

## THE BREAK IN VOEGELIN'S PROGRAM

*The Ecumenic Age*, Vol. IV of *Order and History*, by Eric Voegelin.  
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### I

Over two decades ago Eric Voegelin published the first in a projected series of six volumes designed as "a philosophical inquiry concerning the order of human existence in society and history."<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the project, called *Order and History*, was to elaborate the history of the symbolization of order running all the way from the empires of the ancient Near East, with their cosmological myths, to the modern nation-state, with its gnostic symbolism. The first volume, *Israel and Revelation*, published in 1956, which treated Mesopotamia, Egypt, and especially Israel, was widely viewed as a very promising beginning; and in quick succession came two additional installments, *The World of the Polis* and *Plato and Aristotle*, both published in 1957, which were similarly acclaimed for their blend of erudition, insight, and originality.<sup>2</sup> These volumes quickly attracted an enthusiastic audience for Voegelin, and generated high expectations for the future development of *Order and History*.

The wait, however, for Volume IV has been a long one. Seventeen years passed before it was published; and now that it has finally appeared, it is clear that the project is not going to proceed as originally planned. In both style and substance *The Ecumenic Age* differs from the previous volumes, and Voegelin himself announces that he has found it necessary to break with the original program. There will not be six volumes. Only one more will be published; and that will take the form of a collection of essays (some previously published) on "the contemporary problems which

<sup>1</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), p. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957) and *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957). All three volumes have been reviewed individually in previous issues of this journal. Cf. Bernhard W. Anderson, "Politics and the Transcendent," *The Political Science Reviewer*, I (Fall, 1971), 1-29; James L. Wiser, "Philosophy and Human Order," *The Political Science Reviewer*, II (Fall, 1972), 137-161; and John H. Hallowell, "Existence in Tension: Man in Search of His Humanity," *The Political Science Reviewer*, II (Fall, 1972), 162-184.

have motivated the search for order in history."<sup>3</sup> The projected volume on "The Protestant Centuries" has been abandoned, and Volume V will probably present an analysis of the contemporary crisis rather different from what was originally planned.

The obvious questions are: Why has this happened? And just how much of a change is actually involved? I shall first review Voegelin's answers, and then suggest an alternative interpretation.

Voegelin's characterization of the magnitude of the change is, I think, ambiguous. He speaks of nothing less than a "break" in the program of *Order and History*, and suggests that this was required by a conflict between the historical materials and the original plan. This could be read to suggest an inadequacy in the principle governing the earlier volumes—which was that "the order of history emerges from the history of order." And in fact he does report that he had run up against "the brute fact of meaningful structures which resist arrangement on a time line."<sup>4</sup> The unfolding of the history of order did not conform, therefore, to the neat pattern, or "course" Voegelin originally expected. Yet Voegelin does not draw the conclusion that the original principle is mistaken or that it should be abandoned. On the contrary, he reasserts its essential correctness, and says nothing about revising it. We are confronted, therefore, with the anomaly of a break in program which requires no significant alteration of the original thesis.

In explaining the change, Voegelin emphasizes two specific problems which he encountered, one pertaining to the Ecumenic Age itself and another to an earlier era. The first, already alluded to, came into view as he examined the spiritual dynamics of the Ecumenic Age. What was clear about this period, in addition to its unique spiritual fecundity, was the complex diversity of spiritual experience. A variety of major different spiritual "outbursts" and movements appear, in diverse places, with little apparent connection with one another; and simultaneously they penetrate and shape the cultural fields of East and West. Each, moreover, bears the mark of a particular cultural and ethnic identity. In Persia, there is Zoroaster; in Greece, the philosophers; in Israel, the prophets and then the Christ; in China, Confucius and Lao-tzu; in India, the Buddha; etc. Unless one engages in theological *a priori's*, it is impossible to say that truth emerged from one single. spiritual

<sup>3</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

event, and there is no sound empirical basis (i.e., in the consciousness of the participants) for interpreting these events as a linear progression. The most that would seem plausible is what Karl Jaspers did—namely, to draw together the whole period as an "axis-time" in the development of mankind. But even that Voegelin criticizes because there was no such common experience in the consciousness of the participants. None of them thought of themselves as being involved in an epoch in Jaspers' sense, so the characterization must be imposed from outside. Untidy as it may be, Voegelin feels there is no alternative, therefore, to accepting the unconnected plurality of spiritual events as a given.

The other problem was a significant complication in Voegelin's understanding of the development of human consciousness. Much of the analysis in the preceding volumes was concerned with the movement beyond what Voegelin characterizes as the "cosmological" mentality, and it was designed to make the point that historical consciousness is a product of the "leaps in being" represented by Israelite prophetism and classical Greek philosophy, especially the former. It was Voegelin's thesis that meaning in history was so intimately connected with these "differentiations" of consciousness as to be constituted by them. Now, in *The Ecumenic Age*, he reports that the matter must be viewed in a new light. The problem in the first instance is that Voegelin has discovered evidence of historical consciousness antedating the Israelites and Greeks by centuries, and that, furthermore, this consciousness finds expression in a symbolic form which is cosmological. In "historiogenesis," which is the name Voegelin gives to this newly discovered form, historical consciousness is unmistakable in events being placed on an irreversible, nonrepeatable time line; but at the same time cosmological thinking is equally apparent in the shaping of the line in terms of myths involving intramundane deities. Historical consciousness and cosmological thinking are not, therefore, nearly so alien as Voegelin originally led us to believe. To complicate further the picture, Voegelin also has discovered that this blending of history and cosmology is a "millennial constant" which does not disappear as consciousness develops but, on the contrary, persists all the way down to the present. In fact, most philosophy of history has taken this form, including even the Pauline and Augustinian versions. "The very unilinear history which I had supposed to be engendered, together with the punctuations of meaning on it, by the differentiating events," he says, "turned out to be a cosmological

**symbolism."**<sup>5</sup> The obvious implication is that it is no longer possible to speak of "settled topical blocks" in the manner to which *Order and History* itself had accustomed us. The actual history of consciousness is too complex and nonlinear.

This, too, I think, is problematic. Straightforward as it may seem, Voegelin's explanation of the break in the program of *Order and History* actually only compounds the confusion concerning what has taken place. For neither of the arguments just elaborated can be taken literally. If they are, they cannot be squared with the rest of what Voegelin has to say in *The Ecumenic Age*. If the modes and symbols of order cannot be arranged in any intelligible succession at all, and if the complexity of the history of consciousness precludes distinguishing any topical blocks, then Voegelin would need to repudiate most of the earlier argument of *Order and History*. In point of fact, however, that does not occur. The principal claims presented in the earlier volumes are repeated, with only minor modification, in *The Ecumenic Age*. Once again, the pivot on which the analysis turns is the distinction between cosmological and existential truth; once again, the assumption is that the latter emerges from the former through a process of differentiation of consciousness; and once again, it is taken for granted that the latter represents a more adequate and "advanced" level of understanding. Historical consciousness may antedate Israelite prophetism and Greek philosophy by centuries, but there still remains these fundamental differences in the ways in which reality is experienced and symbolized by different people in different ages. There is an "absolute epoch," moreover, even if there is not an "axis-time"; and despite Voegelin's emphasis on the pluralism of spiritual life in this period, he does not treat all of the "outbursts" equally. The Israelite, Greek and Christian cases are given special attention because they-and they alone-represent the differentiation of consciousness in the full sense. Also, they alone represent the differentiation of *historical* consciousness in the full sense.

There is order in history, therefore, and it becomes apparent precisely through the history of order. Voegelin has not abandoned his original principle; he has simply expanded the scope of his analysis to include a broader range of materials. These materials have complicated the analysis by raising new issues and forcing qualifications of the argument. But fundamentally the thesis of *Order and History* has not changed.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Still, there has been a break. *The Ecumenic Age* continues the original program of *Order and History* in so far as it pursues analysis of the history of the symbols and experiences of order, but at the same time other interests intrude. In particular, Voegelin's own theory of the structure of existence comes to the forefront of the analysis, and the emphasis is much more on the permanent or recurring features of human experience than on the innovations which come through development. Voegelin has apparently decided that the best protection against the many misunderstandings of history to which men have proved themselves vulnerable is a Platonic stress on permanence, so in his latest work the order of history tends to be eclipsed by the order of existence. He has also shown an increasing interest in ontology, developing a distinctive process theory of being. That, too, figures in the argument of *The Ecumenic Age*, and while in Voegelin's understanding it is complementary to the philosophy of history, the tendency is for the philosophy of history to be absorbed into ontology.

It is these changes in Voegelin's intellectual interests, I would submit, which are the real reason for the change in program. What has happened in the years since the publication of *Plato and Aristotle* is that he has drifted somewhat away from his original concern with reconstructing the history of order towards other philosophical concerns such as those just cited.<sup>6</sup> He has pursued the more fundamental issues involved in political theory and the philosophy of history to their logical conclusions, and as a result has been led deeper and deeper into the philosophical foundations of his position. He has increasingly become an original philosopher in his own right.

The real change which Volume IV represents, therefore, is more a matter of agenda than anything else. *Order and History* has become much more of a personal statement, and one can expect that this tendency will be greatly accentuated in the volume which remains to be published. *The Ecumenic Age* is a hybrid of Voegelin's older historical and his current philosophical interests. *In Search of Order*, which Voegelin has indicated will contain a number of his recent philosophical writings, will complete the transformation.

<sup>6</sup> This can be documented in Voegelin's writings in the intervening period. The reader should consult *Anamnesis* (Munich: R. Piper, Verlag, 1966); "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," *Harvard Theological Review*, LX, 3 (July, 1967), 235-279; "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," *Eternità e Storia*, 1970, 215-234; and "Reason: The Classic Experience," *Southern Review*, X (1974), 237-264.

## II

The general theme of *Order and History* has been the relationship between spiritual and political order. In the first three volumes Voegelin documented a growing alienation between the two. The order of the soul became increasingly separated from the order of society. The truth of existence, once differentiated in Israel and Greece, was not accepted as the basis for political order in either society. There was a failure of penetration because of active indigenous resistance. The question, then, for Volume IV is how this relationship evolved subsequently as these societies which had been the context for the emergence of the new consciousness, together with their cosmological neighbors, succumbed to new forces and a new era.

The answer, in brief, is that the alienation became more severe, over a lengthy period, before relief was found, and when it was found, it bore the scars of the struggle. Eventually, a reconciliation of sorts was effected through the civilizational triumph of the ecumenic religions. But this was preceded by several centuries of political and spiritual turmoil, in which the alienation between spirit and power became much more acute and the truth of existence was threatened with extinction. The measures which were taken in philosophy and the ecumenic religions, in turn, to protect the truth against loss determined the form in which it eventually became effective as a civilizational influence. This form was highly vulnerable to deformation, thus paving the way for the later spiritual and political problems which still beset us.

According to Voegelin's periodization, the new era commences with the conquest of Media by the Persian Cyrus in 550 B.C. and extends to the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the sixth century A.D. It thus begins and ends with imperialism, and empire-building is the main theme of its pragmatic history. One after another, a succession of empires rise and fall, transforming the political landscape almost beyond recognition. In each case, for reasons which are not explained, the imperial impulse appears, and a small, previously inconsequential society expands, largely by force, into a huge multicivilizational structure. In the process, the traditional forms of political order are shattered. Ethnic societies, such as Israel and Greece, as well as the old cosmological empires, are broken; they lose not only the capacity for self-government but often cultural identity as well. They become objects of conquest.

The perplexing thing about these empires was not merely their destructiveness; it was also the fact that they had little positive to substitute for the societies they destroyed. In Voegelin's sense, they were not societies at all. They lacked spiritual substance because they had no coherent cultural basis. They were mere "organizational shells," bound together by little more than the conqueror's will to power. They did not organize themselves, of course, and whatever order they experienced was imposed on them. The only real purpose that was to be found in them was expansion, but expansion *per se* is hardly an adequate basis for a society. Voegelin recognizes a certain dynamic in imperial expansion which provided an answer of sorts to the problem of meaning, but it was not really satisfactory. In every case the expansion eventually ran up against insurmountable natural limits, fell short of unifying the known world, and retracted. Sooner or later, therefore, the problem of the spiritual void had to be confronted.

The effect of this on spiritual life was profound. Whole societies were cast into the void. Not only did the empires individually have little clear identity and purpose, but the process of imperialism as well, the longer it went on, seemed pointless. The victims were increasingly left with a sense that pragmatic history is a succession of events which lead nowhere ("senseless misery," as Voegelin puts it). The result, typically, was that the realm in which order was sought contracted sharply. Since it could not be found in society, it was pursued independently of politics in personal existence. This provided a fertile soil for the growth of religion, and explains, Voegelin implies, why the Ecumenic Age was so extraordinarily fertile as the birthplace of religions. But it also promoted the alienation of consciousness from reality, as exemplified by gnosticism and apocalypticism. From the meaninglessness of history it was not a large step to the conclusion that existence itself is evil and needs to be overcome, and this was a step which more than a few were inclined to take.

Such a "loss of balance" was not inevitable, however. Not everyone fell victim to it, and gradually devices were developed to protect against it. The main protection, of course, was the truth of existence, as experienced in the several great revelatory events. But in order for this to be effective, it itself had to be protected. Israel and Greece both were victims of the imperialists, and in both societies the cultural heritage was threatened. The process of creating such protection was central to the development of the ecumenic

religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. It entailed, on the one hand, the creation of scripture as a fixed corpus of sacred literature, and on the other hand, the elaboration of dogma as the authoritative interpretation of religious truth. The assumption was that, together, scripture and dogma would stabilize the truth revealed in the unique events of revelation, and that it could then be passed on in a relatively integral form to persons well removed from the original revelation. A similar process went on in philosophy, as the Stoics "demythologized" the teaching of Plato and Aristotle and converted it into literal, propositional form. Philosophy, too, became doctrine, and the doctrinalization of philosophy contributed significantly to the development of doctrine in religion as philosophy was absorbed into religious thought.

Moreover, as philosophy and the ecumenic religions evolved, they showed a tendency to accommodate themselves to the course of pragmatic history. These events which otherwise seemed so devoid of meaning took on a new significance when they were viewed in the light of the spiritual history of the age. An ecumenical self-understanding developed among both philosophers and religious leaders: they saw themselves as representatives of a truth valid for all mankind, and acquired a missionary impulse. As this developed, they became sensitive to the parallel between their aspirations and those of the empire-builders, and they were led to the conclusion that this convergence was more than a coincidence. It was providential: the purpose of empire had been to prepare the ground for the spread of religious and philosophical truth. The most obvious examples are, of course, the Stoic and Christian attitude towards the Roman Empire, but there is ample evidence that this was in fact a much more generalized phenomenon in the Ecumenic Age.

It was this linkage of pragmatic and spiritual history, in turn, which facilitated the embrace of philosophy and the ecumenic religions by the empires. The eventual result of the marriage was, in Voegelin's characterization, "ecumenic society"-an entirely new social form which represented at least a measure of reconciliation between spiritual and political order. This achievement was won, however, at a price, as has been indicated. The devices developed in the Ecumenic Age to protect the truth of existence also had the capacity to play another role. Because they tended towards objectification of the truth, they were liable to cut it off from its experiential foundations. This entailed the danger that the truth of existence would be reduced to the status of a mere opinion, that could be accepted or rejected as a matter of "personal preference,"



This danger has been fully realized in recent history, and it goes a long way towards explaining the spiritual and intellectual confusion of modernity. Much of the history of the modern period consists, Voegelin suggests, in a revolt against symbols inherited from the Ecumenic Age whose meaning was deformed through theological and metaphysical dogmatism. The modern revolt, however, by adding more doctrine, only succeeded in compounding the problem, so that modern errors have been stacked on top of medieval ones. The net result is a "massive block of accumulated symbols" which serve only to eclipse reality.<sup>7</sup> The problems of the present age are, therefore, directly connected with the events of the Ecumenic Age; and the implication of Volume IV is that we need to view with great skepticism the forms in which the truths discovered in that Age have been transmitted to us.

### III

As a philosophical work Volume IV has two principal themes—history and the unity of mankind. Both are presented as central to the progress of events and consciousness in the Ecumenic Age.

(1) The problem of the nature of the meaning which is to be found in history has been central to the whole project of *Order and History*, of course, and the position Voegelin takes has been consistently maintained. He has held, on the one hand, that the answers given to the questions of philosophy of history by Plato, Aristotle, and the original Christians are essentially correct, and on the other hand, that most of the problems of modernity can be traced to a revolt against these answers in favor of a progressivist immanentization of Christian eschatology. The great achievement of the Ecumenic Age was the differentiation of history as a distinct dimension of human existence; modern thought, while clearly the product of this breakthrough, has deformed the image of history into something contrary to the nature of reality. The purpose of Voegelin's work, in turn, is to bring us back to reality through a recovery of the wisdom that has been lost. Volume IV presents essentially the same argument, but with much greater attention to the details and the philosophical logic of the classical Greek and Christian answers.

The argument begins with the proposition that history has its origin in the differentiation of consciousness which took place in the Ecumenic Age. Voegelin discourages isolating the spiritual events

<sup>7</sup> Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 58.

of the era from the pragmatic, saying that the spiritual outbursts and the ecumenic empires go together as two aspects of one integral unit. He further suggests that both contribute to the emergence of historical consciousness. Nonetheless, his primary accent falls on the philosophical and religious "leaps in being." Imperial expansion contributed to the preparation of the social and cultural ground, but by itself, as we have noted, it was not at all conducive to the discovery of history as a source of meaning. It was experienced as senseless until the pragmatic events were related to the truth that emerged through the spiritual advances.

There is meaning in history, therefore, primarily because consciousness has a history. The basis of the distinction between before and after on an irreversible line is the development of consciousness in the differentiating events. Plato, Aristotle, the early Christians, and before them, the prophets of Israel, were conscious that something fundamentally new was happening in reality in the divine-human encounter which they experienced, and they distinguished the Before and After of revelation. They thereby differentiated history as the distinctive mode of human time. Natural events might have their cyclical rhythms, but the human mode of being, because it involved consciousness, was different.

This original conception of history was complex, however. Precisely because it was a product of events which were experienced as "theophanies" (encounters with the divine), it involved more than human existence. The emergence of the truth of existence through the "leaps in being"-which just "happened," for reasons beyond human control or understanding-had ontological significance. It was interpreted, according to Voegelin, as evidence of the processual character of reality. Reality in the comprehensive sense was in motion, and the movement was experienced as having direction. Through the progress of human consciousness reality was becoming increasingly self-conscious and articulate about its meaning. Or, as Voegelin paraphrases Plato, the soul and its movement were experienced as "the area of reality in which the cosmic process becomes luminous for its meaning."<sup>8</sup>

The direction of the process was discovered, moreover, to be eschatological. In both the Greek and the Christian theophanies, there was an experience of "immortalization," or "transfiguration," as St. Paul speaks of it. Plato, Aristotle, Paul, *et al.* were led to

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

encounter, through the movement of the soul, a depth of reality transcending finitude; and they came away from this experience with a sense that reality as a whole was moving in that direction. Beyond the cosmos, where order is always limited and compromised by disorder, there became visible to them a reality free of disorder; and this they perceived as the goal of the movement of reality. Reality was headed beyond itself.

At the same time, however, the movement did not in fact come to its conclusion, nor was there really any good reason for believing that it would. Alongside the experience of theophany was the equally significant experience of the lasting of the cosmos. Though consciousness developed, human beings continued to be subject to the biological rhythms of nature, and even those who had experienced the immortalizing movement of the soul were not immune to biological death. Even Jesus Christ himself suffered physical death. The structure of reality revealed itself, therefore, to be paradoxical. It remained constant even though it was changing; and it remained within itself even though it recognizably was moving beyond itself. Human existence was simultaneously both mortal and immortal.

This paradox, says Voegelin, is "the very structure of existence itself," and it must be respected if consciousness is not to lose its "balance."<sup>9</sup> The force of the spiritual experiences is such that unbalancing is very likely. The subject can be swept away by visions of a transfigured reality, and only the greatest care will prevent this from degenerating into apocalypticism or some form of world alienation. It was Plato and Aristotle in particular who succeeded in solving this problem through their use of reason, and Voegelin interprets this as one of the most important events in the whole history of mankind. "It has determined the life of reason in Western civilization," he says, "up to our own time."<sup>10</sup>

Equally important is the maintenance of what Voegelin calls "openness" toward the mystery of the historical process. The natural human tendency, as lines of meaning begin to appear in history, is to convert them into a meaning of history that is purported to be the final and complete truth. Unfortunately, however, the flow of events refuses to stop, and very soon each such effort is revealed to be (in Jacob Burkhardt's apt phrase) an "impertinent anticipation."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the answers which are given conflict,

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

and after a while the contradictions among them suggest the obvious conclusion that they aim to accomplish the impossible. Plato and Aristotle were wiser, says Voegelin. They recognized that the process is beyond human control, that its length is indeterminate, and that therefore it is bound to be both unpredictable and mysterious. Unlike Hegel, they recognized that there are certain questions which simply cannot be answered, and they make no attempt to elevate their thought to the position of being the *telos* toward which history moves.

(2) The unity of mankind became a central issue in the Ecumenic Age because, as we have seen, ecumenism played a significant role in the self-definition of both the new empires and the new religions. They aspired to represent the unity of mankind visibly and indeed even to encompass all of humanity. The basis and meaning of this unity was not a simple matter to establish, however. It was subject to conflicting interpretations as the various empires and religions pursued their programs of expansion, and it took much of the duration of the Age to work through the resulting complications.

The "ecumene" is presented by Voegelin as a cosmological symbol which was redefined under the impact of the changes that took place in the Ecumenic Age. The original term, *oikoumene*, found in the Homeric epics, was part of a symbolism which linked it as a twin to the term *okeanos*. *Oikoumene* meant the inhabited world, the earth on which man dwells and from which he draws sustenance, while *okeanos* referred to a "horizon" marking the boundary between human habitation and the world beyond. *Okeanos* symbolized the penumbra of mystery separating existence on earth from death and the gods. As the presuppositions on which this symbolism rested were destroyed, the idea of the ecumene was retained, but its meaning changed. There was a fragmentation of symbolism corresponding to the alienation of power and spirit we have previously noted. For Polybius, for example, writing in the second century B.C., the ecumene is the power field which is the scene of imperial conquest. It is simply a territory, the known inhabited area that can be made the object of imperial organization. In this "pragmatic" conception, what *okeanos* symbolized is completely eliminated. The ecumene is reduced to being a geographical expanse, with none of the former connotations of mystery. However, the ecumenic religions also had a concept of the ecumene, which re-invested it with a divine horizon. The spiritual ecumene

was the potential range of converts (all of those currently living), and the assumption was that conversion would unify the ecumene regardless of what other differences remained.

Both concepts had their deficiencies, says Voegelin, but the pragmatic ecumene was particularly defective. The unity provided by conquest was, as we have seen, no real unity at all, and the conquest never succeeded in reaching its goal. The more it was explored, the more the ecumene grew; and the farther conquest proceeded from its center, the more difficult the obstacles became. In establishing an order of humanity transcending empire, the ecumenic religions solved this problem in principle, but the solution was compromised by their own ecumenic ambitions, which also were frustrated. They, too, found the ecumene a larger field than any one of them was able successfully to penetrate, and they encountered in addition the further problem that, as Voegelin puts it, ecumenicity is not identical with universality. Those men and women who inhabit the earth at any one time do not comprise the whole of humanity; their predecessors and successors must also be taken into account.

The picture has become even more complex subsequently as historical knowledge has expanded. In an extended discussion of what he calls the "Chinese ecumene," Voegelin observes that an ecumenical consciousness was developing concurrent with the imperial unification of China at precisely the same time as the Western Ecumenic Age. The symbolism which was created to characterize the resulting *society-t'ien-hsia* is the exact equivalent of the Greek *oikoumene*. This cannot be attributed to cultural diffusion or stimulation, since there is no evidence of contact between China and the West in this period. The obvious question is how these two concurrent but unrelated ecumenisms in East and West are to be related. Is it appropriate, Voegelin asks, to speak of two mankind? If not, what justifies speaking in the singular? The question can be broadened, moreover, when one takes into account societies not involved in the Ecumenic Age but eventually affected by similar processes of change. What about non-Mediterranean Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the rest of Asia? Are there in fact several mankind?

The answer which Voegelin gives is that mankind is in fact one but this must be understood as an eschatological symbol. Though the problem was never completely thought through in the Ecumenic Age, gradually the recognition dawned that the unity of mankind

does not have its basis in the structure of society but rather in the eschatological movement of reality. The symbol emerges and evolves as part of the movement of reality, and indicates something about its direction. But universal mankind is not a society existing in the world; it is, rather, the community formed by the movement of divine presence in the human soul. The order which is discovered in such experiences is universally valid for all people and is the basis of their humanity, regardless of where or when they live.

Ultimately, therefore, the development of the ecumenical symbolism converges with historical consciousness. History becomes the substitute to take the place of *okeanos*. The process of reality becomes the horizon of mystery without which, Voegelin suggests, the idea of the ecumene remains incomplete and confused; and the combination of universal humanity and the process of reality become an equivalent to the obsolete *oikoumene/okeanos*.

## VI

One of the biggest departures from the original program for *Order and History* concerns the treatment of Christianity. The title Voegelin first announced for Volume IV was "Empire and Christianity," and it was widely expected that this volume would present a detailed analysis of early and medieval Christian sources analogous to what Voegelin had done with Israel and Greece in the earlier volumes. That expectation, obviously, is not fulfilled by what he has chosen to publish in *The Ecumenic Age*. The treatment of Christianity has been scaled down drastically. Aside from a brief analysis of the prologue to the Gospel of St. John, only one Christian author, St. Paul, is discussed in any detail. The early Christian fathers, including St. Augustine, are mentioned only in passing, and the medieval sources are excluded, of course, by definition from the period on which Voegelin has chosen to focus.

This is regrettable not only because it denies Voegelin's audience an analysis of such figures as Augustine and Aquinas that would surely be valuable, but also because it leaves a crucial link in his historical argument inadequately developed. If I interpret Voegelin correctly, he places a great deal of the responsibility for the modern derailment on Christianity. There were certain inadequacies, he feels, in the way in which Christians interpreted and acted upon the truth revealed in Jesus which eventually led to the modern revolt against Christianity and also influenced the character of that re-

volt.<sup>12</sup> In previous writings, he has indicated in a cryptic way what these shortcomings are, but the analysis has not begun to approach an adequate documentation. A host of important questions about various stages in the development of Christian thought have been left unexamined, and apparently they will remain so.

An obvious question is whether this diminution of the place of Christianity in *Order and History* reflects a significant change in the substance of Voegelin's view of Christianity. The critique of Christianity continues, as is evident from what has been said about the problem of doctrinalization. But what of the claim, articulated in *The New Science of Politics*, that Christianity represents an advance beyond the differentiation of consciousness achieved by classical Greek philosophy and the prophets of Israel? What of the claim in particular that "the Platonic-Aristotelian complex of experiences was enlarged by Christianity at a decisive point."<sup>13</sup> The evidence available in *The Ecumenic Age* does not suggest any real departure from this view, but there is a significant difference in emphasis. While affirming once again the truth of the essential core of Christian belief and the importance of the Christian supplement to the truth discovered in the pre-Christian "leaps in being," Voegelin is increasingly concerned to apply a philosophical critique to the claims made by Christians.

The whole of the analysis in the chapter on the Pauline "Vision of the Resurrected" is structured in terms of comparison between St. Paul and Plato, with the accent falling equally on agreements and points of difference. They agree, according to Voegelin, on the main tenets of the philosophy of history and ontology which has just been reviewed, but they proceed from these common assumptions in different directions. Plato is inclined to emphasize order incarnate in the world and existence in reality, whereas Paul is concerned mainly with salvation from disorder and the transfiguration of reality. Or, in interpreting the encounter of divinity and humanity, Plato tends to be more concerned with the human search, with Man's ascent through *eros*, while Paul stresses the divine gift and the divine descent through *agape*.

The substantive differences between the two have to do, in

<sup>12</sup>I have discussed Voegelin's view of Christianity in "The Gospel and Political Order: Eric Voegelin on the Political Role of Christianity," *The Journal of Politics*, XXXVIII, 1 (February, 1976), pp. 25-45.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 77.

Voegelin's analysis, with the degree of differentiation they were able to achieve. Pauline thought represents a greater degree, articulating insights that are at best implicit in Plato. Part of the progress in differentiation concerns the divine nature: Paul moves beyond the uncertainties of the Platonic demi-urge to a father-God who is both fully transcendent and loving. Another part concerns the status of man: Paul moves beyond the Platonic notion of a divine presence in the cosmos as a whole to divine sonship, symbolizing the unique place of man in the development of reality. Finally, still another part concerns history: Paul, because of his vision of resurrection, moves beyond the Platonic meaning in history to the ultimate goal, or *telos* of the process.

The problem, however, is that this greater differentiation was not controlled by a comparable level of critical rationality. Paul was a missionary rather than a philosopher. He lacked the caution and the critical faculty of Plato; and he had a greater tendency to let his thought be overwhelmed by his spiritual experience. The result is that his interpretation of his experience has significant defects. The core of truth which it contains is compromised by conceptual ambiguities and mistaken expectations. In particular, it is compromised by the metastatic belief that the Parousia is imminent and the transfiguration of reality begun in Christ will be completed in Paul's own lifetime. The Pauline letters, says Voegelin, reflect a man in a state of anxiety who has "an inclination to abolish the tension between the eschatological *telos* of reality and the mystery of the transfiguration that is actually going on within historical reality."<sup>14</sup>

Paul came dangerously close to losing the "balance of consciousness." That he did not actually succumb was an important factor in enabling the Church to restabilize the order of existence in the Ecumenic Age. His wavering, however, was also influential, laying the foundation for centuries of confusion about the meaning of history. It is essential, therefore, that his thought be subjected to philosophical criticism. The "uncritical encumbrances" must be set aside in order that the core of truth may be preserved, and Voegelin leaves little doubt that this means a return to the circumspection of Plato. The expansiveness of Paul's vision must be corrected by Platonic restraint.

This, I would submit, could be considered an appropriate

<sup>14</sup> Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 270.



characterization of the general purpose of Voegelin's work as a philosopher of history: to blend the insights of Christianity and classical Greek philosophy through a Platonic correction of Christian errors and excesses. The question, of course, is whether it can succeed. The danger in every such effort at "mediation" (to use Paul Tillich's term) is that essential elements will be lost, and the typical concern of Voegelin's Christian readers is that his Platonization of Christian symbols will end up draining them of their specifically Christian substance. Elsewhere I have proposed that this is indeed what occurs in Voegelin's reworking of Christian eschatology, and I want now to extend that argument with reference to considerations of Christology.<sup>15</sup>

The specific issue is this: What is the place of the incarnation of God in the figure of Jesus in the process of reality? What contribution does this event make to the movement of the whole? Specifically on the basis of what he says in *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin has been accused of failing to take seriously the historicity and the uniqueness of the Christ event.<sup>16</sup> The argument is that he reduces the Pauline vision to a disclosure about the transfiguration of reality in general which has little direct connection with Jesus. In large measure I believe this charge is unjustified, but there is an element of truth in it. For Voegelin specifically denies a claim about the relationship between the Incarnation and history which has been a central part of Christian belief from the beginning. "Transfiguring incarnation," he says, "does not begin with Christ, as Paul assumed, but becomes conscious through Christ and Paul's vision as the eschatological *telos* of the transfiguring process that goes on in history before and after Christ and constitutes its meaning."<sup>17</sup> A part of Voegelin's revision of Paul consists, therefore, in a major reduction of the role assigned to Jesus Christ. Whereas orthodox Christian doctrine has held that there was something about the life and death of Jesus which itself *set in motion* the eschatological process, in Voegelin's rendition the life and death of Jesus become merely events in which an ongoing eschatological process becomes fully *luminous* and *con-*

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bruce Douglass, "A Diminished Gospel: A Critique of Eric Voegelin's Interpretation of Christianity" in Stephen McKnight (ed.), *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gerhart Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind," *Modern Age*, XX, 1 (Winter, 1976), pp. 28-39.

<sup>17</sup> Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 270.

*scious* of itself. Rather than being the initiation and cause of the process, the Incarnation is simply another (albeit very important) phase of it.

Voegelin thus places himself in the position of correcting Paul and Christian orthodoxy on no less an issue than the purpose of the Incarnation. He says, in effect, that Christians, beginning with Paul, have misunderstood the Incarnation. The more that Voegelin publishes on the subject of Christianity, the more it becomes clear that those who expected from him an apologetic for Christian' orthodoxy are going to be disappointed. He simply will not conform to that role, and the only question which remains is whether he provides persuasive reasons for following in the direction in which he leads.

## V

*The Ecumenic Age*, like the preceding volumes *of Order and History*, invites attention from a variety of different perspectives, and a comprehensive appraisal would need to encompass all of these. There are questions to be raised, for example, concerning the concepts Voegelin introduces. Is the "Ecumenic Age" a preferable alternative to Jaspers' "axis-time," as Voegelin proposes? What does "ecumenic society" really mean? And does it fit equally well all of the cases to which Voegelin intends it to apply? There are also questions to be raised concerning Voegelin's appraisal of the pragmatic history of the period in question. Was the process of empire building and maintenance really as unconstructive and senseless as he suggests? He cites authoritative sources from the period as evidence, of course, but the list is selective. Certainly not all of the evidence points to Voegelin's conclusion. Why, e.g., *is* the self-interpretation of the Roman empire so neglected? Still other questions could be posed concerning his exegesis. I have already noted some of the problems with his interpretation of Christian sources, and similar questions are in order with respect to his handling of Plato, Hegel, *et al.* In particular, it is important that Voegelin's innovative interpretation of Plato as a philosopher of history be subjected to critical scrutiny.

If what I have said earlier about the focus of Voegelin's recent work is correct, however, the main theme which the reviewer must address in Voegelin's philosophical position. Especially he must come to terms with his philosophy of history, since it is this which

is the ostensible subject of *Order and History*. Accordingly, in the remainder of the space available to me here, I shall focus attention on this aspect of Voegelin's work.

Voegelin's principal achievement as a philosopher of history lies, I want to suggest, in his formulation of the problem. His formulation is, in my opinion, essentially correct, and it provides precisely the right terms for defining the task of the philosophy of history in the current situation. By that I mean the following: philosophy of history as it was practiced earlier in the modern period—especially in the nineteenth century—is no longer possible; yet the quest for meaning goes on, and it can be divorced from history only with the greatest effort. So theories of history continue to make sense—indeed to be existentially very important—even if claims to final knowledge do not. The pretensions of Hegel and Marx may seem slightly silly today, but the concern which motivated their work is still very much with us.

Or, to use Voegelin's words, we continue to seek meaning *in* history even if it is not possible to attain the meaning of history. And that is precisely, Voegelin tells us, as it should be. Ever since the full differentiation of historical consciousness, men naturally seek meaning in the processes of history; but that need not result in or be dependent on establishing the meaning of the whole. It is impossible to know the meaning of the whole, Voegelin insists, and the attempt to do so should be abandoned as mistaken in principle. But from our inability to know the whole it does not follow that we can know nothing. There is meaning to be found *in* history even though the over-all course remains a mystery.

The question, however, is how this is to be done. The notion of meaningful history is so closely connected in modern thinking with the idea of a *telos* that it is difficult, initially at least, even to comprehend how there can be meaning in historical events without there being an ultimate end to which they can be related. Voegelin's answer, as we have seen, focuses on the events in which the differentiation, or development of consciousness occurred. A basis for meaning in history emerged, he says, when consciousness took its great leap forward. The break away from cosmological thinking was an epochal moment in the history of mankind which altered human existence in a fundamental way. (The effects continue to be felt to the present moment.) This change took place, moreover, and established its line of meaning in history without any necessary connection with an end of history. As Plato in

particular was aware, even though the dynamics of existence had altered, the mystery of history was not eliminated. If anything, it was deepened.

As a partial answer, this has, I think, a great deal to commend it. Only the most extreme kind of relativist could deny the empirical basis of the notion of leaps in being, and even he would have a difficult time denying that meaning in history was in fact constituted by these events or that they actually had the epochal significance claimed for them. There are particular aspects of the argument that are open to question-whether, e.g., Plato and Aristotle actually achieved the degree of historical consciousness Voegelin claims; or whether teleology is in fact as unessential to Christian thought as he suggests-but in the main it is very persuasive.

The only serious criticism that can be made is that perhaps this is not all there is to be said. Perhaps there are other (legitimate) sources of meaning as well. The experience which makes the leap - in-being possible would appear to be the *sole* basis of meaning in history, in Voegelin's interpretation. There is no other kind. The progress of consciousness is the only type of progress he will admit (and that, he implies, was achieved for the most part by the time of Christ). What this neglects is civilizational activity as an independent source of meaning in history. In Voegelin's view, presumably, such activity acquires meaning only in so far as it is connected with the life of the spirit, and any attempt to invest it with autonomous significance is mistaken. That, of course, is precisely the error of modernity, which brought about an enormous flourishing of civilization but at the price of the "death of the spirit." The underlying premise of Voegelin's critique of modernity would seem to be that there is a tension between the life of the spirit and civilizational activity such that the latter quickly becomes a threat to the former if it is given much independent significance.

There is a parallel here, I believe, between Voegelin and a tendency which he criticizes in early Christian thought about history, represented by Paul and Augustine. Their view was defective, he says, because they denied adequate meaning to the mundane affairs of human society. They reduced earthly existence to a mere time of waiting for the end, so that politics, culture, economic life, and the other activities with which people customarily occupy their lives suffered a drastic loss in significance. This created an in-

tolerable situation because it did not give these activities their due, and the eventual result was the triumph of gnosticism. The void created by Christian indifference had to be filled.

One can infer from some of what Voegelin has written that his **work** as a philosopher of history is designed to address this problem; and in some respects, he obviously is successful. His interpretation of the eschatological symbols eliminates the time of waiting, and his emphasis on the "balance of consciousness" counters the tendency towards world alienation which was a part of Pauline and Augustinian thought. At the same time, however, there are other tendencies at work in Voegelin's thought, and it is not clear that he actually breaks sharply with the Pauline and Augustinian assumptions. In point of fact it was not simply eschatology but also their view of the relation between spirit and civilization that caused the early Christians to slight worldly concerns; and even if Voegelin's eschatology is different, his view of human existence does not appear to be that dissimilar. Voegelin, too, has a hi-polar conception of human existence, in which there are "pulls" from "above" and "counter-pulls" from "below"; he, too, stresses a tension between the spiritual man and the carnal; and he, too, suggests that the way of truth involves "dying" to the concerns of this world.<sup>18</sup> The more one reflects on the view of human existence presented in Voegelin's recent work, in fact, the more Pauline and Augustinian it becomes. In turn, the more difficult it becomes to imagine how the problem Voegelin has posed can be solved on Voegelinian terms.

BRUCE DOUGLASS

*Georgetown University*

is Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 131.