner according to destiny and the vagaries of human agents, then Voegelin had a philosophy of history, though it may not be a logic of history. But Voegelin most definitely does not have, from our perspective, is a theology of history, and we say this despite the fact that we realise that some of his most ardent supporters believe that he does. In fact, we would go as far as to say that Voegelin cannot have had a theology of history, for, at the very minimum, one has to accept that the Transcendent exists and intervenes in history for one to have a theology of history. A theology of history presumes revelation, and not revelation as Voegelin understands it.

perhaps not at all present under highly routinised and compacted conditions of living. And yet, the fact that there is this sort of repetitiveness and uncertainty in our lives as human beings ought not to lead us to despair over our inability to attain enlightenment, for there have been, and there will always be, what we might provisionally speak of as spectacular breakthroughs into what we subjectively discern as deep meaningfulness. These breakthroughs will give us great satisfaction, for though they are wholly unpredictable in their specifics prior to their occurring, they bring deep meaning into our lives, at least, until they become routinised. Late Hellenic times presented our forebearers, and continues to present us today, with just such an occasion as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle caused a breakthrough of monumental proportions to take place, indeed, a breakthrough that led to the founding of the occidental intellect from which we today still gain great benefit—and there were a number of other occasions in Jewish pre-Christian history when routinised religious thinking was momentarily replaced by deep experiential insights into the human condition which had the effect of elevating the religious discourse of the Hebrews to new heights. And, of course, the most spectacular occasion of all for the occidental world was when the message conveyed by the birth, life and death of the one called Jesus was understood to be the moral standard against which all human action and thought was henceforth to be measured. In fact, this was, according to Voegelin, the most marking occasion *to date* in the entire history of emerging meaningfulness. But, sadly, with the passage of time, all of these breakthroughs get reify and grow stale, if they have not done so already, including the Christian breakthrough, and the whole quest for experientially-based meaning has to begin anew, argues Voegelin. A new Buddha, a new Isaiah, a new Socrates, and a new Jesus, will, if our world lasts long enough, inevitably stand before their respective contemporaries to proclaim a new and more vital meaningfulness than whatever is the then prevailing routinised orthodoxy, and presumably also more vital than whatever they happen to know of all that has come before. And these new sages will also be, in some sense, credited for a time, perhaps even a very long period of time. However, in the very long run, they too will go the way of all previous efforts of the same sort. Their messages too will become stale and clichéd, and in the end have to be reshaped in order to meet new human exigencies. And, in the final days, when time itself has been exhausted, all that mankind will have to look back upon will be a long trail of now tired practices punctuated by periods of high brilliancy, which inevitably grew musty, as time itself came to an end. At this point in time, man will come to recognise the fatuous but inevitable character of his quest for meaning during his long journey through the ages. Indeed, it will be in this recognition that wisdom will be seen to reside, a wisdom which, with a little judiciousness, we can have now. This is what Voegelin has in mind when he speaks of “experiential equivalences,” “equivalences” at an experiential level which, when properly understood, give to mythic illuminations a meaningfulness of short duration.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Voegelin’s interest in “experiential equivalences” led him to explore not only those experiences mentioned in the written record, but also what he viewed as their earliest expression in Neolithic and pre-Neolithic symbolisation, i.e., cave paintings and drawings. In fact, in his quest to explore the earliest symbolic renderings of what he believed were the universal and atemporal character of these experiences, Voegelin travelled to archaeological sites in Turkey, the Holy land, Malta, the British Isles and Ireland, the U.S., etc., and corresponded with world authorities on the meaning of the symbols he encountered in his travels. See Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn, eds., *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 2008), pp. 15ff.

A number of points of interest flow from all of this. Let us focus our attention on just one. No religion, whether it be a so-called “revealed religion” or not, is “the best” at exposing the true meaning of it all for mankind. All religions—revealed and unrevealed—are on a par with one another when it is a matter of exploring meaning, except for the degree of their respective articulations and refined understandings of man’s experiential life. In fact, some revealed religions may be less capable than philosophy at shedding light on man’s quest inasmuch as they are more inclined to succumb to dogma and dogmatic thinking—which is synonymous with the hardening of our experiential life and the end of our searching—something that no true philosophy (a philosophy that does not become an ideology) ever engages in.

Here, one cannot help but notice that Voegelin does not hold much store in the belief that Christianity, or any other revealed religion, constitutes a dispensation of sorts, that is, a dispensation that exempts mankind from having to repeat endlessly its search for meaning. There is no end to man’s radical searching, not even if we believe that God Himself entered into history and ended the search by providing us with *the* answer. The truth is that Christians are delusional in thinking that Christ provided the answer to man’s questing, and thus ended this radical searching. The searching cannot be ended in this way, in part because the searching is a central element of who we are as human beings. And so, Christianity is simply not “a new dispensation,” for no one can be dispensed from having to quest, not even the Christian.⁴⁶ In short, there is no B.C. followed by A.D. There was no ancient quest that culminated with an ancient answer coming into history from the “outside” at the time of Christ’s Incarnation, as Christians hold. Nor can there be an answer to our questing that arises from within history, as many modern thinkers would contend. This last contention is but a sick parody of Christianity. All is one, i.e., all is questing, from the beginning of time until the end of time. Mankind has and will throughout history continue to live life under the same exigencies that prevailed at the start, namely, the presence of uncertainty and the need to search, but never find in any absolute sense. These are exigencies that oblige man to engage anew in the quest for meaning when things get routinised and lose their capacity to invigorate. But in the end, it is all for nothing. It is at this point in the exploration of what Voegelin has to say that one dearly wishes that Voegelin’s Christian supporters were correct in their claims about Voegelin’s spirituality, but for the reasons proffered here one cannot see how they can be.

III

In summation, I want to say that I am well aware that a much more extensive treatment of the issues raised in this piece is required, and that I have only explored the surface of some the questions involved. In addition, I also want to emphasise that throughout this piece, my point has

⁴⁶ Note that there is a good deal of truth to Voegelin’s claim that not even the Christian can be dispensed from the need to search. Christianity does not contest this. For Christians, the problematic element in Voegelin’s argument is in his claim that there is no acceptable faith-based response to man’s searching. How does Voegelin know this? From where does this certitude on Voegelin’s part arise? In truth, one has to acknowledge that one has difficulty identifying the source of Voegelin’s certitude about this matter, except perhaps to point to his support for the modern immanentist penchant, that is to say, the penchant to deny “the Other,” that same Other Who is denied in Voegelin’s theory of consciousness. Of course, in opposition to Voegelin, Christianity claims that the search ends with a response, and that faith focusses the orientation of the searcher and introduces him or her to dimensions of meaningfulness in this life that elude the faith-less.

not been to argue that Voegelin is hostile to religion in the manner of the great majority of modern Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, or that he speaks disparagingly of religion in general and of Christianity in particular. Quite the contrary is true, and, I think, this is very likely the reason why so many misread him on religion and believe him to have been a deeply spiritual person. Rather, my point has been to show that despite his not being a spiritual or religious person, indeed, despite his being an atheist by the standards of any commonsensical understanding of the term *atheist*, Voegelin was remarkably well disposed towards religion and even Christianity, *but only inasmuch as religion and Christianity are both understood to be entirely immanent phenomena* and two of the most civilising and sophisticated expressions of the structure of consciousness in these brutal and murderous days. In short, Voegelin knew and was able to make sense of the great positive contributions that religion and Christianity made to human wellbeing over the millennia, and, unlike the majority of contemporary atheists, he was not about to discard completely religion *as a civil theology* over the “small” issue of whether it was about the revelation of regions transcendent or only about the exploration of regions immanent. He would rearticulate the history of religion and particularly of Christianity so as to represent it an entirely immanent enterprise—which is what it always was in any case, according to him—and thereby show that with “minor” modifications to our mistaken traditional understanding of religion, all of which modifications would be consistent with modern thinking, religion and Christianity could continue to contribute to human happiness, political stability and peace. This, it has to be stated, was not an insignificant effort on Voegelin’s part, particularly when one takes into consideration the subtle shifts in meaning that Voegelin discreetly introduced into his new formulation of Christianity, and all of this was done in such a fashion as not to draw the attention of the orthodox adherents of any faith. In fact, it has to be acknowledged that this was an effort worthy of great admiration, for it could have been otherwise if the full significance of this re-thinking of Christianity had become immediately manifest. In fact, this was the sort of effort that could only be successful if it were undertaken by a person in possession of great *phronesis*. But, having said this, we must not make light of the issues at play here either. This great feat does not make of Voegelin a great religious or Christian thinker. *Rather, the case is that he ends up being a great pragmatic and prudential thinker who converts religion, and more specifically Christianity, into a civil theology, to be used in support of political objectives, namely, the realisation of political order through the deployment of a minimum amount of violence and force.*

How does this repositioning of Voegelin in the western intellectual tradition affect our understanding of Voegelin’s insight into the predicament that is modernity? Nothing more than a hint at a possible answer can be offered in a paper that is already too long. It is imperative for us to understand that Voegelin is not the thinker who will reacquaint us with the proper balance between the world immanent and the world transcendent. Nor is he someone who will reintroduce us to our Christian religious heritage, that great heritage that was at the centre of the occidental world for two thousand years, . . . no, more than that, that shaped the occidental human being. In fact, the contrary is the case. If we read Voegelin uncritically, we will come away knowing less about that heritage than we ought to, and what we will learn from him sadly will be of questionable correctness. On the other hand, if we bring appropriately critical faculties to bear in our reading of Voegelin, our ability to see into the predicament that is modernity for

ourselves, will, in no small measure, be attributable to our having had to wrestle with the thought of this great master and genius who was Voegelin.

I am well aware that these are both serious criticism and high praise for this truly great man, who, as he said in his work *The New Science of Politics*, set out to found his science of society on the self-understanding of the community that was at hand. However, as I have attempted to show, I believe he ended by doing nothing of the sort.⁴⁷ Instead, he invented a social and psychic order that never quite existed in the way that he described.

⁴⁷ See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 27-29. It seems that Voegelin's thinking undergoes a major shift between the publication of *The New Science of Politics*, which occurred in 1952, and the early to mid 1960s. In a manner that foreshadows the writings of Charles Taylor on the same subject, Voegelin informs us, in *The New Science of Politics*, that a true science of politics, and by implication, society, has to be founded on the common-sense parlance and self-understanding of the community being studied, and at no point should social science parlance sever its link with the common sense discourse and self-understanding of the community under study, although it can and should purify that parlance by elevating everyday terms to the level of theoretical terms. Voegelin even goes on to remark that this is exactly what Aristotle did when he borrowed terms from the everyday parlance of the Athenians, terms which he then purified ("theoreticised") so as to arrive at his constitutional forms, i.e., rule by the "basileus," rule by the "tyranos," the "citizen," etc. These were terms that were used in everyday discourse amongst the Athenians, but what Aristotle did was elevate the word "tyranos," for example, to the level of a theoretical term by refining its meaning ever so slightly, a refining which involved never applying the word "tyranos" to the arbitrary rule of a single person over a people that had, *at no point in its past, experienced rule by the law*. What this means is that while ordinarily average Athenians would, of course, have described Xerxes as a tyrant, Aristotle, the theorist, would not. The Persians had never known rule according to the law, that is, rule according to standards that they had accepted to live by, and so they could not be the subjects of a tyrant, according to Aristotle. The point here is that in his use of the term "tyranos" Aristotle preserved a link between his theoretical term "tyranos" and the common sense everyday term "tyranos" of the Athenians, but, at the same time, when acting as a scientist, he restricts the use of the Athenian term "tyranos" and its variations, to those contexts where a people who, having known what it means for them to rule themselves, fall under the sway of an arbitrary ruler.

The issue here is a complex one, which revolves around the rapport of language to political and social reality. As Charles Taylor reminds us in his very important article entitled "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," (*The Review of Metaphysics*, XXV, No.1 [September 1971], pp. 3-51), "language is constitutive of social and political reality." And so, in this particular instance, the language of the ancient Athenians, when spoken amongst themselves, is not only capable of capturing a distinction that the Persian language is not able to capture, but it captures a way of being that is particular to the Athenians and that does not exist at all amongst the Persians. Simply put, the Persians do not know and do not live under the reality that is rule by a tyrant, while the Athenians do know of this reality, because they have experienced both rule by the law and rule by a tyrant. And so, although the Athenians might use the term "tyranos" in speaking of the rule of Xerxes, they are wrong in doing so if, by the use of this term, they mean to describe the reality that the Persians experience. And the reason why they are wrong is because the reality that is tyranny and tyrannical rule for the Athenians is not present, i.e., does not exist, amongst the Persians. As a result, we can say that the Athenians live a subtler moral life and way of being than do the Persians, whose language and moral life are less refined at this period in their history when they find themselves in conflict with Athens.

Returning to Voegelin, it seems that he abandoned this very fruitful avenue opened up by Aristotle—an avenue that he clearly knew about and even recommended following in the early pages of Chapter I of *The New Science of Politics*—when he subsequently develops his theory of consciousness, inasmuch as his theory of consciousness leads him to sever completely the links between his would be theoretical language, on the one hand, and the common-sense parlance of the Greek, the Hebrew and the early Christian community, and, dare we say, other communities as well, on the other. To put it very brutally, where does Voegelin find references to the reality that is revelation *qua* revelation (that is, revelation as it is understood by the Jews and the Christians, etc.) in the common sense parlance

This gives rise to a very important question which demands to be answered, but which will not be answered here. It is this. What is there about the nature of modernity that renders it able to waylay and, in the end, overwhelm the thinking of one of the very important scholars of the last century? Eric Voegelin was certainly not an inattentive person. Nor was he even a person of significant ability. He was much more than that. He was and is one of the great thinkers of the modern era, who set out to demonstrate that the foundations on which a modern way of being rests are fundamentally hostile to man, and that, as a consequence, we have no choice but, in some sense, to go to war with modernity. However, when all was said and done, what happened was that this great man fell under the sway of the very modernity that he initially set out to defeat. Why? What happened? And if this can happen to Voegelin, is there hope for the rest of us?

By way of a preliminary effort to answer these last questions, we, to some degree, have to take into account the era within which Voegelin lived, and the fact that this deeply intelligent man had a front-row seat on the history of the Twentieth Century, the most violent century thus far in all of recorded history. He was well acquainted with the rise of the Soviet Union, and particularly with the actions of the “proletariat’s heroes” during the vilest days of the late 1920s and into the ‘30s. He had a first hand knowledge of the rise of Hitler and Nazism in the 1920s and ‘30s. He experienced the conquest of much of Europe and of the annexation of Austria (the *Anschluss*) to form the Greater German Reich, and he knew what that involved. He knew or had read of Hitler’s plans for the conquered peoples. He very likely was aware of the Armenian genocide by the Turks which took place in the early years of the Twentieth Century. He knew of the similar developments in the Far East, and he certainly knew of the wilful suffering and inhumanity that all of this had caused. Most importantly, Voegelin was deeply cognisant of the nature of the intellectual gymnastics, not to say, what he would eventually characterise as the “pathological thinking,” that had brought all of this about. In short, Voegelin knew of and was shocked by the spiritual (i.e., psychic) diseases of the modern era, and he needed to make sense of these in order to help all of us overcome what he saw as the worse consequences of the general pathology that

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of the ancient Athenians, or where does he find references to philosophy in the Old Testament and the Gospels? More specifically, can Voegelin’s theoretical language capture the common sense parlance about the reality that is revelation for the Jewish and Christian communities? In fact, is it not the case that Voegelin’s language redefines the reality that is revelation so completely that it ends up being unrecognisable to the Jewish and the Christian communities? This seems to be the case. This gives rise to a broader question, namely, how scientifically appropriate is it to speak of “experiential equivalences” across cultural communities and across the ages? If Aristotle and Voegelin of *The New Science of Politics* days are right, can there be anything like “experiential equivalences” from one community to the next and across the ages? If our experiential life is constituted by the language that we use to speak this experience, can there be anything like “equivalences”? Voegelin knew the answer to this question when he wrote the introductory paragraphs to Chapter I of *The New Science of Politics*. What happened to cause him to forget it? In fact, when speaking of “experiential equivalences,” is not the later Voegelin engaged in reasoning akin to the reasoning of the Eighteenth Century philosophers of history? Is he not forcing history into the straight-jacket of his “new” systemic thinking?

The other question that looms in the background and that should be raised here is: On what does Voegelin ground his later approach? We know that Voegelin sought to ground his writing prior to and including *The New Science of Politics* on a particular way of being in the world. Not unlike Michael Polanyi, who grounded scientific decision-making on tacit knowing, Voegelin, like Aristotle, grounded decision-making in the sciences in general on the way of being of the ancient Athenians. But, on what does Voegelin ground his theory of consciousness? Could it be that he grounds it to some extent on modern systemic thinking?

is modernity. And so, Voegelin set out in the second half of the 1940s to diagnose the predicament that is the modern era, which, according to mainstream thinking, ought to be the epitome of enlightenment, but is, in fact, something that verges at times on being a cesspool of perversity and evil on a scale never before seen. As a means of completing this diagnosis, Voegelin gave himself the task of re-conceptualising and rewriting the entire history of occidental thinking, starting at the beginning, from within his understanding of what would be an appropriate existential and phenomenological perspective. Specifically, he would reassert the primacy of the *experiential*, over the conceptual and ideational, in the lives of men, in the belief, no doubt, that this was the best way to avoid dogmatic and ideological thinking. According to him, this was something that had been sorely neglected since antiquity. He would, in addition, reacquaint us with the *experience* of the transcendent, a subject-based experience, he estimated, that had brought order and meaning into pre-modern lives. And finally, he would break the hold that dogmatic, ideological and millenarian thinking has over modern man, and thereby teach modern man that the essence of wisdom resides in man's, and particularly modern man's, acceptance of his earth-bound condition. Clearly, there was something terribly noble about all of this, for, to his very great credit, we have to recognise that he never succumbed to the mid-century temptations his few peers yielded to with alacrity. Here was a truly great and honourable man; but he was not the person that some of his followers believe him to have been.