

Glenn Hughes

Eric Voegelin and Christianity

To be a beneficiary and proponent of the modern Western democratic tradition, founded on constitutional liberalism, means to affirm a distinct set of political principles and related values. These include the rule of law, government based on free and fair elections and the consent of the governed, toleration, freedoms of religion, speech, and assembly, and the recognition and protection of human rights. The political culture of democratic participation and respect for individual liberties, often considered in Western societies to be the outcome of Enlightenment, emerged, of course, from the crucible of the Christian civilizational tradition, historically enriched by philosophical wisdom and by scientific, technological, and economic transformations. But is Christianity still central to the modern political tradition that grew from its civilizational soil? What do the vision and horizon of Christianity have to say, today, to the political culture of late-modern liberal democracy?

Providing substantive answers to such questions would require a deep understanding of civilizational developments from classical times to the present, a solid grasp of the history of Western political ideas, and a penetrating familiarity with the meaning and history of Christian experience and tradition. Few thinkers possess such broad-

-ranging expertise, but among those few the one who perhaps deserves our closest attention is the philosopher of history Eric Voegelin (1901-1985). Often identified as a political philosopher, Voegelin's accomplishment was on a much vaster scale than that label implies, entailing the working out of a fully developed philosophy of history, together with a detailed philosophical anthropology and philosophy of consciousness upon which to ground it. The fourteen books and over one hundred articles that he published during his lifetime present a unique case of a historian of magisterial erudition gifted with rare philosophical acumen. And because his work focuses on both the origins and development of modern political ideas and on their religious and philosophical background, it offers us not only a discerning analysis of the nature of Christian experience, but also a historically sensitive analysis of Christianity's pertinence to the emergence of democratic respect for individual dignity and liberty.

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I

It should be noted at once that Voegelin's treatment of Christianity, and the significance of Christianity for his philosophy of existence and history, has provoked a certain amount of controversy. Non-Christian philosophers and political theorists often regard him as a kind of Christian apologist, as inappropriately imposing a Christianized perspective onto his studies of philosophy, world history, and political order. Christian scholars, on the other hand, are often critical of his interpretation of Christian faith and institutions, and are particularly suspicious of his frequent criticisms of doctrines and dogmas. The former group tends to see his philosophy as too Christian; the latter group tends to see it as not Christian enough. The relationship of Voegelin to Christianity is thus a somewhat vexed issue.

Voegelin himself would say—indeed did say in various contexts—that the analyses of Christianity, of Jesus and Saint Paul, and of the Gospel teachings that are scattered throughout his work are those of an impartial political philosopher. As a philosopher, he would assert, his devotion is to *truth*, not to this or that tradition or religion or institution. But the fact is, he would continue, that an impartial and discerning philosopher will discover that it is in the orbit of Christian experiences, insights, visions, theology, and philosophy that human beings have attained the most profound, the most critically differentiated, understanding of the human situation in relation to divine ultimacy and to historical meaning. Christianity is of central concern to Voegelin the philosopher, not because of some fideistic or partisan loyalty but, first, because it constitutes a high point of philosophical and historical self-interpretation, and second, because it has pro-

vided the foundational Western anthropology and vision of the cosmos.

What is crucial for a sound philosophical assessment of Christianity, Voegelin would argue, is to approach it initially, not in terms of its institutional history, nor its doctrinal pronouncements and propositions, but in terms of its founding and guiding *experiences*. We must begin by first asking: What is common to the human experience of reality? We must then ask: How did the *Christian* experiences, and their symbolic articulations, clarify and advance the human understanding of our situation in reality? These are the essential questions, and I will use them to examine a few features of Voegelin's account of Christianity.

For Voegelin, the most elementary fact of human existence is that it is a *participation* in reality, a participation that has the specific form of a *conscious search for meaning*. Consciousness, with its capacity for growing understanding and self-guidance, is not a *thinglike* objects perceived by the external senses, but a *tension* of awareness structured by its desire to know. That desire is, overridingly, a search for meaningful existence and for the meaning of one's existence; and since no one's existence is the cause of itself, ultimately it is a desire for a full understanding of one's true origin or "ground." Human consciousness, Voegelin concludes, can therefore be described ontologically as a "tension toward the ground" of existence, the "ground" being at once the reality from which consciousness emerges and toward which its searching tends.

Now, consciousness gained explicit recognition of itself as such a "tension" of searching awareness only on the occasion of its discerning its own ground and the ground of all reality to be transcendent. In the West, it was the Greek philosophers who first carefully articulated the structural peculiarities of transcendence-ori-

ented consciousness, of the soul (*psyche*) informed by intellect (*nous*) as a faculty that grasps intelligibilities, deliberates, and guides action in relation to a non-perishing, transcendent ground and standard. Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle portrayed human consciousness as neither purely mortal nor immortal, but as somehow sharing in both modes of being. In Voegelin's reading of the Platonic-Aristotelian analysis of consciousness, which he essentially approves, what is human about consciousness includes essentially its involvement in that which transcends mere mortality, mere perishability, through participation in the invisible, eternal Thinking or Intelligence that grounds all of reality. This makes consciousness a kind of "in-between" reality, a meeting-place of time and timelessness, of the world and the divine "beyond." Adopting one of Plato's terms, Voegelin refers to consciousness as a *metaxy* ("in-between"), and to human existence as having a "metaxic," or intermediary, character. The essence of being human is therefore, he often states, human-divine participation.

Why does all this sound so odd to contemporary ears? Voegelin's answer is that we have grown accustomed to reducing the co-constituting elements of the "tension" of consciousness into thing-like objects—thinking of "human" and "divine," "man" and "God," as entities rather than as explanatory notations for the two dimensions or directional "poles" of the in-between reality of consciousness. Likewise, we mistake human consciousness itself for something of a physical entity rather than a relational tension. His efforts to clarify the nature of consciousness require Voegelin to return time and again in his writings to one of his most persistent themes, the human tendency to "reify" or "hypostatize" symbols such as "human" and "divine," "immanence" and "transcendence," so that they are mistakenly thought to refer to

spatio-temporal objects or places. It is hard, Voegelin explains, to avoid this objectification of the transcendent and immanent dimensions of conscious experience, turning them into two distinct *imaginable objects* in space-time. Nevertheless, consciousness as explained by Plato and Aristotle, and later by Christian thinkers, is in fact a non-image-able "tension of existence," a location-based participation in timeless meaning, the personal outcome of which remains, from the human perspective, fundamentally a mystery. What is not a mystery is the constant structure of consciousness as a *metaxy*, or "in-between."

Now let us consider how Voegelin develops this analysis of human consciousness to inform his view of the Christian breakthroughs.

Voegelin's *metaxy* of consciousness is a tension of existence in which the desire for meaning, whether one knows it or not, longs for and normatively moves toward fuller participation in, and deepening understanding of, the source of all meaning—the transcendent divinity in which it participates. But "divinity" here is not some inert object of cognition, which consciousness on its own pure volition reaches out toward. The tension is the *relation between* the searching of human intention and the divine completeness of meaning that lures it on, between what Voegelin calls "the human partner and the divine partner" in the search for meaning, with the divine partner always present in the dynamics of consciousness from its beginnings.

So the human seeking is simultaneously a divine "drawing," and the "tension" of human consciousness is both a seeking and a being-drawn as one united movement. "In the one movement [of consciousness]," Voegelin writes, "there is experienced a seeking from the human, a being drawn from the divine pole."¹ In this view, the searching of human reason is always being guided by

an anticipatory trust in the meaningfulness of reality and of its ultimate basis or ground; this searching is from its inception and throughout a *response* to the presence of meaning—and indeed, of ultimate meaning. Human reason, then, is always the unfolding of a trusting response to a divine appeal. And “a trusting response to a divine appeal” is the elementary existential meaning of the word “faith.” The implications here for traditional conceptions of the relation between “faith” and “reason” are momentous, and Voegelin develops them thoroughly.

The standard view that philosophy, science, and common sense are the fruit of a purely immanent “reason,” while “faith” in transcendent being is an anti-rational act of belief in a reality strictly beyond human experience, reflects a gross falsification, Voegelin explains—both of the essential structure of human consciousness as a mutual participation of human and divine, and of the Greek philosophical experiences from which the Western concepts of reason first emerged. The analysis of human consciousness that unfolds in the thought of the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle reveals that the human difference—the presence of rational consciousness (*psyche noetike*)—is precisely the activity of the ordering movements of a finite intellect (*nous*) that *participates* in the divine thought or intellect (*Nous*) that orders the cosmos. Thus, in the Greek analysis, the philosophical illumination of the structure and meaning (*logos*) of human consciousness is no less “revelatory,” as a process initiated and guided by the divine partner in the movement of philosophical thought, than it is a “rational” process of human questioning and understanding.

Voegelin goes to some lengths to show how Plato, in particular, eloquently acknowledges the “divine partner” in the process of philosophical discovery, as well as

the “revelatory” character of the philosophical vision of worldly, human, and divine reality presented in dialogues such as *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*. Philosophy, for Plato, articulates the *logos*, the structure and meaning, of a participation in a reality that is saturated with divine presence. Thus, Voegelin states: “The language of noetic philosophy is the language that emerges from the response to the divine movement; it has revelatory character.... Hence, the noetic quest of the ground is more than a merely human effort at cognition with merely human means; it is a process in the divine-human Metaxy of the psyche....”²

The interpretive occlusion, in the course of Western intellectual history, of the “revelatory” component in the Greek explication of human rational consciousness, a component about which the philosophers themselves were quite clear in their writings, is blamed by Voegelin on two principal factors. First, there is the ease with which, following tendencies of imagination, we separate the human and divine “poles” of the interpenetrative tension of consciousness into the two unconnected “things” of a human seeker and a divine ground being sought. And second, compounding that basic imaginative tendency, there is the problem that Voegelin describes as a long history of Christian theological “monopolizing, under the title of ‘revelation,’ for Christian symbols the divine component [in the movement of the human-divine in-between], while assigning, under the title of ‘natural reason,’ to philosophical symbols the human component.” As a theological doctrine, he writes, this is simply a distortion of the facts; in light of both the Greek philosophers’ accounts of their own experiences and of an adequately sophisticated philosophy of consciousness, it is empirically indefensible.³

Voegelin’s interpretation of the experi-

ential foundation of Greek philosophy leads us to one of the most important and provocative features of his philosophy: his insistence on the fundamental complementarity and shared experiential roots of Greek philosophy, on the one hand, and of Hebrew and Christian revelation and of the Gospel claims regarding Jesus, on the other. Voegelin does not shirk his obligation to explain the “Christian difference”; but his explanations are invariably situated within analyses asserting the “common core” of Hellenic and Hebrew-Christian discoveries. This “common core” includes experiences giving rise to the following four convictions: first, that the divine ground of reality transcends spatio-temporal limits; second, that therefore the truly divine is known “within,” by meditation of the faculty in consciousness (*nous* or *pneuma* respectively) that can reach toward and participate in divine transcendence; third, that the glory and responsibility of human existence is that it is a tension of divine-human encounter, in which one can find or miss the direction of meaningful life; and fourth, that authentic or “awakened” existence is a movement of intensifying conscious participation in the divine ground of existence—that is, a movement from mortality toward immortality. Both traditions, then, offer a way to be “saved” from directionless and non-illuminated existence. And the “saving tale” that each offers—Voegelin notably juxtaposes and compares the Gospels with Plato’s myths—are presented in each tradition as having “revelatory” authority, as being grounded in guiding visions suffered by exemplary individuals in the metaxy of hu-



Eric Voegelin at Stanford University, 1968.

man-divine encounter. Radiating from these individuals through society and history, these “saving tales” have existential authority as appeals and challenges to all who come into contact with them.

All this leads us to the inevitable question: Are not the “saving tale” of the Gospels and the person of Jesus unique? In Voegelin’s view, yes and no. First, Jesus existed in the metaxy, like every other human being. But, as manifest in his actions and attested by those who bore witness to him, his response to the divine appeal was of unparalleled completeness, in such a way that the divine partner in his existence was experienced, by himself and his followers, as what

Voegelin calls “an extraordinary divine irruption.”⁴ In other words, Jesus is not uniquely privileged insofar as his consciousness is shaped as human-divine encounter or insofar as his words and deeds reveal the mystery of divine presence; this he shares with other prophets, philosophers, saints—and in fact to some degree with every human being. But Jesus *is* unique in that, in him, that encounter and presence reach such dimensions of clarity and completeness that, for those “who can see,” there is in him such a fullness of revelation, such a fullness of imaging-forth of the unseen, transcendent divine reality, that it must be affirmed to be unsurpassable.

Jesus’ authority, Voegelin urges, does not come from the quality of some “information” he shares about a God to whom he has sole access. It comes from the recognition, on the part of those whose own existences in the metaxy have been a struggle to shape their lives in response to the divine

appeal in their own consciousness, of the overpowering presence in Jesus of the *same divine source and goal that has moved their own searching*. This is what warrants a new and definitive application of the traditional and culturally shared symbol of the “Son of God.” Anchoring his analysis in specific Gospel texts, Voegelin puts his point this way:

The Matthean Jesus, thus, agrees with the Johannine (John 6:44) that nobody can recognize the movement of divine presence in the Son unless he is prepared for such recognition by the presence of the divine Father in himself. The divine Sonship is not revealed through an information tendered by Jesus, but through a man’s response to the full presence in Jesus of the same Unknown God by whose presence he is inchoatively moved in his own existence.⁵

And again:

There is no Son of God unless there is a God whose son a man can be without becoming untrue to the truth of existence; and the Son of God cannot be recognized by other men unless they “see” in him the full presence of the God to whose presence they respond themselves in the ordering movements of their existence.⁶

Thus, for Voegelin, Jesus’ union with God is unique in its quality, but not in its nature. This view will be unacceptable to those who insist that in Jesus a one-time incarnation of divine presence in history took place. Voegelin’s answer would be that, first of all, human consciousness is co-constituted by divine presence at all times; secondly, “revelation” in the sense of exemplary disclosure of divine nature and meaning is world-wide and age-old. Most Christians would admit that the prophetic tradition in Israel leading up to the epiphany of Jesus consists of a continuity of increasingly profound revelations of the one, true divine reality. And this being acknowledged, it would be unacceptable to assert that the revelatory experiences attested to by Greek poets and philosophers, or by the *Upanishads* or the *Tao Te Ching*, do not

also consist of insight into the one divine reality. “The breaking forth” of the divine-human word of truth about ultimate reality, writes Voegelin, “does in fact not occur as a single manifestation of truth in history but assumes the form of an open historical field of major and minor divine-human encounters, widely dispersed in time and space over the societies who together are mankind in history. Nevertheless, in spite of the pluralistic historical form, what breaks forth in this field is the one truth of the one reality.”⁷

It is fully orthodox, Voegelin insists, to understand “the Christ” as a fulfillment of a millennial and world-wide process, and not as an unprecedented one-time intrusion into history:

For it is the Christ of the Gospel of John who says of himself: “Before Abraham was, I am” (8:58); and it is Thomas Aquinas who considers the Christ to be the head of the *corpus mysticum* that embraces, not only Christians, but all mankind from the creation of the world to its end. In practice this means that one has to recognize, and make intelligible, the presence of Christ in a Babylonian hymn, or a Taoist speculation, or a Platonic dialogue, just as much as in a Gospel.⁸

Voegelin would claim that, unlike most theologians and Christian philosophers, he has taken up precisely the challenge of making intelligible the “presence of Christ” in non-Hebrew-Christian testimonies to revelatory experience and insight, especially in those of the Greek thinkers whose parallel differentiation of consciousness and transcendence merged with the Hebrew-Christian to form the basis of our civilization.

Such an argument for the common core of the Hellenic and Hebrew-Christian differentiations must be accompanied, of course, by a careful account of their genuine differences. The two traditions do not, after all, symbolize metaxic consciousness, or divine reality, or the relation of the worldly immanent to the divinely tran-

scendent, in identical ways. The differences are to some degree accounted for, Voegelin writes, by the differing aspects or “areas” of human-divine encounter each tradition respectively focuses upon.

The attention of the Greek philosophers falls primarily on the process of seeking—that is, on the rational (“noetic”) component in the movement of divine appeal and human response, and on the dynamics of human participation in the divine. By contrast, Hebrew-Christian prophetism focuses on the divine drawing—on the spiritual (“pneumatic”) center of loving response to the divine appeal, and on the dynamics of divine participation in human suffering. Each tradition’s set of symbols complements the other by its stress on distinct components in the appeal-response of human-divine encounter, and each needs the other to balance and complete its discoveries. This is why classical philosophy was perfectly suited to become the analytical instrument for the exposition of meaning in Judaic and Christian teachings. But Christian revelatory insight into divine reality, Voegelin asserts, is also in another sense a *completion* or *fulfillment* of the philosophers’ quest, in that its more thorough differentiation of the divine nature illuminates more profoundly the absolutely loving, absolutely transcendent, absolutely free and creative source and object of the human search for meaning. Thus Voegelin, while extolling the unique accomplishment of Greek philosophy in establishing a technical language and critical basis for analyzing structures in reality—including the structure of human consciousness as a metaxy—still asserts that the Greek philosophical enterprise finds its fulfillment only through the full manifestation of the Logos in Christ, in whom divine reality is “maximally differentiated” for the truths of transcendence.

That “maximal” differentiation reveals, through the Mosaic and prophetic epipha-

nies culminating in Jesus, a divine ground radically distinct from the finite world: a transcendent divinity who creates the universe *ex nihilo*. Nothing in the Greek discoveries of transcendence, in the conceptions of Plato’s Agathon or the Platonic-Aristotelian Nous, so radically separates the divine ground from the cosmic stream of things. There is no notion of a creation *ex nihilo* in classical philosophy, because there is no conceptual removal of divine presence from the world to the degree it is found in the Judeo-Christian teaching.

That further degree of differentiation, Voegelin reminds us, is what made possible the clear recognition that the criteria of a life properly lived, of “true existence,” pertain not to physical or social facts, but to the conscious response each individual makes to the divine appeal in his or her soul. In other words, the Christian differentiation revealed that every individual has an essential share in the gift of divine presence; that the one, transcendent divine reality is the source of insight, virtue, and goodness in every human soul; and that each person is equally the beloved creation of the Creator to whom he or she is uniquely related. This universalizing of “true existence” down to the level of the individual soul lay beyond the experiential and conceptual orbit of classical philosophy.

II

The Christian articulation of representative meaning in history down to level of the individual person in his or her responsive participation in divine reality has had vast ethical, political, and cultural consequences. From it have developed Western teachings on the unique and irreplaceable worth, or dignity, of every human being, which is rooted in the Biblical recognition of each person as created “in the image of God.” While both Greek philosophy and

the Christian vision of existence present a “theomorphic” understanding of human beings—viewing the human as existing in the form and image of divine reality—only the Christian vision liberates the idea of the human essence, or the divine “form” in human consciousness manifested in responsible freedom, reasoned self-governance, and love, from all value-determinations associated with natural structures, qualities, talents, or dispositions. Thus, it is only the Christian vision of *imago Dei* that establishes the *absolute spiritual equality*, and thus the *equal spiritual dignity*, of all human beings—a recognition that underlies all later political affirmations of universal human dignity and universal human rights.⁹

Not everybody accepts this idea of equal spiritual dignity, of course. It is really convincing only on the basis of personal openness to the experience of one’s own participation in divine transcendence, and many people reject this openness. According to Voegelin, every person is faced with the basic existential choice of either striving to be faithful to the normative directional tension of consciousness, in openness towards the divinely transcendent ground of existence, or avoiding this effort of fidelity and turning away from the divine ground. Adapting Bergson’s language of the “open soul” and the “closed soul” (*l’âme ouverte* and *l’âme close*), Voegelin repeatedly analyzes consciousness in terms of “the virtues of openness toward the ground of being” and “the vices of infolding closure,” and he portrays the impacts of both of these on self and society.¹⁰

Among the virtues of openness Voegelin includes the life of reason properly understood. He explains that human reason can only be realistic in its pursuit of personal and political goods if it unfolds with the freedom that comes from acknowledging its own dynamic orientation to a transcen-

dent good. If reason resists the meaningfulness of its own pull toward the divine ground, it will not reason well about the human situation in reality, about human happiness, about the range of values and their pursuit and achievement. Human reason, in other words, cannot effectively be itself unless it is oriented and directed by love for the divine Reason that is its own most fundamental identity. If reason in its dynamic core “is existential *philia* (love), if it is the openness of existence raised to consciousness, then the closure of existence, or any obstruction to openness, will affect the rational structure of the psyche adversely.”¹¹

But open existence is difficult to maintain. As a response to the appeal of a transcendent ground of meaning, the open soul must suffer the vicissitudes of *faith*—of affirming that its own meaning depends upon an intangible, unpossessible, essentially mysterious reality. The difficulties of faith—not faith as a fideistic assent to doctrinal propositions, nor certainly as a fundamentalist or absolutist assumption of the certitude of God’s favor, but as an existential faith of loving openness to the divine mystery encountered in illumined conscience and gracious persuasion—are notoriously daunting. Basic to faith is the uncertainty involved in understanding that we cannot understand, in any substantive way, the answers to our most searching questions: why we exist, what our performances in life add up to, the direction of historical process, the mystery of evil and of its longed-for resolution. Also basic to it is anxious awareness of the fragility of genuine commitment, of how easily forgetfulness and self-delusion enter into the effort of openness, and of the unendingness of the task, as long as we remain alive, of recovering and reestablishing our existential orientation through love of transcendent reality. While the dignity of personal existence only flourishes through the open soul’s consciously

responsive bond with transcendent meaning, “[this] bond is tenuous, indeed, and it may snap easily,” Voegelin writes in *The New Science of Politics*. He continues:

The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss—the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience.¹²

A refusal of loving openness toward transcendence—a refusal to let the love of God, of *amor Dei* in the Augustinian sense, become the soul’s compass and balance—is truly, Voegelin explains, a denial of one’s self. For a person *is* participation in divine freedom and knowledge—a person *is imago Dei*. The closure of consciousness to its own transcendent divine ground is the rejection by a person of his or her own personhood. “The denial...of transcending toward divine being destroys the *imago Dei*,” Voegelin writes, meaning that a person can “reject his own identity” as *imago Dei* and in doing so “deform his humanity.”¹³ Closed existence is personal deformation, resulting from the frightened, or despairing, or rebellious, or lazy refusal on the part of consciousness to orient itself on the basis of its innate awareness of its own divine ground and through the cultural legacy that explores the meaning of human-divine relationship.

Closed existence diminishes the psyche, Voegelin asserts, through its chosen posture of imperviousness to divine presence. He describes it as a “contraction” that reduces consciousness “to a self imprisoned in its selfhood,” a denial by the soul of its own constitutive depth that results in self-communication from the divine ground. And from such acts of existential closure there emerge into public discourse deformed

images of what a human being is—images that, when accepted and internalized, undermine human dignity by eclipsing its basis in transcendence, by distorting the search for meaning, and by disrupting the sense of human solidarity. Images of the human that publicly replace the participatory *imago Dei* with images of a completely world-immanent self, the good citizen of a totalitarian or communist state, or the “absolute self” of atheist existentialism or philosophical materialism, are not harmless, because from them flow ambitions, decisions, actions, habits, and policies. Dehumanized self-interpretation issues into dehumanizing behavior. As Gabriel Marcel has stated: “[M]an depends, to a very great degree, on the idea he has of himself and...this idea cannot be degraded without at the same time degrading man.”¹⁴

The deformation of closed existence, Voegelin explains, is a dead end. The rejection by the self of the divine ground of the self leaves it without convincing and consoling foundation, and without rationally persuasive or fulfilling direction. Because consciousness *is* the encounter between immanence and transcendence, any attempt by consciousness to establish its own meaning and value solely on some material basis of explanation, on some account of world process or intrahistorical dynamism, on some idea of national destiny, or on the pure assertion of its own knowledge and will, creates a vacuum of substance and purpose at the center of the self. This vacuum is typically sensed, Voegelin states, in anxious apprehensions that the existential project has become nothing more than “a confused stirring about in the nothingness of an abandoned reality.” And the greatest clarity about this truth has emerged, Voegelin emphasizes, in the Christian tradition. “The insight that man in his mere humanity, without the *fides caritate formata* [faith formed by love], is demonic nothing-

ness has been brought by Christianity to the ultimate border of clarity....”¹⁵

The demonic nothingness of “mere humanity” has revealed itself spectacularly in the past century’s ideological madnesses and in the political adventures of fascist, Nazi, communist, and other regimes inimical to Western political principles. Analyzing modern history in light of the truths of open and closed existence, Voegelin explicates the ripening of the political conflicts of the twentieth century as showing all too clearly the deforming effects, among individuals, political movements, and regimes, of a growing closure toward divine transcendence and an accompanying absolutization of self or nation.

III

The irony of modernity, of course, is that it has been an astonishing story of technological advance and economic productivity, expansive historical discovery and scholarship, and widening promotion of political ideals based on a recognition of human liberty as the principle of progress—while at the same time producing calamitous totalitarian ambitions, together with frenetic aimlessness and irreverent consumption. Drained of an orienting and humbling awareness of the divine measure of action and truth—and progressively unable to confront mystery—modernity, despite the gradual advance of democratic principles and ideals, may be credited, Voegelin writes, with “having unified mankind into a global madhouse bursting with stupendous vitality.”¹⁶

Voegelin’s work provides a clear and unusually thorough answer, then, to the question asked at the beginning of this essay: whether Christianity is still central to the modern democratic tradition. Government based upon the affirmation of human dignity and human rights, equality

before the law, universal suffrage, the consent of the governed, and the protection and promotion of individual liberties, derives directly from Christian anthropology with its insistence on the unique and irreplaceable value of each individual, and on the equal value of every person as *imago Dei*. It is possible to be a proponent of liberal democracy without understanding oneself to be a Christian, without even being responsive to religious language and symbols. But if one examines carefully the principles and values that ground the political culture of democracy, one will sooner or later find that they presuppose, logically and ontologically, precisely the types of experience and insight concerning what it means to be human through which Christianity shaped and advanced human self-understanding.

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1. Eric Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 183.

2. Eric Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth,” in *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, vol. 28 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 187.

3. Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” 187-188. For Voegelin’s account of the roles of faith and love in the full exercise of reason, and of the rationality of faith, together with a critique of the standard dichotomy between “reason” and “revelation,” see his essays “Reason: The Classic Experience,” “The Gospel and Culture,” and “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” all in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, and “The Begin-

ning and the Beyond,” in *What Is History?*

4. Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” 192.

5. *Ibid.*, 202.

6. Eric Voegelin, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 368.

7. Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond,” 182.

8. Eric Voegelin, “Response to Professor Altizer’s ‘A New History and a New but Ancient God?’,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 294.

9. Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, vol. 31 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. and trans. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 205; *History of Political Ideas, Volume II: The Middle Ages to Aquinas*, vol. 20 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Peter von Sivers (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 192.

10. Eric Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 119.

11. Eric Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 274.

12. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics, in Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 187-188.

13. Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 263; “The Gospel and Culture,” 175; “The Eclipse of Reality,” in *What Is History?*, 137.

14. Voegelin, “The Eclipse of Reality,” 111; Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1978), 20.

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