

Apocalypse of Reality: Eric Voegelin, For and Against Political Theology

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Eric Voegelin was no mere theorist: he risked his life as a witness against the spiritual sickness of National Socialism.¹ He knew from experience that the modern soul, or consciousness, is tempted by ideological systems to evade the pathos of life-in-time.² Consciousness rather should be the place where a super-intelligibility shines, the “divine ground” rendering reality luminous—meaningful and orderly—despite the rigors of embodied existence. But ideologies remove oxygen from our souls, so this illumination cannot flare up. In forsaking his *History of Political Ideas* for *Order and History*, Voegelin explains that ideas (the bases of ideologies) “transform symbols, which express experiences, into concepts—which are assumed to refer to a reality other than the reality experienced. And this reality other than the reality experienced does not exist. Hence, ideas are liable to deform the truth of the experiences and their symbolization.”³ Ideas transmute icon-experiences into the idol-mirrors of representational consciousness.

Voegelin saw the world, under technocratic Western hegemony, as alienated from the divine ground of reality. He judged history since the classical age to be increasingly derailed by ideas that numb us to what is revealing itself in the primal experiences of life.

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He would help us attend to reality again so that our souls might be attuned to an order beyond our power to create—thereby increasing the measure of order in this world. An eros of questioning and a meditative patience are required.

Is this a project for political science? Does it not belong to theology—a political theology? Voegelin would respond that attention to the revelatory process of reality constitutes philosophy as such; he considers theology a largely misguided exercise. Questioning is the flame in the horn to be kept burning by the philosopher, a flame that Christian theology has often quenched.

This negative assessment of theology seems to doom the carrying-out of a remit to speak of Voegelin on political theology. But one must think through the terms. What is theology? If one understands it as engagement of intelligence with the divine ground of reality, then Voegelin easily warrants the name of theologian. Michael Morrissey notes,

As a philosopher and political scientist, Voegelin sought to answer the fundamental political questions: What is the source of order in history and society? From what do we take our bearings in fashioning our human existence? To what do we turn in our seeking the right way to live? For Voegelin the answer to these questions is as simple as it is profound: religious experience.⁴

This passage also indicates why one might coherently call Voegelin a political theologian, given that his prime concern is with political order and deriving that order from the divine ground. Thinking the terms in an ordinary way, Voegelin's project is precisely a political theology.

Again, taken to mean a historical practice initiated in classical and late antiquity, the discipline of theology (for which dogmas are axioms) is accused by Voegelin of consciousness-blinding. And theologians would do well to feel the sting of his critique: theology without constant animation by the restless energy of philosophical questioning is indeed merely an exercise in ideology and its dead

ideas.⁵ The limits of Voegelin, in turn, might be revealed by a theological critique, for the danger of merely flipping the hierarchical ordering of the sciences as it has come down through the Christian intellectual tradition—awarding the palm of architectonic hegemony to philosophy over theology—is the destruction of a necessary hedge on the pride of philosophers, who are tempted to conceptually arrange matters so tightly as not to allow God to surprise us. A philosophically animated theologian will listen even if what God says is inconvenient for one's system.

So, Voegelin is both for and against theology, depending on how we take the term. If we understand “political theology” as a specific field of systematic theology, Voegelin presumably would be against that too—despite his being a most potent political theologian in a more primordial sense. But, in fact, the specific modern discipline of political theology might enable rapprochement between Voegelin and traditional theology, insofar as political theology seeks to revivify dogmatic theology by immersing it in the living waters of embodied existence and critical philosophizing.

This article explores the theological and anti-theological Voegelin as found in *Anamnesis*, *Autobiographical Reflections*, *In Search of Order*, and especially *The Ecumenic Age* and lets Voegelin and ecclesiastical theology sharpen each other—in service of their common humanizing project.⁶ This inquiry into Voegelin's mystico-political philosophy culminates in an initial conversation with the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz. Political theology finds an ally in the anti-theological Voegelin (in its own campaign against dogmatism), while itself opening new possibilities for Voegelin's system. The more tradition and existential flux are authentically harmonized, the more fruitful Voegelin's urgently needed political theology will become for modern renovation.

The Continuity of Modernity with the Ecumenic Age

Voegelin recalibrated the course of his masterwork, *Order and History*, after writing the first three volumes (published in 1956 and 1957), without negating the achievement of those books.⁷ The fourth, *The Ecumenic Age*, would not appear until 1974, while the

final volume, *In Search of Order*, was left unfinished at his death in 1985. The pivot of the recalibration is to be found in *Anamnesis*, a deliberately shaped collection of papers published in German in 1966.⁸ The shift is from a philosophy of history to a philosophy of consciousness.⁹

Voegelin discovered “lines of meaning in history that did not run along lines of time.”¹⁰ For example, he took a second look at the phenomenon highlighted by existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers as the “Axial Age” of human history, from about 800 to 200 B.C., in which there was a series of “spiritual outbursts” across Eurasia—including the birth of philosophy in the Greek-speaking world, the prophets in Israel, Zarathustra in Iran, the *Upanishads* and the Buddha in India, and Confucius and Lao Tzu in China. Rather than trying to fit this remarkable parallelism *into* history, forcing linearity onto obstreperous facts, Voegelin now saw history as being *constituted by* these “theophanic” (divinely manifesting) events in the consciousness of specific individuals.

The puzzle of these unconnected eruptions of spiritual insight dovetailed with another refractory reality: the falsity of the conventional view that a unilinear, as opposed to cyclical, view of history was an innovation of the Hebrew religion. From pre-Hebraic “cosmological” civilizations all the way to Christianity (with its universal histories) and our own modern myths of progress (epitomized by the historiographic constructions of Hegel), Voegelin discovered a continual recourse to genetic accounts rooting one’s society in some transcendent ground, which force the empirical facts of history into a narrative meant to show the permanence of one’s own society as the consummation of the ages. Voegelin called this symbolic form “historiogenesis”: the generation or fabrication of a history.¹¹

These stubborn facts of history triggered in Voegelin an insight that reversed the intentionality between historian and reality.¹² History does not contain a clean story line that a superior observer might narrate; rather, the transcendent ground of history generates the meaning and direction of history *in* human consciousness.

This insight planted the Archimedean point of Voegelin’s work in the philosophy of consciousness, enabling him to ascertain

structures that had been overlooked before. The Axial Age fits within what Voegelin would designate the Ecumenic Age, which in the West runs from the rise of the Persian Empire to the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The “ecumene,” from the Greek for the inhabited world (*oikoumene*—related to *oikos*, household), is the arena in which the Persian, Macedonian, and Roman Empires succeeded each other, after the fall of the “cosmological” empires (such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon—determined by myth and not by philosophy or a universal religion). On the margins of the two types of empire, Hellas and Israel had space to flourish, and the great “noetic” (rational/intellectual) and “pneumatic” (spiritual) leaps in being occurred (the birth of philosophy and of “monotheism,” respectively, the former determined by the seeking and ascent of man, the latter by the gracious descent of God).¹³ These leaps differentiated experience of the cosmos so that the cosmos is given the transcendent context of a Beginning and a Beyond. However, these breakthrough insights did not gain sway over the temporal powers. “The fall of Israel and Hellas to the power of empire” presents perhaps the crucial puzzle of history: “For an epoch in the history of order was marked indeed when the societies that had differentiated the truth of existence through revelation and philosophy succumbed, in pragmatic history, to new societies of the imperial type.”¹⁴

The Ecumenic Age is characterized by a “triad”: Ecumenic Empire, Spiritual Outburst, Historiography.¹⁵ Jaspers had attended only to the middle phenomenon, but Voegelin found it necessary to add the other factors to demarcate this period: “the imperial concupiscential outbursts that have always attracted the attention of historians” and “the beginnings of historiography, in which the disorder created by the destructive expansion of empire is weighed against the order established, and the order established is measured by the newly differentiated understanding of existential order.”¹⁶ Voegelin’s reference to “concupiscence” should be read à la the Augustinian *libido dominandi*: the lust to dominate. Even still, the imperial drive was a refraction of “ecumenic consciousness.” What the spiritual breakthroughs of Israel and Hellas did for the Western Ecumene

was to generate a sense of “universal humanity,” and the emergence of a sense of history is inseparable from the directionality provided by the pressure to make universal humanity concrete, somehow. In their blind and violent way, the great conquerors were seeking to give that reality historical embodiment.

The directionality generated by a sense of universal humanity continues to determine the modern age. Much of the impulse behind the imperial history of the “West” stems from this confused sensibility. Even in the contest of ideas, we moderns recognize a case must be made that accounts for the claims of other systems and tries to comprehend them (that is, Enlightenment publicity is a function of ecumenic consciousness). Clarity about what universal humanity entails becomes ever more urgent as the processes of globalization run on.

So, in a way, we still live in the Ecumenic Age, that age correlative to an ecumenic consciousness of universal humanity and an impulse to realize it—and that is why Voegelin’s originally planned volumes on “Empire and Christianity,” “The Protestant Centuries,” and “The Crisis of Western Civilization” could be replaced with *The Ecumenic Age*.¹⁷

Theology as Betrayal of Philosophy

This background is essential for understanding Voegelin’s evaluation of Christian theology, which becomes increasingly negative. Whereas before the shift to the philosophy of consciousness Voegelin was best known for his condemnation of modern thought as gnostic, his new sense of continuity between our age and the classical age (in which the spiritual outbursts of Israel and Hellas occurred) causes him to view Christian dogmatics (constituting a middle term between ancient and modern consciousness) as the generator of modern ideological systems. For Voegelin, it becomes increasingly urgent that we recur to Aristotle and especially Plato as the great repositories of symbolizations we ought to penetrate so as to attain to their underlying experiences—and undergo them for ourselves.¹⁸ The pneumatic differentiation is increasingly overshadowed by the noetic, in Voegelin’s valuation, as he

emphasizes the noetic's revelatory (nonsecular) quality over against ecclesiastical theology.

In Search of Order presents a damning judgment on the rigid nature/grace distinction propagated by scholastics: "Christian theology has denatured the Platonic *Nous* by degrading it imaginatively to a 'natural reason,' a source of truth subsidiary to the overriding source of revelation . . . in order to gain for the Church a monopoly on revelation." This theological subalternating imperialism has led to the secularization of reason, and provided the template for the ideological style:

The nonrevelatory reason, imagined by the theologians as a servant, has become a self-assertive master. In the historical sequence, the imagined nonrevelatory reason has become the real antirevelatory reason of the Enlightenment revolt against the Church. The resistance to the social power of intellectually inert, self-assertive institutions has motivated the acts of imaginative oblivion that eclipse the noetic-revelatory truth preserved in ecclesiastical doctrines that have become inflexible. Moreover, since Enlightened resisters can no more than anybody else escape the structure of consciousness, they had to arrogate the authority of noetic truth for their resistance to it; in the form of the various ideologies, resistance to noetic truth, understanding itself as resistance to "irrationality," has become the ultimately legitimizing source of truth revealed. The usurped monopoly of revelation has migrated from the ecclesiastic institutions to their ideological successor establishments.¹⁹

Later in this final volume of *Order and History*, Voegelin writes of "the trauma of the orthodox environment" as that against which Hegel, Nietzsche, Jung, Heidegger, and others had to struggle.²⁰ However destructive modern ideologies have shown themselves to be, they are at root reactions against the monopolizing of ultimate reality by ecclesiastical theology.

Both the noetic and the pneumatic differentiations are subject to “derailments” in which the symbols (found in their great texts), expressing the consciousness-events of illumination in theophanic experiences, ossify into concepts that have lost their iconic transparency to the transcendent ground. Voegelin blames the hegemony of theology for draining the life out of the classical-era theophanies:

In the Hellenic context, noesis finds itself in opposition to the compact myth and the derailment of sophistry. In the Christian phase it becomes amalgamated with the Hebrew and Christian truth of revelation. On the Hebrew end, this was accomplished by Philo of Alexandria; on the Christian end, by the Church Fathers. The resulting amalgam that we call theology was socially and historically quite successful. However, the fusion with revelation did not have the most felicitous consequences for noesis. Ever since Philo, the theologians sought to assign to philosophy the role of *ancilla theologiae*. . . . In this relationship, the critical function of noesis to lay open radically the realms of the world and history could not become fully effective, since the perverse transformation of noetic symbols into concepts of dogmatic metaphysics had weakened the authenticity of noetic insight—an authenticity that is present only in the process of the exegesis itself.²¹

Theology has smothered philosophy (noetic openness to reality); with thinking hobbled, consciousness finds itself incompetent to counter modern ideological systems.

Voegelin does more than condemn scholasticism, the theology of the universities: he condemns dogma as such for frustrating openness to reality. That believers might receive dogma with a reifying consciousness is undeniable; what can be questioned is Voegelin’s assumption that God cannot reveal through iconic dogmas. For Voegelin, God is not a subject at all, and reality cannot be represented without falsification—outside a kind of mythic

storytelling. There is a philosophical *a priori* operative here, going back to Voegelin's rejection of phenomenology with its reduction of consciousness to objective intentionality, that is, its notion of consciousness as correlative to the object of sense perception.²² Instead of subjects and objects fixed in their identities, Voegelin wants flux.²³ God, who is Being, cannot also be *a* being, and definite statements about ultimate reality cannot be made. There is here an apophatic theologian's or mystic's self-restraint in speaking of the divine, but sometimes modesty leads to hubris—when assertion of limits is too confident. If the divine cannot speak concretely, human reason has no effective measure. Voegelin stands with Hegel in placing philosophy above theology. For Hegel, the absolute activity of religion has absolute content but is obscured by picture-thinking (*Vorstellung*). Hegel and Voegelin do not disagree here—the charge against Hegel is that he replaces philosophy with ideology.

The Philosopher as Guardian of the Balance of Consciousness

Voegelin's privileging of the bearers of the noetic, as opposed to the pneumatic, differentiation pertains to the paradoxical structure of reality, "a structure that moves beyond its structure." This is "the paradox of a history in suspense between the Ananke [necessity] of the cosmos and the freedom of eschatological movement. That the two branches of the paradox are distributed, in the Ecumenic Age, over the noetic theophanies of Hellenic philosophers and the pneumatic theophanies of Israelite-Jewish prophets must be acknowledged, but cannot be explained."²⁴ Philosophy shepherds the cosmic structure, theology the eschatological moving-beyond the structure. Voegelin believes that "the freedom of eschatological movement" is more dangerous for order in society. The pneumatic enthusiasm of the religious, which tends toward Gnosticism and apocalypticism, is not Voegelin's cup of tea: his care, the exigencies of the cosmos.²⁵

Let's trace the line of argument leading to the paradoxical structure of reality. In a crucial section on "Existence and Nonexistence" in the chapter "Historiogenesis" from *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin describes the fundamental experience of reality underlying all

phases of consciousness.²⁶ Though a sense of the universality of humanity and the concomitant birth of history depend on the noetic breakthrough of Greek philosophy and the pneumatic breakthroughs of Moses' Burning Bush and Sinai and the monotheism of Deutero-Isaiah, in fact these events are all rooted in what Voegelin calls "the primary experience of the cosmos." This experience is primary in that a more differentiated consciousness never leaves this experience behind—so ancient, classical, medieval, and modern symbolizations of reality can be "equivalent." If the philosophical is more differentiated than the mythical, both still yield equivalent symbolizations in that they stem from a common experience of existence. This primordial relation of humanity to reality is characterized by an experience of an embracing cosmos; intracosmic gods; consubstantiality ("togetherness and one-in-anotherness") of the divine, the world, humanity, and society; and, beneath it all, a sense of the precariousness of existence.

Mythical "compactness" of symbolization draws from the experience of the cosmos's providing "an underlying, intangible embracingness, . . . a something that can supply existence, consubstantiality, and order to all areas of reality even though it does not itself belong as an existent thing to any one of these areas. The cosmos is not a thing among others; it is the background of reality against which all existent things exist; it has reality in the mode of nonexistence."²⁷ The ground of the primary experience, perduring in the succeeding, more differentiated, experiences in the light of which myth is found wanting, "turns out to be the fundamental tension of all reality experienced: the tension of existence out of nonexistence."²⁸

What the noetic and pneumatic differentiations of the Ecumenic Age break above all when they break mythological compactness is the inner-worldliness of the divine. It is discovered that the divine transcends, is "Beyond," the cosmic process. Mythological human consciousness sensed this in the precariousness of existence (under certain conditions triggering historiogenetic attempts at stabilization, but more usually soothed by liturgies of cyclical renewal), but differentiated consciousness lives more nakedly in an "existentialist" world where finite existence hovers over an abyss.

Experience of mortality and finitude—of not existing from ourselves, of existing between being and not-being—gives rise to the “aetiological question, the question of the ground: What is this mysterious ground the existent things don’t carry within themselves but nevertheless carry with them as a sort of matrix of existence?”²⁹

Voegelin is explicit in rejecting a final answer to the question, another indication of his rejection of theology, whose business is to have an answer for that question: “No answer, thus, is the ultimate truth in whose possession mankind could live happily ever after, because no answer can abolish the historical process of consciousness from which it has emerged—however frequently and fervently this fallacy may be entertained by doctrinaire theologians, metaphysicians, and ideologists.”³⁰ Perhaps Voegelin should have recognized that a competent theologian might answer “God” and be addressing a mystery forever requiring a renewed effort of thinking. That said, a theologian ought to take to heart Voegelin’s insight into the radical contextuality of “experience-question-answer” (though this also poses problems for Voegelin’s own desire to attain to, say, Plato’s theophanic experiences through his texts); for example, knowing divinity to be Trinitarian would not be grounds for judging mythological answers to be simply false but should rather inspire a new respect for, and insight into, all answers evoked by the mystery.

Nevertheless, there are definitive moments in the history of answers. Voegelin points out that the Mosaic theophanies break the mythological-imperial mediation of divine presence and cause universal humanity to emerge clearly. No longer bound to the mediation of a ruler over a certain territory, the Israelites could begin to see that all humans are united under the rule of God.³¹ Might Voegelin not allow the God of these direct communications to reveal a character and speak a Name?

The precarious “national” existence of Hellas and Israel in the midst of imperial powers, combined with periods in which they were not subject to those powers, created a tension fertile for their respective noetic and pneumatic differentiations. Their succumbing to the empires (Macedon, Babylon) caused acute spiritual

confusion: Why would the transcendent divinity breaking through in philosophical and prophetic consciousness not order imperial power according to the level of noetic and pneumatic experience? Why is humanity trapped in the violence and mindlessness of concupiscential power?

Ecumenic consciousness, the sense of universal humanity correlative to the spiritual outbursts of the Ecumenic Age, outran the possibilities of empirical realization:

When finally enough contemporarily living human beings were corralled into an empire to support the fiction of an ecumene, the collected humanity turned out to be not much of a mankind, unless their universal status as human beings under God was recognized. And when universal humanity was understood as deriving from man's existence in presence under God, the symbolism of an ecumenic mankind under an imperial government suffered a serious diminution of stature.³²

So the Roman Empire needed an ecumenical supplement. It had to acknowledge Christianity's symbolic power, but this also set up the long struggle between church and state to fly the standard for universal humanity. "The relation between the concupiscential and the spiritual exodus [toward universal transcendence] is the great issue of the Ecumenic Age."³³ This can be understood as a struggle between the this-worldly and the otherworldly as context for eschatology.

Voegelin saw spiritual danger arising at this point: given that the theophanic experience has revealed cosmic process to be rooted in something Beyond, and is heading toward something Beyond, how do we maintain dual citizenship, as it were, in the precarious cosmic process as well as in the transcendence of that process? How do we live in-between, in the tension between an imperially callous pulverizing and the fugitive luminosities of justice and love? How do we negotiate "conquest and exodus"?

Voegelin recurs to the Anaximander Fragment, one of the oldest surviving texts of philosophy, as an unsurpassable expression

of the tension of existence out of nonexistence and as constituting the philosophical consciousness of reality. To gain insight into the convergence of conquest and exodus (the former an overcoming *within* the lastingness of the cosmos and its circuits of power; the latter the movement of the structure of reality *beyond* itself), we are to refer those “symbols” back to a process Anaximander describes thus: “The origin [*arche*] of things is the Apeiron [the boundless, the unlimited]. . . . It is necessary for things to perish into that from which they were born; for they pay one another the penalty for their injustice according to the ordinance of Time.”³⁴

How does this experience of abiding source and tragic contingency shed light on the convergence of conquest and exodus? Voegelin presents an important meditation in answer. In an obvious sense (“man can neither conquer reality nor walk out of it”), conquest and exodus must be “movements *within* reality.” Nevertheless, we discover “within” houses a kind of transcending, and both conquest and exodus partake of that: “for reality is not a field of homogeneous extension but is aetiologically and directionally structured.” What kind of structure? Two modes of being: the Apeiron and thinghood. And these two modes are related in an order: “the one being an unlimited *arche*, the origin and ground of things, the other having the character of a limited thinghood that originates in the Apeiron and returns to it.” This means that the Apeiron is “more real” than the things that are generated and corrupted in time. If there is a difference in rank in these two levels of reality, then that opens up the possibility of a transcending movement within reality.

Voegelin needs to make one final move—subtle, but crucial. The consciousness of tension toward more eminent reality, toward the ground of empirical experience, “is not an object given to a subject of cognition but the very process in which reality becomes luminous to itself.” Voegelin is drawing on his philosophy of consciousness, which has a non-objectifying consciousness correlative to reality in the most comprehensive sense. What the philosophical differentiation of consciousness reveals is that the Apeiron itself is not, in the end, the most eminent reality: “The Apeiron and

the things are not two different realities in a static relationship one toward the other; they are experienced as modes of being, or as poles of a tension within the one, comprehensive reality. Reality in this comprehensive sense is experienced as engaged in a movement of transcending itself in the direction of eminent reality.”³⁵ In the emergence of philosophical consciousness, the structure of “reality” (with the hierarchically ordered poles of Apeiron and things) is *as a whole* experienced as in flux toward *more* reality. That is, spiritual breakthroughs reveal progress in reality itself, progress in an eschatological direction.

Therefore, “conquest and exodus symbolize enterprises of participation in the directional flux of reality”: one horizontal, as it were, the other vertical.³⁶ They tend to break from the primary experience of the cosmos toward the realm of apocalyptic prophecy.

Riding the Dragon of Transcendence with Plato

In the midst of these irruptions of transcending enterprises, Plato in his philosophical myths is the “great mythopoeist” to whom Voegelin constantly points as maintaining the “balance of consciousness.” Plato still allowed himself the primary experience of the cosmos while experiencing the transcending directionality of the whole process.

Paradoxically, the philosopher emerges with the disturbing irruption itself. “The constitution of reason through revelation” is the source of the difficulty in maintaining psychic equanimity. That is, the constitution of the soul or consciousness *as* the life of reason, life in the truth of existence, is an irruption of the divine into the millennial stabilities of mythologically determined societies. This revelation breaks the regnant orders, the taken-for-granted, of the society into which it intrudes. Personally and socially, we struggle to make sense of the everyday disorder of death, as well as all the little deaths that rhyme with it, which constitutes the regularity of the cosmic process: generation and corruption. We order our perishing days as best we can, given the story of reality prevailing in our society. We make a kind of peace with the grinding process.

And then come the prophet and the philosopher, whose souls have been invaded by revelatory glimpses of another, more comprehensive, more beautiful, order—and they unsettle everything. The world is passing away: the divine process is transcending itself. The luminosity of the revelation makes the cosmos sing with the promise of a utopian order, an unambiguously good order, rather than order built upon generation and corruption. The Logos of reality blazes everywhere. Reason is summoned and energized. “The life of reason . . . is firmly rooted in a revelation.” This cracks the psyche and the society. It is the philosopher who must reestablish a balance between the unbalancing breakthrough (which has happened precisely in his or her soul/consciousness) and the cosmos (the order on hand). The precisions of reason and the subtleties (and nondogmatism) of mythopoesis are required. The philosopher has the mandate.

“Revelation as the source of reason” is a fact that conservators of present order are compelled to obscure. Sophists, feeding off the status quo, do not want reason to wake up; rather, they wish us to play with the history of ideas. If reason lives by divine irruption, that is a secret that must be kept. Meanwhile, self-satisfied theologians like Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor do not need God breaking in and disturbing things. If reason is revelatory, this disturbs any settled division of labor between philosophy and theology. Dogmatic slumber is preferred.

Voegelin would resist these inanitions with his insight that the philosopher has as much of a responsibility to speak of the divine ground as does the theologian. And insofar as the theologian loses the balance of consciousness (for Voegelin the history of theology is a history of the loss of such balance), the philosopher is a more competent guardian of the divine—indeed, the only one left standing.

“When God lets himself be seen, whether in a burning thorn-bush or in a Promethean fire, he is what he reveals himself to be in the event.”³⁷ One consequence of that last claim is that there is no Trinitarian reserve, as it were, which would stratify the divine in a way that would give theologians something to meditate upon

beyond what a philosopher could—a stratification correlative to a real difference between reason and faith. For Voegelin, a philosopher is the only theologian you're ever going to need.

The political struggle for order of soul and society is indeed an endless, perhaps Sisyphean, task within Anaximandrian temporality. For Voegelin, a community needs the authoritative insight and equanimity of the philosopher mediating experience of divine order in order to harmonize with reality. The philosopher is the true and necessary political theologian.

Paul's Derangement?

According to Voegelin, Plato kept the theophanic event in balance with the experience of the cosmos. He did not permit enthusiastic expectations to distort his understanding of the human condition. He continued to acknowledge the limits that constrain us: personally, reason must struggle with passion; socially, persuasive paradigms of political order must struggle with a multitude that is not moved primarily by mind; historically, a vision of united Greek city-states will not hold back the tide of empire. "In sum, Plato did not allow the theophanic event to grow into the apocalyptic 'great mountain that filled the whole world' (Dan. 2:35)."³⁸

Thus begins Voegelin's chapter entitled "The Pauline Vision of the Resurrected" in *The Ecumenic Age*. Voegelin judges that Plato succeeds where Paul fails:

The theophanic event constitutes meaning in history; it reveals reality as moving toward a state undisturbed by forces of disorder; and imagination, following the directional movement, will express its goal by such symbols of transfigured reality as "a new heaven and a new earth." That is the point at which apocalyptic imagination can endanger the balance of consciousness by tampering with the mystery of meaning. . . . The event [of transfiguration], as it can happen any time, hangs as a threat or hope over every present. In fact, nothing happens; and yet, it might happen. . . . [I]n the style of existential truth constituted by

theophanic events, the anxiety of falling into the untruth of disorder can engender the vision of a divine intervention that will put an end to disorder in time for all time. When the conflict between the revealed truth of order and the actual disorder of the times becomes too intense, the traumatic experience can induce the transformation of the mystery into metastatic expectations.³⁹

This passage provokes many questions.

First, how scientific is Voegelin's concept of "apocalyptic"? He has it that the apocalyptic imagination short-circuits the mystery of the historical process, providing premature and unwarranted answers, including predictions of future events and their timing. The apocalyptic consciousness is "metastatic," which is a term Voegelin develops to criticize Isaiah for prophesying to King Ahaz in the impending Syro-Ephraimite War that the Lord wants him not to lose heart because the invasion will fail.⁴⁰ Voegelin assumes, and it is not obvious the assumption is correct, that Isaiah is telling Ahaz not to make military preparations for defense but to have only faith. *If* that had been the word of the Lord to Isaiah, it is not clear why Voegelin should mock it. It seems clear that a revelation that could be taken as a practical directive by which to orient empirical existence is ruled out as a possibility for Voegelin from the start. The divine ground may be luminous, but for Voegelin it is not capable of illuminating our pragmatic conduct directly or purposefully. Rather, the Anaximandrian order of things has its own rules, and we must play by them: "The King had common sense enough not to follow the advice of the prophet but rather to rely on fortifications and military equipment. Still, there was the prophet's assumption that through an act of faith the structure of reality could be effectively changed."

Voegelin goes on to excoriate Isaiah as indulging in magic. Biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad objected to the impiety of such a judgment, so Voegelin "coined a new term to characterize the peculiar sublimated magic belief in a transfiguration of reality through an act of faith. And this kind of faith I called *metastatic*

faith—the belief in a metastasis of reality through an act of faith.” Reminiscing, Voegelin had second thoughts about not simply retaining the plain charge that “this kind of faith is indeed magic,” as such faith would “attempt to produce a desired result by means outside of the cause-effect relations in nature.”⁴¹ And yet there are many religious believers who believe, even unsuperstitiously, in the occurrence of miracles. More important, believers look to God for direction in living out their day-to-day lives. But Voegelin’s divine ground cannot give such counsel and so needs no theologians or prophets to mediate such counsel.⁴²

Does Voegelin adequately account for other possible ways of understanding apocalyptic consciousness? The scholarship has changed since his heyday, benefiting from a range of voices much expanded beyond the German choir of historical-critical exegetes. For instance, the old assumption, stemming from Albert Schweitzer, that Paul (and Jesus!) expected the cessation of the nightmare of history to occur imminently is no longer taken for granted.⁴³

Second, according to Voegelin, the apocalyptic imagination compromises the integrity of this world like a cancer. Are we to assume, then, that despite the eschatological directionality of the process of reality, the world in fact goes on and on, forever suffused with death? If there will be an End, is it unbalanced to expect it? It seems Voegelin wants us to focus on personal eschatology, in a way reminiscent of theologian and biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann: “So far as the individual human being is concerned, this movement [in reality toward a state beyond its present structure] obviously can be consummated only through his personal death. The great discovery of the Classic philosophers was that man is not a ‘mortal,’ but a being engaged in a movement toward immortality. The *athanatizein*—the activity of immortalizing—as the substance of the philosopher’s existence is a central experience in both Plato and Aristotle.”⁴⁴

Third, if there is no Personality to unveil the process of the whole, then apocalypticism must be a delusion. But perhaps Voegelin’s imagery of the divine “ground” is not apt after all? Ground is impersonal, and it cannot engage in a theodrama of

everyday life. Is Voegelin a victim of the symbol he employs? Mystics like Eckhart speak of an *Ungrund*, and that might work better—translating Apeiron more accurately and capable of gesturing towards a reality encompassing even the Apeiron. It helps to stratify the divine depth, opening up space for a Trinitarian exceeding of the philosophical straightjacket. Indeed, we must ask Voegelin, does the “divine ground” of the process of reality *belong to* the process of reality? Is God a process-divinity realizing itself in and through history?⁴⁵

Along the same lines, is there not sleight of hand in calling the abyss of being “nonexistence,” rather than, say, hyper-existence, as in Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite? De-personalizing the divine “ground” stacks the deck in favor of philosophical job- and status-security: no Speaker, then the only actual interpreters of divinity are philosophers; no divine intervention, then philosophy is the only truly authoritative ordering force on the level of pragmatic history.

Differentiation of Cosmos and History

Voegelin gets us beyond the inane assumption too often operative in Christian theology that the meaning of “salvation” is to be taken for granted as “going to heaven.” He notes that for Paul, salvation is to be understood in terms of “transposition into reality without *phthora* [perishing, corruption].”⁴⁶ But the spiritual oncologist judges Paul’s enthusiasm and urgent desire for *aphtharsia* [indestructibility, imperishability] to be metastatic.⁴⁷

However, to enter into Paul’s existential experience, one must seriously entertain the Christian theological differentiation of the Beginning: there is the original good creation of a cosmic order, as well as the radical evil of primordial revolt.⁴⁸ Even in terms of the fundamental philosophical exigence to pare away *nomos* when analyzing experience in order to stand before naked *physis*, Voegelin has inadequately differentiated the Anaximandrian process in that he seems to conflate the finite constraints of embodied existence with the infinitizing drama of loving and sinning. He seems to have us understand, say, concupiscental conquest and

ideological deformation as part of the Anaximandrian rhythm of coming-to-be and passing-away.⁴⁹

But are there not two sets of rules to the game of life? One describing the contours of physical reality; the other, the “way of the world,” in which narcissism, self-serving, pleonexic hunger, the fear and anxiety of a zero-sum mindset, set the table. Surely politics must wisely negotiate both sets of rules, but surely it is also true that their differentiation is necessary for intelligent action.

That is, is historical process not something distinct from cosmic process, requiring the healing and reconciliation Paul speaks of in Romans 8? He recognizes that *aphtharsia* must overcome a double futility laid upon humanity: not only the natural tragedy of composite things falling apart, but also the personal/voluntary tragedy of ignorance, trauma, hubris, *ressentiment*. Without this differentiation of the Beginning, it is easy to overlook the ultimacy of *agape*, of infinite love, as the ultimate energy of both the Beginning and the Beyond. Recognition of the utter *unnaturalness* of malice prepares one to see the “necessity” of infinite love. Having seen that, one must establish the balance of consciousness at the higher level of *caritas*.

The apocalyptic urgency of crying out “Come, Lord Jesus” and “Thy Kingdom come” would have everything to do with differentiating the drama of historical experience. It is only with reference to that drama that the Christian dogmatic claim can be entertained in earnest: that in and through the life, death, and resurrection of a certain Jew, God irrupted into pragmatic history—to heal creation, consummate its emergently probabilistic order, and elevate it into the deathlessness of infinite knowing and loving.⁵⁰ Dogmatic theology recognizes both natural intelligibilities and the horrors (and joys) of history; it also confesses that God has assumed through Christ the entire cosmic, and historical, process into the Trinitarian mystery of a love so vast that there is no depth of brokenness in time, no night of godforsakenness, in which God is not present to us. This does not mean rapture from the pain of existence; it means that we are embraced by an invisible love *in* the darkness of the rhythm *and* that there will come, some unknown day, from the

goodness and suffering of God, a wiping away of every tear, a conquest of every sin, a vindication of every victim, and a creativity without end. Rather than undercutting political responsibility, such a hope enables engaging the world in serene urgency.

But Voegelin's presentation of the Christian claim does not rise to the level of the community's self-understanding:

The difference [between Paul and Plato] narrows to the content of Paul's theophany, to the vision of the God who has become man, of the God who has entered the Anaximandrian Time with its genesis and phthora and, having gone through the pathemata [sufferings] of existence, has risen to the glory of aphtharsia. The vision of the Resurrected convinced Paul that man is destined to rise to immortality, if he opens himself to the divine pneuma *as Jesus did*.⁵¹

This passage is exciting in the way that reading Voegelin is exciting, maybe especially for religious readers. Here is a vastly learned and brilliant man who takes the Bible seriously, who presents scriptural passages in a way that is fresh and living. And those virtues are precious, especially given the automatic way many theologians treat these explosive passages. Yet, of Voegelin's scriptural reformulations it still must be asked, is this somehow a decisive exegesis? Even though, in this case, it neutralizes Christocentric mediation? One could acknowledge the truth of Voegelin's account of the Ecumenic Age, and indeed of much of his system, and still, rationally, claim that Jesus of Nazareth brought the Beyond into the level of pragmatic history. The Christian does not believe in Paul's vision of the Resurrected: in part *through* that vision, to be sure, he or she believes something *beyond* that vision—the resurrection of Jesus as a fact of both history and of what transcends history.⁵²

Playing heresy-hunting “gotcha” against Voegelin would be grotesque. But it is worthwhile to point out the problematic nature of his preemption of the self-understanding of an interpretive community on the basis of his own philosophical system:

“For the ‘Christ’ of Nicaea and Chalcedon is not the reality of theophanic history that confronts us in the Pauline vision of the Resurrected.”⁵³ Is it self-evidently true, his rejection of all doctrine as a requirement of philosophical maturity? May a human claim such pontifical authority for himself?

A vision is not a dogma but an event in metaleptic [involving the interaction of divine and human] reality that the philosopher can do no more than try to understand to the best of his ability. As the vision occurs in the Metaxy [the In-Between], it must not be split into “object” and “subject.” There is no “object” of the vision other than the vision as received; and there is no “subject” of the vision other than the response in a man’s soul to divine presence. The vision emerges as a symbol from the Metaxy, and the symbol is both divine and human. Any attempt to break up the mystery of divine-human participation, as it occurs in a theophanic event, is fatuous.⁵⁴

Voegelin again draws on his philosophy of consciousness. One might find that account generally persuasive and yet also leave open the possibility that beyond the luminous mode of consciousness, there might be a higher subject-object reality than the one we know through everyday intentionality. At a more primordial level than the objectifying intentionality of *perceptual* consciousness lies our *mystical-poetical* experience of alterity, otherness, the Other: the recalcitrance of reality, the otherness of the neighbor (think about how threatening the often-inarticulate desires of another can be), the otherness of God (whose ways are not our own). Voegelin wars against all objectivity because he sees in it only our concupiscential imperialism. But perhaps there is a mutual subjectification-objectification in the loving face-to-face, whose union depends on abiding difference? When we know and are known by the ones we love, we become subject-object within the infinite intensity and gracious commerce of love. In dogmatic language, this is the Trinity, the mystery of personality constituted by perpetual

self-transcendence—and that is the Kingdom of love's order, powerful enough to overcome malice's disorder and the suffering it causes.

Voegelin and theology should continue to learn from each other, for there is a common and urgent project: recovering experiential openness to the transcendent abyss radiating the order of being and moving it beyond itself.⁵⁵ There is an order of charity yearning for ever-greater incarnation.

In Conversation with Political Theology

Political theology opens avenues for rapprochement between Voegelin and theology while continuing the steel-sharpening-steel of that conversation: so, we turn now to Johann Baptist Metz (1928–2019), who formulated the explicit project of political theology for Catholic systematics, with a focus on the memory of suffering (the memory of the victims) and apocalyptic. Metz shows us the balance of consciousness on the higher level of *agape* and indicates how we might participate more skillfully in the incarnation of love's order here and now.

“Apocalypse” means unveiling or revelation. The word tends to conjure images of fire and war (from *Apocalypse Now* to dispensationalist fantasies of the Rapture and Armageddon). That misunderstanding follows upon a loss of the primal Christian experience: to expect, and to yearn for, the Second Coming of the crucified and risen King *because* one lives in the presence of the Trinitarian mystery, the invisible infinity of wisdom and love. This would be a nondelusional “imminent expectation of the end.”

Metz seeks to retrieve the primal Christian experience of time. Modern humanity exists in an evolutionistic continuum in which moment simply follows moment and progress is inevitable. This timeless, simultaneously unhistorical and historicist, progressivism requires the suppression of dangerous memories of the victims of historical process. To be worldly, to serve Mammon, means, above all, to give pride of place to success. This again raises the question of a proper stratification of the Anaximandrian process of generation and corruption. In the Johannine literature, for example, one might be able to distinguish between the “cosmos” rooted in the

Beginning, and the “cosmos” as scarred by a primordial break in the communion between God and humanity: “For all that is in the *cosmos*—the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not from the Father, but from the *cosmos*” (1 John 2:16). The cosmos *as* from the Father’s Beginning is good, but bent back upon itself into a closed system in the Augustinian *incurvatio in se ipsum* (the *saeculum* secularized), desire becomes corrupted into self-service, constituting a disordered “cosmos.”

To be successful in the uncosmetic cosmos requires having sufficient worldly power. The powers-that-be get where they are by subjugating the less powerful—and covering up the crime. Complicity with the historical process means complicity with that oblivion of victimization. Voegelin demonstrated in his life and work a true solidarity with victims of totalitarianism, so one should recognize his animation by these energies of political theology.

Metz also presents his political theology as a fundamental theology, the field of Catholic systematics dedicated to showing the reasonableness of divine revelation and its historical mediation through the Church. Sited here, political theology exposes itself to reason as a critique of ideology. Indeed, Metz describes his political theology as a “practical fundamental theology,” which places the project under “the primacy of praxis” that presses toward personal conversion of mind and heart:

The Christian idea of God is in itself a practical idea. God simply cannot be thought without this idea irritating and disrupting the immediate interests of the one who is trying to think it. Thinking-God happens as a revision of those interests and needs that are directly organized around one’s self. Metanoia, conversion, and exodus are not just purely moral or pedagogical categories; rather, they are thoroughly noetic. Therefore, stories of conversion and of exodus do not serve as dramatic window-dressing for a preformulated “pure” theology. Rather, they belong to the fundamental way theology itself operates.⁵⁶

Metz provides, as a hermeneutic rule for Christian praxis, a profound corrective to our activism and, indeed, to an overemphasis on consciousness, which is a weakness in Voegelin's approach:

Christian praxis . . . attends not only to praxis as action—prototypically that action which subdues and dominates nature—but praxis as “suffering.” These pathic structures should be advocated as forms of resistance to a growing sense of apathy. They include mourning, as a category of resistance against the proscription of mourning in a society of success and victors, as well as joy as a category of resistance to the growing inability to celebrate gratuitous meaning.⁵⁷

Though Metz's practical fundamental theology is framed as a “political theology of the subject,” it is not the kind of subjectivity that Voegelin rejected in phenomenology, that of consciousness intentionally correlated to a “thing-reality” of objects. Rather, it is an embodied subjectivity that undergoes the world pathically, suffers it. This chimes with Voegelin's meditative openness to the world, while maintaining our embodied individuation—which Voegelin brackets in his process-existentialist theology/anthropology.

Although maintaining a “pathic” quality in the consciousness open to the event of luminosity, Voegelin must remove the body, and indeed our individuality, from the scene, because embodiment tends to mislead consciousness about the nature of reality: “[In the mode of intentionality], we speak of consciousness as a something located in human beings in their bodily existence. In relation to this concretely embodied consciousness, reality assumes the position of an object intended. Moreover, by its position as an object intended by a consciousness that is bodily located, reality itself acquires a metaphorical touch of external thingness.”⁵⁸ The mode of consciousness that Voegelin cares about, that of participation, by which reality becomes luminous in consciousness, is on his account something like a mystical loss of individuation. Thus, “when consciousness is experienced as an event of participatory illumination in the reality that comprehends the partners to the event, it has to be located,

not in one of the partners, but in the comprehending reality; consciousness has a structural dimension by which it belongs, not to man in his bodily existence, but to the reality in which man, the other partners to the community of being [God, world, society], and the participatory relations among them occur.”⁵⁹

Let’s grant that Voegelin’s fluctuation of the person helps break our imperialist tendencies; that anthropology still must remain open to further revelation—perhaps of another kind of subjectivity. Systematic and ideological closure threatens even the noblest systems. Accordingly, Metz is on high alert for covert masters in generally propagated patterns of subjectivity. For example, he exposes the Enlightenment as the “secret enthronement of the bourgeois subject,”⁶⁰ but he does not rest content to forestall “bourgeoisification.” In a way analogous to Voegelin (a nonconservative cherished by conservatives), Metz, though cherished by progressives, attacks central obsessions of the left: “The same political theology of the subject that, in the name of the memories it represents, cannot simply let the bourgeois subject be itself, cannot let the comrade simply be the comrade either.”⁶¹ Emancipation of consciousness must always be an emancipation from partisan ideologies, as well as from philosophical systems, in favor of universal humanity.

To realize universal solidarity in a nonideological way requires a God who can talk back, as it were: indeed, “the name ‘God’ stands for the fact that the utopia of all human beings being liberated to become subjects possessed of human dignity is not a pure projection—which is certainly what it would be if there were only utopia and no God.”⁶²

Conclusion

Voegelin found “ridiculous” the reduction of consciousness to consciousness of objects of sense perception, so he investigated the experiences that in fact form consciousness, performing an *anamnesis* of significant events in his childhood.⁶³ Metz would have us remember concrete histories of suffering. In their spirit, it might make sense for us to meditate upon our own memories—our joys

and hopes, griefs and anxieties—as luminous for the joys and griefs of our fellow humans. Is there a fullness of presence slowly (all too slowly!) unveiling itself, even, and especially, in our dark nights? Might there arise in us a serene urgency for the realization of the good here and now, as we await a good that can only, in the end, be given?

To remember the divine presence, to be surprised by it in one's life and in the great texts: perhaps we will find a new and contemplative politics in attending to Voegelin as a mystic political philosopher in a humbler mode (in particular, reconciled to apocalyptic), who proclaims that “philosophical existence is existence in awareness of man's humanity as constituted by his tension toward the divine ground,” an awareness gained in the Platonic *periagoge* of “turning toward the ground.”⁶⁴ From such turning to divinity (the energy of infinite understanding and loving) comes ordering of the soul and possible ordering of society. Thus, we recognize Voegelin as an indispensable political theologian for our age.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Lee Trepanier, “Eric Voegelin on Race, Hitler, and National Socialism,” *Political Science Reviewer* 42, no. 1 (2018): 167–96.
2. Voegelin equates consciousness and *psyche*. See *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 34 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 137.
3. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 104.
4. Michael P. Morrissey, “Voegelin, Religious Experience, and Immortality,” in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glenn Hughes (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 11. This volume as a whole demonstrates that Voegelin is a kind of political theologian. Morrissey has also written an elegant and exemplary book to advance the conversation between Voegelin and theology, *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). More irenic than my approach, it is in any case excellent.
5. Helpful work bringing Voegelin and theology into conversation is performed by William Thompson, “Voegelin and the Religious Scholar: An Introduction,” in *Voegelin and the Theologian: Ten Studies in Interpretation*, ed. John Kirby and William M. Thompson (New York:

- Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), and by Thompson in “Voegelin on Jesus Christ” in the same volume.
6. Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, ed. David Walsh, trans. M. J. Hanak, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002); *Order and History, Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz, vol. 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); *Order and History, Volume V: In Search of Order*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 18 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
 7. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume I: Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); *Order and History, Volume II: The World of the Polis*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis, vol. 15 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); *Order and History, Volume III: Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Dante Germino, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
 8. David Walsh’s introductory essay to the volume is masterful, bringing Voegelin’s thought alive in the intellectual context of our time.
 9. Kenneth Keulman puts it well: “The term ‘consciousness’ had rarely appeared in the first three volumes; and when it did appear, there was no indication that it bore any extraordinary burden of meaning. There had been no previous indication that the central *locus* of our humanity was consciousness. In the earlier volumes, the term most often used to suggest the core of our humanity was ‘human nature.’” See *The Balance of Consciousness: Eric Voegelin’s Political Theory* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 133.
 10. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 46.
 11. See Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 51.
 12. Note Voegelin, *In Search of Order*: “In the complex experience, presently in process of articulation, reality moves from the position of an intended object to that of a subject, while the consciousness of the human subject intending objects moves to the position of a predicative event in the subject ‘reality’ as it becomes luminous for its truth” (29–30).
 13. See Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 310–11, for characterization of the noetic and pneumatic differentiations in terms of *eros* and *agape*. Also, note that Voegelin disavowed “monotheism” as one of those ideas deforming, in this case, a breakthrough recognition that the divine is not intracosmic. The term is used here to provide a commonsense point of reference.

14. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 167.
15. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 380.
16. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 129.
17. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 46. A helpful overview covering this sweep of time in terms of “civil theology” is provided by Barry Cooper, “An Introduction to Voegelin’s Account of Western Civil Theologies,” in *Voegelin and the Theologian: Ten Studies in Interpretation*, ed. John Kirby and William M. Thompson (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 253–89.
18. It might be asked whether one is able to enter through symbols into the same experience had by the person expressing a theophanic encounter: can one step into the same divine flux twice?
19. Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 58.
20. Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 79.
21. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 384.
22. See, e.g., Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, chap. 18; *In Search of Order*, 28–31.
23. Consider Voegelin, *Anamnesis*: “I am inclined to believe that the process-theological attempt and its expansion, a metaphysics that interprets the transcendence system of the world as the immanent process of a divine substance, is the only meaningful systematic philosophy” (74).
24. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 324–25.
25. It is appropriate to note here that Voegelin was not really a conservative. Michael Franz provides a helpful analysis in “Brothers under the Skin: Voegelin on Spiritual Order and Disorder,” in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glenn Hughes, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 133–61. Voegelin takes religious texts seriously and the divine ground in dead earnest, but he has no use for orthodoxy of any kind. He rejects all creedal Christianity, Catholic or otherwise. He is straightforwardly subordinationist in his Christology, in a way that smacks of Hegel—though unlike Hegel, there is not any way to classify Voegelin as a Trinitarian. See Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 325–26. He critiques conservatism as a modern reaction to ideological reaction (a revolt against a revolt), floating free from the vital experience of reality—just like ideology, early-modern metaphysics, and theology before it. See Voegelin, *Anamnesis*: “The act of turning away and turning around is indeed the *sine qua non* for finding the way from revolt back to reality; the *periagoge* [conversion, as in Plato’s *Republic*] must be performed in any case. If one, however, simply follows revolt as a guide, one finds the desire for knowledge again blocked, for the revolt does

not target directly the reality of knowledge, but its forms of decay, i.e., the theological and metaphysical dogmatisms. These older dogmatisms, which are the first things we encounter after we have turned around, are closer to reality than the revolt against the ground, even though they have the character of *parekbasis* [derailment]. We must not forget, though, that they, too, suffer from a degree of loss of reality of their own that has provoked the ideological revolt since the eighteenth century, and that, on the other hand, the revolt has exposed socially effective realms of the structures of world, society, and history that the social oppression of orthodoxy sought to keep closed. The revolt was a historical accomplishment in the service of noesis, even though its hybris caused the source of noesis in the tension toward the ground to be buried. What has happened can be in no way undone. The search for return, undertaken in the face of the totalitarian climax of the revolt, was unable to go beyond the older dogmatism and thus failed to reach the reality of knowledge itself. All it has produced is a curious grey area of speculation about order that is as characteristic a phenomenon of the times as the ideologies themselves to which it is opposed" (386–87). Given its important civilizational concerns, conservatism should also be grateful for Voegelin's anti-Eurocentrism—a salutary thing when the concept of "Western civilization" has been reified by ideological polemics. Voegelin's discovery of a "Chinese ecumene" is an essential element in the recalibration of *Order and History*. Knowing more has always been a good way not to be a know-nothing.

26. This section constitutes the greatest change from the version of this chapter published in *Anamnesis*.
27. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 122.
28. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 123.
29. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 124.
30. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 125.
31. See Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 149. Here it should be noted that the consciousness of universal humanity corresponds, in a seeming paradox, to a breakthrough in consciousness in which the individual person hears him- or herself as directly addressed by the divine. This direct contact between individual and divine short-circuits the hierarchical mediations of a given subuniversal collectivity. The divinity thus revealed is God, not of some group, but of each and of all. We might use the term "cosmopolitan individuation" to describe this breakthrough, and it characterizes the Ecumenic Age. Geoffrey L. Price unfolds this dynamic in terms of "two epiphanies of man" in "The Epiphany

of Universal Humanity,” in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glenn Hughes (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 65–83. The first culminates in the transfer of spiritual authority from Athens to Socrates, the second in Paul’s hearkening back to Abraham and his faith as the way to overcome moral impotence and perversity.

32. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 230.
33. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 258.
34. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 277–78.
35. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 278–79.
36. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 279.
37. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 293. Compare theologian Karl Rahner’s maxim “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa.”
38. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 303.
39. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 303–4. As Morrissey notes, “[For Voegelin, Paul’s] prophetic vision lacked the philosopher’s control of meaning, a control that could harness the turbulence of a pneumatic revelation,” *Consciousness and Transcendence*, 106. The question a theologian would ask, though, is how much should our *logos* control the *Logos*?
40. Isaiah 7.
41. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 94–95.
42. It is not clear how Voegelin would draw the line of pragmatism versus magic in distinguishing the situation of Isaiah from, say, the astonishing victory of the Maccabees in their revolt against the imperial power of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and from the Jewish zealotry that would take on the Roman Empire, against which Jesus and Paul warned. What is common sense? And is Paul apocalyptic in writing Romans 13:1–7?
43. See, e.g., Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 1992). One point to highlight: “There is, in fact, no apocalyptic orthodoxy on the matter of the timing of things eschatological” (16). In any case, it is one thing to keep up with monographs; it is another to say that the meaning of a revealed text is dependent on the vagaries of academic research, susceptible as that is to myriad conceptual derailments.
44. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 145.
45. See note 23. It is not possible, given the constraints on this essay, to map Voegelin’s analysis of the Beginning and the Beyond onto his reading of Anaximander, which would also be a comparison of Voegelin’s exegeses of the New Testament John and Paul. We will have to be satisfied with

one animadversion. In the introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin writes, “Although the divine reality is one, its presence is experienced in the two modes of the Beyond and the Beginning. The Beyond is present in the immediate experience of movements in the psyche, while the presence of the divine Beginning is mediated through the experience of the existence and intelligible structure of things in the cosmos. The two modes require two different types of language for their adequate expression” (63). A conflation of those two types of language (philosophical and mythological, respectively) leads to loss of the balance of consciousness. Voegelin convicts the Prologue of John’s Gospel of thus conflating the Word of the Beginning with the Word of the Beyond—but to proscribe that identity of the Logos is precisely to proscribe the operation of traditional *theo-logy*.

46. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 304. What Voegelin does not advert to is the inherently corporate nature of salvation in the biblical worldview. See, e.g., Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988); and Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, ed. Aidan Nichols, O.P., trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988).
47. Bruce Douglass brilliantly diagnoses the neuralgic point: “[Voegelin] seeks, in effect, to create a Christianity that has no affinity whatsoever with the metastatic expectations of modernity. The question, however, is whether this can be done and still do justice to the faith and experience of believers. . . . Perhaps . . . a Gospel which has no affinity to Gnosticism is no longer recognizably the Gospel.” See “A Diminished Gospel: A Critique of Voegelin’s Interpretation of Christianity,” in *Eric Voegelin’s Search for Order in History*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 154.
48. In an outstanding essay, Bernhard W. Anderson grapples with the fundamental questions at stake here (especially the challenge of evil) in “Politics and the Transcendent: Voegelin’s Philosophical and Theological Exposition of the Old Testament in the Context of the Ancient Near East,” in *Eric Voegelin’s Search for Order in History*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 62–100. One gem: “Apocalyptic is prophecy in a new idiom” (97).
49. In an essay full of insights, Stephen A. McKnight sheds light on this matter: “[For Voegelin], the drama of humanity is subordinate to the drama of the cosmos. Ultimately, then, the subject of history is the

- cosmic process itself and not mankind,” in “The Evolution of Voegelin’s Theory of Politics and History, 1944–1975,” in *Eric Voegelin’s Search for Order in History*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 40.
50. Kenneth Keulman rightly questions “whether Voegelin’s treatment of the ‘pauline vision of the resurrected’ gives adequate account of the contradiction, the intrusion, the absurdity of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus,” in “The Tension of Consciousness: The Pneumatic Differentiation,” in *Voegelin and the Theologian: Ten Studies in Interpretation*, ed. John Kirby and William M. Thompson (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 94–95.
 51. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 306. Emphasis added.
 52. N. T. Wright, e.g., makes a case for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
 53. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 326.
 54. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 307.
 55. I owe this formulation to Christopher Altieri.
 56. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, ed. and trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2007), 62.
 57. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 67.
 58. Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 29.
 59. Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 30.
 60. See Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 31–45.
 61. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 76.
 62. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 76.
 63. The disarming fourth chapter of Voegelin, *Anamnesis*.
 64. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 125.