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## *The Emerging Universalism of Eric Voegelin*

**E**ric Voegelin's theoretical conception for the planned six volumes of *Order and History* promised "a comprehensive study of the order of human existence in society and history, ranging in time from the Egyptian and Mesopotamian empires of the Ancient Near East to the modern national states and the contemporary conflict of civilizations." This language from the jacket of Volume I, *Israel and Revelation* (1956), affirmed an interest in theoretical knowledge that was clear and unequivocal, namely, the reconstruction of the "symbolic forms of Western thought from their origins up to the modern era." The history of existential truth and symbolic meaning Voegelin was interested in had its beginning, as the jacket text indicates, in the ancient Near East and faced a "crisis" in the time of his writing as a result of, among other things, "the problems arising from the earthwide expansion of Western civilization." An ecumenic overreach threatened the core of civilizational meaning or had already caused irreversible damage. Eighteen years later, when he published the fourth volume of his work, he had not only changed its title from the originally advertised "Empire and Christianity" to *The Ecumenic Age*, he almost abandoned the Western focus of his universal meaning quest entirely. Actually, this dramatic conclusion to his history of consciousness had to wait for the posthumous publication of Volume V, *In Search of Order* (1987).

Yet the change of title for Volume IV signaled a remarkable shift of emphasis in Voegelin's philosophy of history. Christianity had lost its exclusive place in the drama of humanity. Christian critics who had been among Voegelin's most expressive supporters became alarmed when they discovered that the unfolding of the Christian truth story was not receiving central treatment. The New Testament

narratives were not interpreted as sacred history around which the world turned. Instead of facing the challenge of Christology and the explosive issues of 1900 years of Christian theology, Voegelin chose to write about the visionary response of Paul to the historicity of the Christ experience. The sarcastic list of questions and answers he drafted as a questionnaire for true believers) could easily be considered by conservative, especially Christian critics, as an insult directed at them. Obviously, Voegelin did not single them out as a specific group but included them in the crowd of dogmatists for whom he demonstrated little tolerance in his work. He blamed them for having contributed to the rise of ideological thinking over the last 300 years. The doctrinaire prohibition or suppression of open reflection, including mysticism, within institutional Christianity was frequently mentioned by him as one of the major sources for the emergence of the speculative Enlightenment in the West.

Voegelin's *Order and History* was conceived as a response to the challenge of the Enlightenment reading of human history. The answers that Oswald Spengler (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1917/23) and Arnold J. Toynbee (*A Study of History*, 1934-1961) had ventured before seemed unsatisfactory in many respects. Although both authors had successfully demolished the Enlightenment notion of a unilinear civilizing process orchestrated by a unitary mankind, Spengler's organismic metaphors for civilizations and Toynbee's reliance on C. G. Jung's psychological types for the explanation of the range of world religions produced new and unnecessary problems for the critical analysis of meaning. When Voegelin began to probe the meaning record of historical civilizations, universalism belonged to the *topoi* he connected with the global political designs of Enlightenment intellectuals. In contrast, his concept of universality was tied to a representative vision of reality which evolved in the texts of ancient Israel and Greece. The prophets of Israel and the philosophers of Greece articulated for their societies narratives of meaning which, as explorations of the human place in the cosmos, applied potentially to experiences of humanity everywhere. These representative truth claims of the Israelite and Greek symbolic formations shaped the universalism of

Voegelin's anti-Enlightenment story in the first three volumes of his work. *With The Ecumenic Age* a new universal discourse begins to emerge that attempts to include all meta-narratives of meaning, not only the ones that spell out the major patterns of Western self-interpretation, namely ancient Israel, Greece and Christianity. The theme of Western uniqueness in Voegelin's original design does not vanish but submerges in a larger historical meaning quest. His answer to the Enlightenment philosophers was not the reaffirmation of the West as the civilizational peak of human history. The search for the formative experiences of creative visionaries crossed civilizational boundaries and reached further back in time, as evinced by the strong interest he showed late in life in the sacred architecture and cave paintings of the Neolithic period.' The Neolithic, non-literary beginnings of human history became as interesting to him as the recorded documents of the major civilizations. Even if he did not have time to integrate the Neolithic archaeology in his new interpretation of history, the universal direction of his interests was obvious. The constancy and similarity of essential experiences, as well as the phenomenon of symbolic continuities, contradicted all progressive assumptions about history as the gradual or eruptive actualization of a providential plan.

Voegelin's introduction of the concept "Historiogenesis" for a type of speculation that had been used as legitimization of social order from the societies of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Israel to the present set the tone for Volume IV. By comparing the imperial function of these mythical tales of legitimization in antiquity with the political projects of progressive Enlightenment philosophers of history, he destroyed the privileged perspective the moderns claimed for themselves. In characteristically irreverent language, he united ancient and modern authors into an epistemological school when he wrote: "...a cosmological conception of history that by conventional assumption belongs in the orbit of Israelite-Christian revelation is to be found not only in cosmological and ecumenic empires but also in the supposedly non-mythical and non-theological, contemporary Western society." He added: "And what is modern about the modern mind, one may ask, if Hegel, Comte and Marx, in order to

create an image of history that will support their ideological imperialism, still use the same techniques for distorting the reality of history as their Sumerian predecessors?"<sup>3</sup> Yet as far-reaching as these observations about constants in human history already were, the disturbing features of his new departure in the philosophy of meaning were connected with the comparative dimension of his history of civilizations.

Unlike Spengler and Toynbee, Voegelin did not spend much effort with the institutional arrangements and achievements of civilizations he was talking about. He acknowledged the advancement in historical scholarship in this regard and made wide use of the most recent literature. His main interest, however, was focused on the concrete consciousness of human beings in all civilizations whose experiences of reality were not limited to an imagined world without transhuman foundations. Voegelin's intellectual enterprise is motivated at its center by his opposition to the legitimacy of modernity as a world without transcendence. This resistance against the self-understanding of modernity does not automatically demand conversion to Christianity or membership in a Christian church.

A few personal comments about Voegelin's complicated affiliations with institutional Christianity are in place in order to dispel the lingering notions about his spiritual interests. Voegelin severed his relationship with Austrian Protestantism as a result of the collaboration of the Lutheran church with the Nazis. He blamed Protestants and, because of its powerful influence in Austrian society, even more so the Catholic Church for having participated in the legitimation of the Nazi *Anschluss* of Austria. After emigrating to the United States, he never joined an American church. Teaching in Germany (from 1958 to 1969) did not make him a participatory member of any church either, though he may have paid the German church tax since it was automatically levied by the state on the income tax and then transferred to the various churches. When, in the early 1960s, one of his Munich secretaries converted to Catholicism after having read *Israel and Revelation*, he seemed more amused than impressed by this social impact of his work. Neither being nor wanting to become a Catholic, he denied any responsibility for this conversion, which

was institutionally facilitated by an assistant who happened to be a Dominican. This detail added to his amusement, and did not correspond with the supposed secret religious identity that some critics tried to decode as being either Catholic or, at least, neo-Thomist. Voegelin's distance from institutional Christianity has bothered some of his ardent American admirers so much that they have attempted, posthumously, to shroud him in the aura of right religion. The way, for example, in which the circumstances of his death were described by James Schal. in an article on "The Death of Plato" borders on hagiography:

On the day of Voegelin's death, a Psalm was read as he passed into unconsciousness. The Psalm was the Twenty-Fifth. 'Oh, keep my soul, O Lord, and deliver me: let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in Thee.' Voegelin died peacefully while this Psalm was being read. As his wife was too weak and anxious, the Psalm was read to Voegelin by his American-Indian house keeper whose name was, with splendid paradox, Hiawatha.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the fact that he did not have an American-Indian house keeper named Hiawatha but actually an African-American nurse by that name, this nurse was very religious and resolute and decided, while Mrs. Voegelin was not in the room, to read to her dying patient: from the bible. The text she chose had offered itself when the copy which she had taken from Voegelin's library opened at the part of David's Psalms. Neither the patient nor his wife was involved in the choice of the passage. Yet in the imagined death scene of the philosopher he has to conform to a sublime, slightly exotic image. He cannot be shown as he really was up to his death, namely the radical questioner who was unwilling to be satisfied by the answers of convention, tradition and institutional religion. He practiced the art of questioning until his last hours. "He was watching himself dying," his wife said. He was curious to the ends

The interpretation Christianity receives in The Ecumenic Age explains some, *yet* by no means all, of the intellectual agitation in the critical responses. Authors who follow Voegelin's line of discussion get hit with the same indictment as Voegelin himself. In his review

of two books on Voegelin (M. Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, and G. Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin*) David Walsh writes: "The only major weakness of the two studies is a profound one, one which arises from a problem within Voegelin's own work and not from the authors themselves. It is the problem of Voegelin's understanding of Christianity...." He suggests "...the incompleteness and unsatisfactory quality of Voegelin's treatment of Christianity...has larger ramifications for his work as a whole." He regrets that the authors "take Voegelin's treatment of Christianity too much at face value and, as a consequence, do not recognize the difficulties that arise from it." Voegelin's approach toward Christianity was dangerous for the true believers in all denominations. He confronted them with the discomforting insight that he recognized "in the epiphany of Christ the great catalyst that made eschatological consciousness an historical force, both in forming and deforming humanity" (EA, 20). To be sure, he did not attach his code word for speculative magic, namely gnosticism, to the historical Christ experience itself. Yet the epiphany had, as Voegelin indicated in *The Ecumenic Age*, a tremendous trigger effect for historical and modern gnosticism, lending legitimacy to a way of seeing the world that demonized it and sought to change it radically. This unbalanced consciousness is the meta-narrative against which much of Voegelin's work, up to the early 1970s, is directed. Hans Blumenberg was therefore right when strategically quoting in his seminal book, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Voegelin's thesis about the gnostic quality of modernity.' Yet Blumenberg saw modernity as the successful overcoming of gnosticism, having removed through its creation of modern Western civilization the sting of evil and therewith the experiences that engendered religion, including gnosticism. This benevolent, liberal view of Western modernity as the conquest of evil was certainly at odds with Voegelin's understanding of history as it was with the classic text of the old Frankfurt School, namely Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), a text not mentioned by Blumenberg.

Voegelin's anti-modernist persuasion was not motivated by

nostalgia for a past whose natural conditions granted greater closeness to the truth of Being. A certain level of material culture was necessary, as he wrote, in which "the philosophical enterprise could flourish. A primitive tribal village is materially too cramped to leave room for the *bios theoretikos*" (EA, 217). He accepted the historicity of human existence and expressed his reading unequivocally:

No answer...is the ultimate truth in whose possession mankind could live happily forever 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. But precisely because every last answer is a penultimate in relation to the next last one in time, the historical field of consciousness becomes of absorbing interest; for it is the participation in the history of consciousness that confers on man's existential encounters with the reality of which he is apart the ultimacy of meaning which the penultimate answers, torn out of the complex experience-question-answer, do not have (EA, 75).

Voegelin's refusal to subscribe to some kind of meaning closure did not suggest that he abandoned attempts to connect historical experience and meaning quests. Quoting Jacob Burckhardt at length on history's "nauseating spectacle of meaningful advances...achieved through the human misery and mass murder of conquest," (EA, 215) could have been the prelude to a retreat to skepticism or even mysticism. For both skepticism and mysticism one finds a lot of affinity in Voegelin's work. Yet as tempting as both attitudes had always been for him, his contempt for the world was never strong enough to negate his own experiences. After all, the personal encounters with the ideological empires of his time motivated him not only to search for meaning in his own soul, but to connect this inquiry with a search for order in the world in which he was living.

This search was initially limited to a Western archeology of meaning. Retracing in *Plato and Aristotle* the rather chilling rela-

tionship between Socrates, Plato and Aristotle on the one hand and the polis of Athens on the other hand, made him emphasize the limits to any expectations of successful intervention in the affairs of the world. His portrait of Aristotle presents an almost stoic image of the political philosopher par excellence whose "philosophy of human affairs," as spelled out at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, had always been Voegelin's model for a therapeutic political science. The portrait of Aristotle, however—"In Aristotle we feel a coolness and serenity which stems from the fact, if we may express it drastically, that he has 'given up'"—alludes to the failure of the Greek *poleis* creatively responding to the imperial threat stretching from the Persians to Alexander's conquests and ultimately terminating 170 years of participatory polis government in the Mediterranean area. Voegelin does not write about the irony that the philosopher who had "given up" on the polis spent eight years of his life educating the future terminator. Did this education engender a vision that the ruler of the ecumene wanted to actualize with his conquests? Can Aristotle's silence about his student's career only be interpreted as disapproval of an imperial misunderstanding? Could it be that the philosopher recognized his own lack of political imagination at this ecumenic juncture in Mediterranean history? Voegelin offers little help in our understanding of this puzzling biographical vacuum in the lives of Aristotle and Alexander other than suggesting that "the Macedonian conquest...is enacted over his head and apparently does not interest him very much; only the Asiatic conquests of Alexander cause some worry because he disapproves of his former pupil's inclination to treat Asiatics like Hellenes and to foster an amalgamation of the two civilizations" (*EA*, 289). Yet Voegelin becomes surprisingly expressive about Alexander in *The Ecumenic Age*. The way he talks about his world indicates that there were no obvious solutions to be followed. Alexander's imperial decisionism may have not so much disinterested or shocked, but disarmed the philosopher who had "given up" on the polis anyway.

Voegelin's discussion of the ecumenic configuration leaves some questions open about his judgment regarding Alexander's enterprise. In a clear critical reaction to Burckhardt's moralizing



tone about philosophers and makers of history, he uses almost Hegelian, if not Nietzschean, language when removing moral criteria from the characterization of Alexander. He writes:

The release of the tension on the line of ecumenic conquest and mass murder, though it is a derailment from existential order, is still an act of imaginative transcendence. The concupiscential exodus of the conqueror is a deformation of humanity, but it bears the mark of man's existential tension just as much as the philosopher's, or the prophet's, or the saint's exodus (*EA*, 197).

Why conqueror, philosopher, prophet and saint figure as equals he does not fully elaborate. The collapse and disintegration of the cosmological order that predates the ecumenic configuration free energies that soar beyond the boundaries of the given understanding. In Alexander's case, the given boundaries were the perimeters of the then known habitable world. As Voegelin describes Alexander's project: 'When Alexander expanded into India he thought that he would reach the Okeanos in the east. His late campaigns had less character of a conquest, or even of a rational military enterprise, than of an exploration of the limits of the ecumene.' The ruler who was a conqueror and explorer had to scale down his campaigns of discovery beyond the horizon because of the fear of his ordinary soldiers. They began to rebel against his drive beyond the rim of the known world. Yet Voegelin, despite acknowledging the megalomaniacal dimension of the enterprise, affirms the experiential truth in Alexander's reach for the unknown:

... Alexander committed whole armies to destruction through unknown obstacles. In the genius of Alexander, the power drive of the conqueror blended with the curiosity of the explorer, and with the deadly concupiscence of reaching the "horizon"....Through this outburst, the ecumene as seen from the West acquired an indefinite horizon beyond the Punjab, though the actual extent of the Indian civilization area, as well as of the Far East beyond, was still unknown (*EA*, 205).

His attention focused also on the horizon in the West, "...for the west beyond Sicily, and especially the Atlantic coastline of Africa and Europe beyond the Pillars of Hercules, was not too well known a part of the ecumene either" (*EA*, 206). Alexander truly pushed knowledge to the outer limits and tried to imperially organize the new ecumene. He represented for Voegelin more than being the exceptional world ruler in the literal sense with extraordinary qualities of charismatic leadership, superb education and extreme curiosity added to his profile. He transcended the limits of his world by reimagining it and forcing people to not only live in it but also to revise their self-understanding in universal categories. Alexander was the unique case of universalism incarnate.

Voegelin's perception of Alexander had obviously undergone a dramatic change from 1957 to 1974 as the result of his work on the ecumenic period. Alexander was no longer simply seen as a possible candidate for Plato's role of the original or revised philosopher-king. Even his 1957 critique of Aristotle becomes affected by this change. Then he wrote in an almost accusatory vein about Aristotle's "sometimes inconceivable complacency"<sup>9</sup> concerning the political world around him and praised "Plato's vision of an Hellenic empire for coming close to the trend of pragmatic politics that it barely anticipated the solution which the problem found, in the generation after his death, in the imperial foundations of Alexander and the Diadochi." Voegelin's next sentence about Plato illustrates a dramatic shift in view between the 1950s and the 1970s:

And his evocation of the philosopher-king is, under one of its aspects, no more than the expression of the search for an Hellenic figure that would correspond to the savior-kings and pharaohs of the Near Eastern empires. The vision is so unextraordinary that it is even difficult to imagine how a political thinker in this situation could demand less than Plato does.<sup>10</sup>

Voegelin did not revisit his critique of Aristotle, who may actually have remained silent because he recognized in the Alexander he knew so well an Hellenic savior-king, or pharaoh, or even Plato's

philosopher-king. Yet he may have also seen what Voegelin discovered in the 1970s..

Alexander's obsession with the ecumene and its complexity of cultures, and his sometimes rather crude experiments in multicultural living arrangements (e.g., the mass marriage of nine thousand Macedonians, Persians and other non-Greeks at Opis in 324 B.C.) contributed to Voegelin's own paradigm shift, namely, his break with a history of meaning that privileged the West. The Alexander story was not the primary factor, but it illustrated for him the role of the ecumenic configuration in a universal history of consciousness. In the 1967 "Conversation" at the Thomas More Institute in Montreal on "Theology Confronting World Religions" he still insisted that the Western language of reason as it had emerged in classical Greek philosophy had to be the basis for the conversation between civilizations. At one point he angrily remarked:

It isn't going to facilitate it unless the others also are willing to accept reason, based on such experiences, as the common language. We must always realize that is the language of reason, the optimum of differentiation. If you relax that standard, you get into complex symbols in which you cannot communicate with anybody who belongs to a different type of complex symbolism.<sup>11</sup>

Alluding to fictitious Eurocentric historians, he summed up their position by inventing a quotation: "There is not a plurality of civilizations...; there is only one civilization-the Western-and a lot of other societies which gradually become civilized, that is Westernized." Then he added as his own afterthought: "Perhaps that's true."<sup>12</sup> For Voegelin this position had become untrue when he published *The Ecumenic Age*. The change did not come suddenly or easily. In the Montreal "Conversation" of 1970, in a progress report on *Order and History*, he is singling out Jesus over Plato in the differentiation of consciousness<sup>13</sup> and, then, a little later in the same discussion, he makes the astounding statement that Christianity would have vanished as an obscure Judeo-Christian sect if it would not have become transformed by "the entrance of

young pagans who brought the cultural content of philosophy into Christianity. That is what saved Christianity culturally and historically. That is a factor rarely realized." Voegelin would have become a spiritual persona non grata if he had developed this thesis of the pagan philosophical, i.e., Greek, colonization of the "Judeo-Christian sect (that) really disappeared; it had no future."<sup>14</sup> In 1976 the "Conversation" focused entirely on *The Ecumenic Age* and its discussion of the historic parallelism of spiritual outbursts and empires. Yet, as he explained his paradigm shift to the Montreal audience:

these empires were multi-civilizational. That is: when an ecumenic empire expands (like the Roman empire, or the Persian), you get a destruction of all previously existent civilizations, including all the tribal civilizations in that area, plus all the cosmological empires like Babylon or Egypt. They are cashiered and now you get a new type of society.<sup>15</sup>

Voegelin's Western time line was gone, mankind was gone ("There is not one mankind which experiences all these things."), and the foremost question for him had become whether the Buddha, Confucius and all the other exceptional historical visionaries of truth "have all experienced the same Divine Reality and there is only the one God who manifests Himself, reveals Himself, in a highly diversified manner all over the globe for all these millennia of history that we know."<sup>17</sup> This theme of a spiritual universalism was at the center of his thinking in the last decade of his life, culminating in the final and incomplete volume of *Order and History* which fascinated and disturbed so many of his readers. Yet the signs that are pointing in this radical direction are already visible in *The Ecumenic Age*.

Voegelin did not adopt the symbolic discourse of universalism because it was tainted for him forever by Western Enlightenment. Yet his critical inquiries were leading in everything but name in the direction of a universal language of meaning. His unwillingness to accept the Enlightenment concept of universalism had roots similar to those underlying his preference for the Greek term "noesis" over "reason." As he summed it up in his fourth "Conver-

sation" in Montreal:

"Reason" did not exist in language in the history of mankind until it was formulated in the Greek fifth century as a word denoting the tension between man as a human being and the Divine ground of his existence of which he is in search. The consciousness of being caused by the Divine ground and being in search of the Divine ground—that is reason. Period. That is the meaning of the word "reason." That is why I always insist on speaking of "noetic" and use the term *nous*: in order not to get into the problems of the ideological concept of reason of the eighteenth, century.<sup>18</sup>

His resistance against Enlightenment rationality as reason without transcendence is anchored in the empirical evidence he surveyed and analyzed for a massive history of political thought he wrote (but did not publish), the Chicago lectures that became *The New Science of Politics* (1952), and the five volumes of *Order and History* (1956-1987). This evidence of symbolic self-interpretation came from all historical civilizations. It convinced him of the basic thesis that all civilizations present themselves in and through symbolic stories as universes of unique meaning. These civilizational meta-narratives of meaning articulate the common experience of being grounded in a reality that has transcendent, divine or cosmic qualities. The similarity of these experiences does not cancel the historical uniqueness of their symbols. It suggests, however, the universal character of the quest for spiritual meaning, even if the ground retains infra-cosmic features as Voegelin emphasizes in the cases of the Chinese (EA, 299) and the Indic (EA, 321) civilizations. These differences in symbolic articulation affirm civilizational specificity; they do not contradict the recognition of fundamental experiential equivalences.

As I will suggest in my conclusion, Voegelin's interest in Alexander has some bearing on the contemporary debate about the future "clash of civilizations." The Macedonian ruler had produced an historical configuration that forced people of various civilizational backgrounds to meet each other and, sometimes, to live together

under one imperial roof. This type of regime has received a bad press as the result of modern colonial imperialism and the barrage of the (not always deserved) post-colonial critique in the late 20th century. The Alexander chapter of ancient Greek history shows that he not only expanded an imperial regime but also the Greek horizon of knowledge into the unknown Punjab region. In addition, he left, as Voegelin describes it, a legacy of Greek-Indian and Indian empires on the sub-continent which implies that much cultural interpenetration and emulation took place. The complex intentions of the original imperial founding were repeated in the follow-up versions of empire. The initial Macedonian managers of Alexander's dependent Indian satrapies<sup>19</sup> left before the end of the 4th century and became replaced by Indian rulers who were influenced by Alexander's example. Chandragupta (321-297), the founder of the Maurya Empire, had met Alexander and was later married (through arrangement by one of Alexander's successors, Seleucus Nicator) to a Macedonian princess. As Voegelin tells the story, "...Seleucus Nicator...undertook a campaign to recover the Indian satrapies and to penetrate perhaps deeper into India than Alexander had done. The course of events is not that well known, but it ended certainly with the Seleucid and the Maurya coming to an understanding" (EA, 166). Chandragupta himself, but especially his grandson Asoka (272-231, the great propagator and protector of Buddhism" against the Brahmins<sup>20</sup>), were imperial rulers in the image of Alexander. They failed like him, yet they recognized like him that the old regimes of order could no longer suffice and that the traditional boundaries of meaning were disintegrating. Alexander was a successful student of Greek philosophy, as is demonstrated by the daring manner in which he dismissed conventional *ethos* and *nomos*. He was too good as a new kind of ruler to not have paid attention to the discussions of rulership occasionally pursued by Plato and Aristotle (out of frustration over the performance of the polis, though they remained at the core polis thinkers). This direct connection between Greek philosophy and Alexander will always remain in the realm of conjecture. Yet unless one dismisses the influence of Aristotle on his student completely and thereby discred-

its both, some of Alexander's imagined experiments in world order resonate with echoes from Plato's dialogues and Aristotle's lectures. Certainly, there is nothing in the career of Alexander that compares with the Buddhist peace order that his distant admirer Asoka created after his imperial exercises in bloody terror, intended to subdue his enemies. Ranieri is obviously right when he concludes: "The association of empire and spirit ultimately fails, because as each empire declines, its claims to embody universality are revealed as illusion." But that could be said about almost all attempts to bring the spirit in closer connection with the life of humans in society as Voegelin reminds his readers: "...neither the revealed word nor the love of wisdom, though they appeared in Israel and Hellas, had ever truly penetrated the respective societies; and this failure of penetration, far from being caused by disturbances from the outside, was due to indigenous resistance" (EA, 115). As a result of this sobering insight Voegelin was drawn to mysticism but never became a mystic since he knew that

...the experiencing consciousness is founded in a body; this body is part of a life process through the generations; the human life process is part of the life that also comprises the animal and vegetable realms; this larger life process is founded in the earth on which it takes place; and the earth is part of the whole of reality that the Greeks have called the cosmos. The *oikoumene*, in the literal sense, is man's habitat in the cosmos (EA, 202).

This cosmic experience which he found expressed in all civilizational formations held him back from giving in to the contempt for the world which always appealed to him.

Voegelin's ecumenic philosophy of history is influenced by the excursions of Alexander who burst through the horizon of the known world and made other worlds visible to his world. Yet the Macedonian and Indian empires that came into temporary being through the desire for ecumenic rule by exceptional historical agents were and remained not the only ones. The Chinese process of unifying the known Sinic world, for example, by the Ch'in and the Han emperors,

which happened at the time of Mauryan India and the rise of Rome but was unknown to the non-Chinese orbit, raised for Voegelin certain questions: "Are there two manlands who independently go through the same process? If not, what justifies the language of the one mankind in whose history both the Western and the Eastern Ecumenic Ages occur...? And how is the unit of meaning to be characterized in which the parallel Ecumenic Ages occur...?" (*EA*, 274) This Chinese variation on the ecumenic theme also had obvious consequences for all versions of universalism, even if the Chinese process of reflection was characterized by what Voegelin calls an "incomplete breakthrough" (*EA*, 285) to transcendence. A recent study on Confucianism seems to confirm Voegelin's understanding. David Hall and Roger Ames contend that, "perhaps the most far-reaching of the uncommon assumptions underlying a coherent explication of the thinking of Confucius is that which precludes the existence of any transcendent being or principle. This is the presumption of radical immanence."<sup>22</sup> This was not, for Voegelin, the important issue. After all, Voegelin wrote, "...Chinese society had moved toward an anthropological conception of order through a leap in being, even though it was not radical enough to break the cosmological order completely" (*EA*, 299). The same, he writes, applies to Vedic India: "The incompleteness of the breakthrough does not diminish the importance of the dialogic ascent in the Upanishads" (*EA*, 322). In the Western history of consciousness, Paul's vision radicalized the understanding that there is indeed more to history than empire: The emergence of the truth is the historical event that constitutes meaning in history. But this Christ experience as the transfiguring incarnation of divine reality did neither mean the end of the history of consciousness in the West, nor the termination of the truth process in other civilizations. The end of history remained open to Voegelin. He was against the preemptive closure because he was against the "apocalyptic brutality" of Christian as well as anti- or non-Christian missionaries of doctrinal truth (*EA*, 325).

The openness of Voegelin's understanding of the history of truth is captured in his statement: "The truth of existence...does not



emerge from one single spiritual event." This statement becomes amplified in a multiple setting when he says: "The differentiation of the one truth of existence, thus, is broken in a spectrum of spiritual eruptions each bearing the mark of the ethnic culture in which it occurs" (EA, 301). This open and plural universalism is at odds with the conceptual framework that feeds the contemporary frenzy about a coming "Clash of Civilizations." In Samuel P. Huntington's reading of civilization truth is a frozen code of doctrinal meanings with which people in seven or eight major civilizations-namely, "Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African"-define and distinguish each other.<sup>23</sup> Huntington talks about civilizations as fixed, rooted and uncontested entities which come into being at one historical point and will go out of business at another point. Why they appear and vanish he does not explore. What happens to them when they are thrown together in an ecumene that is connected by global technological, electronic, economic, political, social, cultural and other processes he does not discuss. He seems unaware of earlier contacts, transformations and mutations that belie the fixity of his contemporary categories. Huntington, who wants to be an ecumenic thinker, turns out to be a provincial ideologue. Contrasting Voegelin with Huntington's civilizational perspective reveals how important a critical reading of truth and meaning is at a time when the civilizations are devoid of both-and the ecumene is turning into a playing field for hegemonic powers.

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## NOTES

1. Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 243; henceforth cited as *EA*.
2. Vid. Brendan M. Purcell's discussion (in *his The Drama of Humanity: Towards a Philosophy of Humanity in History*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996) of Voegelin's interest in the Neolithic monuments in Ireland.

3. *EA*, 68.
4. James V. Schall, "The Death of Plato," *The American Scholar* 65 (1996), 414.
5. This account was received by me from Mrs. Lissy Voegelin in January 1985 and July 1988.
6. David Walsh, "Eric Voegelin and our Disordered Spirit," *The Review of Politics* 57 (1995), 134.
7. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 78; English translation, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (tr. Robert M. Wallace)(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).
8. Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1957, p.289
9. Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 161.
10. *Ibid.*, 223.
11. *Conversations with Eric Voegelin* (ed. R. Eric O'Connor)(Montreal: Thomas More Institute Papers; 76,1980), 64.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 82.
14. *Ibid.*, 105.
15. *Ibid.*, 117.
16. *Ibid.*, 118.
17. *Ibid.*, 135.
18. *Ibid.*, 138.
19. Vid. J. R. Hamilton, *Alexander the Great* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), 119-124.
20. *EA*, 167.
21. John J. Ranieri, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 225.
22. David Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 12.
23. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer, 1993), 25.