

Eric Voegelin, Liberalism, and the Life of Reason



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In an article entitled "Racial Hatred on Campus" (*The Nation*, 1989), Jon Wiener observed: "The upsurge in campus racism is the most disturbing development in university life across the nation during the past decade. More than anything, it reveals how white attitudes toward minorities have changed on campus during the Reagan years, even at institutions that historically have been bastions of liberalism." While few would disagree that racism in any setting is disturbing and deserving of repudiation, what struck this reader most about the author's claim was his use of the word "even." Much to his surprise, *even* historical bastions of liberalism were not immune to this sin. One can imagine his reaction when confronted by those who not only find nothing surprising about the presence of racism in a liberal setting, but who would argue strongly that the philosophical assumptions underlying liberalism contribute to a situation in which racism can flourish. Those who look to liberalism as an effective antidote to intolerance and social strife would likely find unsettling the possibility that liberalism may contribute to the dissolution rather than to the realization of the good society.

Of course, an issue such as this goes to the heart of contemporary debates, debates involving more than the question of the adequacy of liberalism as a public philosophy. The broader concern seems to revolve around finding ways to foster the civil discourse needed to sustain a pluralistic society. For the question arises with increasing frequency as to whether it is possible to preserve such a society without at least some acknowledgment of commonality. On what ground can people of widely diverging religious, moral, and cultural perspectives possibly meet? Is it possible to go beyond identities based on gender, race, or ethnicity to encounter one another at a level shareable by all human beings? Or are these differences irreducible? If so, this would seem to

imply that the bond among citizens consists of little more than a responsibility to recognize the other as different and to do no harm, either out of fear of punishment for doing otherwise or, more positively, out of regard for the other as an autonomous agent like oneself.

The problem is particularly acute for liberal democracy, which by its very nature is committed in principle to the equal treatment of all. But what does it mean to be recognized as equal within a pluralistic society, and from what perspective are competing claims for recognition to be judged? The very commitments that constitute liberal democracy give rise to the challenge of somehow encompassing widely varying understandings of the good life within a single polity. Increasingly, in the view of many who reflect seriously on democracy, the "politics of recognition" has become a "politics of difference," in which, according to Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The language of opposition now appears as a cascading series of manifestos that tell us that we cannot live together; we cannot work together; we are not in this together; we are not Americans who have something in common, but racial, ethnic, gender, or sexually identified clans who demand to be 'recognized' only or exclusively as 'different.'"¹ The idea of a public realm in which people engage one another in spirited, often heated debate has given way to the image of "culture wars," a term which at times comes close to being more than a metaphor.

Amid these arguments over the state and future of liberal democracy, one seldom hears the name of the philosopher Eric Voegelin. This, I believe, is unfortunate; for Voegelin's thought has much to recommend it as a serious attempt to wrestle with the issues that confront us. Indeed, if we take Voegelin at his word, it was the social and political crisis of his time, the perceived loss of rationality in public discourse, and the replacement of such discourse with ideological posturing that served as the catalyst for his work. And if this were not reason enough to view his work as shedding light on our present situation, there is the further fact that in Voegelin we have a thinker who is a multiculturalist, a religious pluralist, and, at the same time, a non-relativist in matters pertaining to the human good.

German by birth (1901), Voegelin's family moved to Vienna in 1910. There he studied, eventually completing a doctorate in political science

¹Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. xii.

in 1922. Voegelin took an active part in the robust Viennese intellectual life of the time, becoming part of what was called the *Geistkreis* [Spiritual or Intellectual Circle], which consisted of a number of young scholars, including the historian Friedrich von Engel-Janosi, the economist Friedrich August von Hayek, and the philosopher Alfred Schuetz. In 1924 he was awarded a 2 year scholarship to study in the United States. During those years he studied first at Columbia with John Dewey and the sociologist Franklin Henry Giddings, then at Harvard with Alfred North Whitehead, and finally in Wisconsin with the economist John R. Commons. Voegelin found the practical, commonsense outlook of the Anglo/American philosophical tradition a refreshing change from the intellectual environment he had left behind in Europe, and he was particularly impressed by the combination of insight and practicality embodied in the person and work of Commons, who he later described as "a Lincolnesque figure." In his *Autobiographical Reflections* he remarked on the effect that his American experience had upon him:

During my year in New York, I began to sense that American society had a philosophical background far superior in range and existential substance, though not always in articulation, to anything that I found represented in the methodological environment in which I had grown up...There was the strong background of Christianity and Classical culture that was so signally fading out, if not missing, in the methodological debates in which I had grown up as a student. In brief, there was a world in which this other world in which I had grown up was intellectually, morally, and spiritually irrelevant. That there should be such a plurality of worlds had a devastating effect on me. The experience broke for good (at least I hope it did) my Central European or generally European provincialism without letting me fall into an American provincialism. The immediate effect was that upon my return to Europe certain phenomena that were of the greatest importance in the intellectual and ideological context of Central Europe, for instance, the work of Martin Heidegger, whose famous *Sein und Zeit* I read in 1928, no longer had any effect on me. It just ran off, because I had been immunized against this whole context of philosophizing through my time in America and especially in Wisconsin.²

²Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

After returning to Europe, Voegelin found himself immersed in a political situation marked by the emergence and spread of Communism, Fascism, and National Socialism. He wrote two books in which he criticized Nazi racial theory, the second of which (*The Race Idea in Intellectual History from Ray to Carus*, 1933) was particularly irritating to the National Socialist regime. The book was withdrawn from circulation by the publisher, the remaining copies were destroyed, and Voegelin and his wife were forced to leave Austria. They settled in the United States, where Voegelin taught briefly at Harvard and Bennington. It did not take him long to develop a strong dislike for the academic environment along the Eastern seaboard; indeed he found what he considered to be the left-leaning tendencies of both faculty and students to be as intellectually rigid and oppressive as the intolerant atmosphere he had left behind. Eventually he settled at Louisiana State University, where he taught American government and political theory from 1942 to 1958. During these years he worked on an immense *History of Political Ideas*, which was never published. While the reasons for this decision are complex, a crucial factor in Voegelin's decision was that he had come to realize that analysis on the level of "ideas" was inadequate, and that before a proper treatment of political reality and its ideological deformations could be undertaken, the political scientist needed to penetrate to the underlying *experiences* of reality that had given rise to political ideas. This reorientation of his work led to the writing of his five volume *Order and History*, in which he moved from a historically oriented reflection on experience and political order as manifest in Hebrew and Greek civilizations toward a description of the abiding structures of experience, symbolization, and language that underpin every social/political order.

Voegelin's new focus on experience led him to develop a philosophy of consciousness, since it made little sense to speak of experiences of reality apart from the conscious awareness of participation that made such experiences possible. In 1959, an invitation from the University of Munich to establish an Institute for Political Science enabled him to pursue this direction in his thought. 1966 saw the publication of *Annals: Toward a Theory of History and Politics*, in which Voegelin made clear the reason for the change of emphasis in his philosophy:

The problems of human order in society and history originate in the order of consciousness. Hence the philosophy of consciousness is the centerpiece of a philosophy of politics...Consciousness is the luminous center radiating the concrete order of human existence into society and history. A philosophy of politics is empirical—in the pregnant sense of an inquiry into the experiences which penetrate the whole area of reality that we express by the symbol “man” with their order. The work of this philosophy requires, as we said, the constant exchange between studies on concrete cases of order and analyses of consciousness which make the human order in society and history intelligible.³

The movement in Voegelin’s thought from political ideas to constitutive experiences of order was of far more than academic significance; he sought to trace the warfare and violence of the twentieth century to its source in the deformation of human consciousness. In an interview given toward the end of his life, Voegelin commented on the reasons for the particular direction his research had taken:

I should perhaps say the strongest influence is my perhaps misplaced sensitivity towards murder. I do not like people just shooting each other for nonsensical reasons. That is a motive for finding out what possibly could be a reason someone could persuade somebody else to shoot people for no particular purpose. It is not simply an academic problem, or a problem in the history of opinion and so on, that evokes my interest in this or that issue in the theory of consciousness, but the very practical problem of mass murder which is manifest in the twentieth century. It is a very crucial issue, that if one looks at the history of the twentieth century (say, in the *Cambridge History*), one finds that this century comes under the era of violence. This is almost the only description that can be given, since here various developments come to a crucial explosion.⁴

³Eric Voegelin, “Consciousness and Order: Foreward to Anamnesis,” in *The Beginning and the Beyond: Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 35-36.

⁴Eric Voegelin, “Autobiographical Statement at Age Eighty-Two,” in *The Beginning and the Beyond: Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), p. 117.

Throughout his life Voegelin committed himself to the task of discovering the experiential roots of the "crucial explosion" that had destroyed the lives of so many people in the present century. His identification of the deformations of consciousness that had come to mark the present age was but a first step in the recovery of a rational discourse in which ideological posturing could be replaced with authentic conversation.

Voegelin returned to the United States in 1969, accepting a position at the Hoover Institute in Stanford, California. In keeping with the direction in which his thought had been heading, the final part of his philosophical career was given over to the articulation of a language, emerging from reflection on experiences of transcendence, capable of serving as a framework for crosscultural, religiously pluralistic dialogue. At the time of his death in 1985 he was still fervently engaged in the "meditative exegesis" of texts, symbols, and the experiences from which they arose. What strikes one about Voegelin's later writings is the way in which his language strains to give articulation to the mystery experienced in this encounter between symbol, text, and interpreter. Equally striking is the fact that, for Voegelin, this meditative turn in no way represented a movement away from the social/political orientation of his work. On the contrary, in the careful attention to and reflection upon the myriad testimonies to human experiences of transcendence that underlie every social and political order, Voegelin discovered the language he had been seeking in order to restore sanity and reason to the public square.

From this brief sketch of Voegelin's life and work, it should be clear that the political crises of the first half of the twentieth century served as the primary catalyst for his theoretical endeavors.⁵ One of the more appealing features of Voegelin's thought is that it never loses touch with the concrete human situation; in his view, philosophy, while never partisan, can never wrap itself in an apolitical cloak of theory in order to evade responsibility in the present moment. It was the death and suffering visited upon so many people in this century that moved him in his philosophical endeavor. Voegelin's effort to restore the life of

⁵For a fuller, more detailed account of Voegelin's life and work, see Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

reason to society must always be seen against the backdrop of violence that prompted his passionate response. And his recovery of a language by which people of the most disparate cultures and traditions might become involved in genuine conversation was an integral part of that response. This project of recovery was not undertaken with the naive belief that by simply exchanging ideas people would come to live harmoniously, or that the mere stating of orthodoxies constituted dialogue; rather Voegelin was possessed of the sober realization that a pluralistic society could not be sustained over an extended period of time unless people were able to engage one another at the level of their deepest concerns and constitutive meanings. Once one understands these motivating factors behind his work, one can better grasp why the recovery of reason, the fostering of a deeply grounded tolerance, and the defense of a genuine pluralism were not peripheral matters for Voegelin—they were at the very heart of his concern as a philosopher.

Fundamental, then, to Voegelin's project was a restoration of what he called "the life of reason" as a means of revitalizing the public realm. In his thought, the meaning of reason is both deep and broad. Following what he took to be the teaching of the classical Greek philosophers, he described reason as nothing other than the openness of human beings toward the transcendent ground of existence.⁶ Reason, understood in this fashion, was not to be taken in an esoteric sense, acces-

⁶Eric Voegelin, *Conversations With Eric Voegelin*, ed. R. Eric O'Connor (Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1980), 11. This understanding of reason includes: (1) "the consciousness of existing from a Ground"; (2) "the creative Ground of existence which attracts man to itself"; (3) "the *sensorium* whereby man understands himself to exist from a Ground"; (4) "the constituent of man through his participation in (the reason of) the Ground; or the constituent force in man *qua* human through participation in the divine *Nous* which is his specific essence." See, Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper, eds. and trans., *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin 1934-1964* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 308-309; Eric Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 28, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 88-89. See also Eric Voegelin, "On Readiness to Rational Discussion," in *Freedom and Serfdom*, ed. Albert Hunold (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1961), pp. 269-84; "Industrial Society in Search of Reason," in *World Technology and Human Destiny*, ed. Raymond Aron (Detroit: University of Michigan Press, 1963), pp. 31-46.

sible only to a spiritual elite; rather it was an expression of experiences quite familiar to human beings in every age:

“Man is not a self-created, autonomous being carrying the origin and meaning of his existence within himself. He is not a divine *causa sui*; from the experience of his life in precarious existence within the limits of birth and death there rather rises the wondering question about the ultimate ground, the *aitia* or *prote arche*, of all reality and specifically his own. The question is inherent in the experience from which it rises; the *zoon noun echon* that experiences itself as a living being is at the same time conscious of the questionable character attaching to this status. Man, when he experiences himself as existent, discovers his specific humanity as that of the questioner for the where-from and the where-to, for the ground and the sense of his existence.⁷

There is no detached, Archimedean point from which humans might dispassionately pose questions about the ground of existence as if they somehow stood apart from it all; “The ground is not a spatially distant thing but a divine presence that becomes manifest in the experience of unrest and the desire to know.”⁸ Reason is present whenever people experience themselves as following the dynamism of their questioning unrest and as being moved by wonder. For Voegelin, to speak of

⁷Eric Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12, Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 268-69. In Voegelin’s thought, “experience” is inseparable from the reality in which we participate and the consciousness by which we participate in reality. For Voegelin, experience is to be located in neither subject nor object but in the immediacy embracing both. Experience is never to be likened to an encounter with the objects of sense; for this reason Voegelin prefers to say that experience of the ground is an experience of a “non-existent” reality. From his study of Plato and Aristotle Voegelin came to appreciate that at the heart of experience was a dynamic movement and tension toward the divine ground. Experience is essentially “metaleptic;” an overlapping of divine appeal and human questing. Experience is an event occurring in the “in-between.” The term “In-between” or “*metaxy*” is borrowed from Plato, and occupies a prominent place in Voegelin’s thought. Human existence is always existence in the *metaxy*. See *Autobiographical Reflections*, pp. 72-73; “Reason: The Classic Experience,” p. 279; Eric Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12, Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 52-54.

⁸Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” p. 271.

humans as rational creatures is to recognize this shared openness toward the ground as constitutive of our specifically human nature. It is also to recognize that "Rational discussion on order in the existence of humanity and society is possible only when accompanied by knowledge of transcendental fulfillment."⁹

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance Voegelin places on the fact that reason emerges from common human experiences of participation in reality, experiences of openness, of seeking, and of being drawn. By grounding reason in experience, Voegelin felt that he had traced rationality to its deepest source. Beyond such experiences one could not go. While it was quite possible to talk about these experiences of openness and even develop a language with which to do so, the experiences themselves are not reducible to any other reality and do not, therefore, admit of "proof." The experience rendered by the symbol "reason" is basic and foundational. For Voegelin:

Either the openness is a reality and then you can't prove it—you can't prove reality; you can only point to it—or it isn't. Well it is. We know—we have documents of the experiences, they are in existence: the dialogues of Plato, the meditations of St. Augustine on

⁹Voegelin, "On Readiness to Rational Discussion," p. 278. This last statement calls for some clarification. It would be a serious misconstrual of Voegelin's thought to imagine that in speaking of "transcendental fulfillment" he means that one cannot be rational unless one "believes in God," where God is understood as a being whose existence can be demonstrated. While Voegelin freely employs religious terms such as "transcendental," "divine ground," and "God," these must always be understood to arise from the experience of being drawn or moved by a reality that is somehow "beyond" the cosmos. As such, these terms represent that dimension of reality recognized as the divine "pole" within the experience, rather than entities whose existence one could ascertain and about which one would speak as if they were objects in the external world. (See Voegelin, *Conversations*, pp. 52-53). In employing these terms in this fashion, Voegelin's point is to reinforce the notion that they refer to a reality which, while never encompassed by human questioning and not ever completely knowable, remains the background, goal, and source of all human wonder. One does not have to "believe in God" to be rational; but each of us is called upon to respond to the normative exigencies of our capacity to wonder, and in doing so questions of the ultimate meaning and intelligibility of reality arise spontaneously. The *question* of God lies within our horizon. The rejection of such questions, the refusal, in Voegelin's words, "to be drawn into the realms of the transcendental," means that one has chosen an intellectual and spiritual obscurantism—it is certainly not being rational.

time and space, or the thornbush episode in *Exodus*. Here are the documents of the openness towards transcendence. You can't have more. There's nothing you can prove or disprove.¹⁰

While aware of the possible objection that such experiences might be considered merely "subjective," Voegelin would point out that the experiences articulated in classic documents (like those cited in the previous quotation), while varying widely in expression, all reveal a similar openness to reality, and he would turn the question back on his interlocutor by asking the person to account for the apparent "equivalence" of experiences cutting across the most varied and otherwise dissimilar cultures, societies, and historical epochs. What this means is that while symbols may have emerged from apparently incommensurable cultures, it is possible, by means of "meditative exegesis" to recognize that there is a common experience being expressed. One of the more important statements Voegelin made about his method of procedure and the criteria by which to evaluate documents concerning experience, was that, "The test of truth, to put it pointedly, will be the lack of originality in the propositions."¹¹ The truth of symbols emerges from within the context of other symbols drawn from the wider historical field. Sym-

¹⁰*Conversations*, pp. 23-24. See also "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," pp. 67-70 for his response to the proposition, "The experience is an illusion." Voegelin argues that, technically, an experience as experience can never be an illusion—no matter what is going on, the person in question is having an "experience" of some sort. The problem, then, must consist in the fact that the one having the experience is mistaken about the "content" of the experience. Here there are two possibilities; either (1) the experienced object does not really exist, or (2) the object exists but, is different from what is experienced. In either case, "the judgment of illusion rests on control experiences of the potentially or actually existent object outside the experience." This is problematic though, "For a judgment of illusion can pertain only to experiences of existent objects, not to experiences of participation in nonexistent reality." Voegelin's point would seem to be that the "control experiences" that would be necessary to arrive at the judgment "The experience is an illusion," presuppose a split between subject and object in which one could somehow examine the "content" of the experience. But this is already to have lost the experience; which ontologically precedes any articulation of subject and object.

¹¹Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 122. The section immediately preceding this reads as follows: "The validity can and must be tested by placing

bols or accounts of experience which, upon analysis, are found to be recognizably equivalent to other classic symbolizations within this field, can be understood as testifying to the common human experience of participation in reality.

By tracing reason to its experiential origins, Voegelin made clear the *empirical* nature of his work. He would argue that his notion of reason was neither a theory nor an idea; it was a symbolic expression of well attested experiences in the history of humanity. He was extremely conscious of empirically grounding his philosophical language. This is why throughout his work we find him returning again and again to the data—symbols, myths, religious and literary texts, works of art, and any other expressions of the human spirit. His was a radical empiricism that went beyond the symbols, texts, etc. to recapture the experiences underlying these expressions. The more data he could amass from the study of comparative religion, archaeology, anthropology, ancient civilizations, etc., the more empirically verified would be his interpretations of the originating experiences.¹² Nor was this a matter of Voegelin imposing his own preconceived ideas on the data. Anyone familiar with his thought knows that Voegelin was quite capable of changing his mind and altering his interpretation in light of new evidence, even if it involved a major reorientation of his work.¹³ For Voegelin, any philosophical language that is not somehow empirically grounded, i.e., that does not remain close to experience, easily degenerates into an ideol-

the propositions in the historical field of experiences and their symbolizations...The validating question will have to be: Do we have to ignore and eclipse a major part of the historical field in order to maintain the truth of the propositions...or are the propositions recognizably equivalent with the symbols created by our predecessors in the search of truth about human existence?"

¹²At a recent conference, Brendan Purcell of University College, Dublin, related an amusing anecdote about a conversation he had with Mrs. Voegelin, in which she expressed the hope that no new civilizations would be discovered, since it seemed every time this happened her husband felt compelled to pick up and go to the site.

¹³Two such shifts were those that marked Voegelin's abandonment of his *History of Political Ideas*, and later, the revision of the plan for *Order and History* after the third volume. See, Eric Voegelin, "Autobiographical Statement at Age Eighty-Two," in *The Beginning and the Beyond: Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1984), pp. 116-119 and Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 1-58.

ogy that obscures the experiential basis of reason and thereby makes rational discussion impossible.

This attention to the experience of openness as the core of rationality was an attempt to discover a common ground for rational discussion that would not be bound to the definition of reason as formulated in any particular cultural, religious, or philosophical tradition, while at the same time remaining recognizably equivalent to the same experience as witnessed to by each tradition. Voegelin understood that the meaning of "reason" itself had become problematic; like so many other symbols it had become disengaged from its engendering experience. "Reason" as fundamental wonder and openness must be recaptured on a deeper level of commonality, the level of experience and its symbolization.¹⁴ Voegelin did not claim to offer a neutral, universal perspective that transcends all cultures while itself belonging to none. Instead, he offered an approach that is sensitive to the historical emergence of reason as it manifests itself in every culture, while at the same time recognizing the constancy, throughout history, of the openness that constitutes the core of rationality. Characteristically, Voegelin maintained that evidence of the life of reason is to be found in such diverse sources as Siberian shamanism, Coptic papyri, and the petroglyphs in the caves of the Ile-de-France. No particular culture is privileged with regard to its symbols or its formulation of experience; and if, through the efforts of the historical sciences, further relevant data sheds new light on the structure and meaning of the tension toward the ground, it may be necessary to call into question the assumptions underpinning one's cultural horizon. Voegelin would argue that the more one carefully and openmindedly attends to the "data" (i.e., the historical trail of symbolizations, literary texts, art, and other cultural artifacts) the more one is confronted by the evidence that this openness has always been present

¹⁴Consider the following passage: "There is no longer a common rational culture. The question is, what do we do now? We cannot proceed like Thomas; we cannot wave the *Contra Paganos* in our hands and start a debate, because nobody believes in the classic formulations, including most of our Western university personnel in philosophy. So if there is no common basis of intellect, how do we talk? The only thing one can do now is to go back of the rational formulations of classic and medieval philosophy, abandon also (for the dialogic purpose) the Old and New Testaments because these are not sources of common belief, and go back of the formulated positions to the experiences which engendered symbols." *Conversations*, pp. 39-40.

in and constitutive of the structure of humanity. Nor should this come as a surprise, for all people share in "the existential tension toward the ground, and the ground is for all men the one and only divine ground of being."¹⁵

Such a stance, however, is not to be confused with relativism. While immensely respectful of diverse cultural and religious traditions, Voegelin's perspective is not uncritical. In principle, all cultures may reveal something of the life of reason and ought to be respected as such. But Voegelin was also quite clear that the basic criterion for rational discussion and for being able to describe a society as "good" was the presence of a vibrant life of reason, understood as existential openness. Where such openness is lacking, Voegelin does not hesitate to render a sharply negative judgment on the culture or society in question. This accounts for some of his rather trenchant comments concerning liberal democracy and its pluralistic character.

From Voegelin's perspective, one of the problems with liberal democracy was that within its orbit the life of reason had, in many cases, effectively atrophied. Liberal agnosticism on matters concerning the substantive goods that might provide a cohesive vision for society tended to relegate to the realm of private opinion any discussion of that openness which constitutes reason. In his essay, "The Eclipse of Reality," Voegelin lamented the fact that:

The right to be ignorant of the reality and truth of common experience has become, in the twentieth century, the most remarkable and characteristic institution of Western societies. The institution is firmly established and recognized, has entered public consciousness, and has even been elevated to something like a principle of social order by the self-interpretation of Western societies as "pluralistic societies."¹⁶

¹⁵Eric Voegelin, "What Is Political Reality?" in *Anamnesis*, ed. Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 179.

¹⁶Eric Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 28, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 155. See also "Industrial Society," p. 46 and Eric Voegelin, "Necessary Moral Bases for Communication in a Democracy," in *Problems of Communication in a Pluralistic Society* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1956), pp. 58-59, pp. 60-61, p. 67.

In Voegelin's view, this closure against common experience had unfortunate consequences:

In the openness of the common spirit there develops the public life of society. He, however, who closes himself against what is common, or who revolts against it, removes himself from the public life of human community. He becomes thereby a private man, or in the language of Heraclitus, an *idiotes*...Now it is possible, however, and it occurs all the time, that the *idiotes*—that is, the man estranged from the spirit—becomes the socially dominant figure. The public life of society is thus characterized not only by the spirit, but also through the possibility of estrangement from it. Between the extremes of the spiritually genuine public life and the disintegration of a society through the radical privatization of its members, lie the actual concrete societies with their complex field of tensions between spirit and estrangement. Every concrete society, therefore, has its own particular character of public life through which the genuineness or sickness of its spirit can be recognized.¹⁷

Those societies in which the *idiotes*, the “individual,” has become the dominant social figure, cannot properly be called either good or political. Where openness to the ground is lacking, one can speak of “masses” but not of political society. In place of social/political responsibility rooted in the acknowledgment of a common participation in reality and a common regard for the other as reasonable, we find instead a narcissistic and apolitical emphasis on individual development, self-expression, and originality, due to the fact that where the ground of reality has been denied it will likely be replaced by the notion that the individual is the ground of his or her own existence. In his essay “Nietzsche, the Crisis and the War,” Voegelin predicted the dire consequences that follow from indifference in matters of the spirit:

When the organizing power of the spirit becomes weak, the result is not a peaceably happy despiritualized society, but a chaos of instincts and values. Despiritualized happiness is the twin brother

¹⁷Eric Voegelin, “The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol.12, *Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 7.

of despiritualized brutality; once the spiritual order of the soul is dissolved in happiness, it is only a question of time and circumstances when and from which quarter the attack on an order without dignity will begin.¹⁸

This passage throws light on Voegelin's less than wholehearted embrace of pluralistic society. From his perspective, pluralism was too often invoked as a means of avoiding the challenging and difficult work of coming to terms with the other at the most fundamental level of spiritual encounter. In settling for a superficial peace, it overlooked the deeper conflicts simmering beneath the surface of an outwardly happy and prosperous society. Voegelin was concerned that below the surface of "that pluralism of opinion which supposedly is the guaranty of peaceful advances toward truth" there lie the unresolved religious and ideological wars of preceding centuries. Writing on the "Necessary Moral Bases for Communication in a Democracy," he concluded:

The rich diversification of socially entrenched and violently vociferous opinion is what we call our pluralistic society. It has received its structure through wars, and these wars are still going on. The genteel picture of a search for truth in which humankind is engaged with the means of peaceful persuasion, in dignified communication and correction of opinions, is utterly at variance with the facts.¹⁹

Voegelin believed that the pluralism characteristic of modern liberal democracy was inadequately grounded; it had lost sight of the profound tensions underlying the uneasy harmony of the present situation. With its appeals to diversity and toleration, liberalism had merely covered over deep cultural/religious rifts that continued to erupt into the public square. The increasing difficulty with which liberal societies attempt to placate groups of people of widely divergent horizons, and

¹⁸Eric Voegelin, "Nietzsche, the Crisis, and the War," *The Journal of Politics* 6 (1944), p. 180.

¹⁹"Necessary Moral Bases," pp. 58-59, pp. 61-62. Some recent, influential books and articles have also called attention to the deep cultural clashes playing themselves out in the social/political arena. See, for example, James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars*, (Basic Books, 1991) and Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer, 1993), pp. 22-49.

the polarization of citizens around certain seemingly intractable social problems, was for Voegelin evidence of the inadequacy of contemporary liberal notions of pluralism in providing a lasting basis for social stability. It should be emphasized that it is not pluralism *per se* that draws Voegelin's criticism. His reservations have to do with a pluralism that is content to remain on the surface without seriously confronting the very difficult challenges involved in recovering a common language grounded in crosscultural experiences of transcendence. For Voegelin, the "peaceful persuasion" on which pluralistic democracies pride themselves, is only salutary when reason is recognized as having its origins in experiences of transcendence—the exclusion of such experiences from the public square reveals a narrowness that deprives pluralistic societies of the very sources in which genuine dialogue could be grounded. In Voegelin's view, the contemporary liberal emphasis on pluralism and diversity was often little more than a masquerade for indifference to genuine conversation.

Voegelin's identification of the latent wars underlying liberal, pluralistic societies serves as a reminder that his philosophical enterprise was motivated primarily by a desire to address problems of political and social order. Voegelin insisted that an important catalyst in his work was his disgust at the sight of violence perpetrated for dogmatic and ideological reasons. This led him to adopt, if not a sceptical, at least a highly critical attitude (some would say *too* critical an attitude) toward doctrine of any sort. He praises those whose awareness of the limits to any humanly discerned verity leads them to the generous conclusion that "every myth has its truth." Deeply attentive to *experience*, Voegelin remained decidedly ambiguous with regard to the possibility of a definitive conceptual formulation of that experience in philosophy, theology, or political theory. His reservations stemmed to a great degree from his fear that these formulations too often took on a life of their own, becoming "truths" which would then be used to justify the persecution of the unenlightened and the recalcitrant. Voegelin's sought to create a discourse that was appreciative of truth as it emerged in cross-cultural experiences of order, while at the same time avoiding any tendency toward dogmatism and ossification. He was very much convinced that every myth had its truth, and he was deeply committed to the creation of a tolerant society. That is why his criticism of liberal, pluralistic society must not be misconstrued. Voegelin did not seek to undermine

or repudiate the tolerance esteemed (in theory, if not always in practice) by liberal society; his concern was that it be adequately grounded.

It is important, then, to distinguish Voegelin's understanding of tolerance from what one might describe as a liberal stance. Historically, the liberal justification of tolerance sprang from a concern to end the destruction wrought by religious wars. But philosophically, the grounding of this tolerance has coincided with an epistemological agnosticism with regard to knowledge of the transcendent. In general, liberalism has been sceptical about language which appeals to a transcendent "hypergood" as a criterion by which to ground or to determine the types of social goods that ought to be pursued. The implications of such a view are easily noted—if truth in such matters is unattainable, then conflict over what is fundamentally a matter of personal, private conviction would seem to be senseless.

Voegelin shared with liberalism an intense commitment to limit the social effectiveness of intolerance, whether ideological or religious. There is even a sense in which Voegelin's refusal to endorse as definitive any particular tradition's articulation of truth makes his thought congenial to liberalism's epistemological grounding of tolerance. However, basic differences remain. Voegelin was particularly concerned with what he perceived to be a tendency within the Anglo-American liberal tradition to present its animating principles as universally valid and applicable to every situation. Because of this, he found the claims for tolerance espoused by Anglo-American liberalism to be less than convincing.

In "The Oxford Political Philosophers," Voegelin commented with more than a tinge of irony, that the philosophers in question "are willing to accept the mystery of incarnation: that the principles of right political order have become historical flesh more perfectly in England than anywhere else at any time," and he feared that "the institutional symbolism of the English polity has become accepted as the language of political discourse."²⁰ Voegelin expressed similar reservations about liberalism as a whole, and its tendency to forget that "it is not a body of timelessly valid scientific propositions about political reality, but rather

²⁰Eric Voegelin, "The Oxford Political Philosophers," *Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (April 1953), pp. 100, 107.

a series of political opinions and attitudes which have their optimal truth in the situation that motivates them.”²¹ Underlying Voegelin’s concern is the question as to whether the rights and freedoms so important to Anglo-American, liberal democracy were actually timeless “principles” or rather “prudential measures that will, under given historical circumstances, create the best possible environment for the attainment of the highest good.”²² Voegelin was certainly not opposed to such freedoms; but he perceived a danger in elevating that which is pragmatically effective in a given political/social context into “inalienable, eternal, and ultimate” principles. Western liberal democracies exhibited “a strong tendency to forget, both in theory and practice, that ‘goodness’ is the quality of a society and not of a governmental form.”²³ For Voegelin, the principles needed to support genuine public discourse and social tolerance could only be derived from a philosophical anthropology which finds “the ordering centre of human personality in the experience of man’s relation to transcendent reality.”²⁴

Voegelin agreed that liberalism arose as an understandable reaction to a historical context marked by wars of religion. For Voegelin, though, the very fact that liberalism was a response to particular historical circumstances meant that the liberal approach to tolerance was not to be enshrined as a universal truth, but as a sensible, historically contingent response to the situation at hand. He commented on the selective toleration advocated by Locke, and wondered whether “behind the formulae of freedom and toleration hides the orthodoxy of a liberal, semi-secularized Protestant church-state.”²⁵ The uncritical embrace of a liberal model “that is so manifestly historically contingent must lead unavoidably to difficulties, and cause severe damage when it is dogmatized into a world view and its elements are raised to articles of faith.”²⁶

If, however, the liberal justification of tolerance is found wanting, how is society to defend what is still a value of great importance? Consistent with his understanding of reason as openness, Voegelin locates

²¹Eric Voegelin, “Liberalism and Its History,” *The Review of Politics* 36 (1974), p.506.

²²“Oxford Political Philosophers,” p. 103.

²³“Industrial Society,” p. 41.

²⁴“Oxford Political Philosophers,” p. 103.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

²⁶“Liberalism and Its History,” p. 516.

the source of toleration in humanity's constitutive orientation to the transcendent ground. It is this, and not any historically conditioned prudential measures (however appropriate they may be at the time), that constitutes the basis for lasting tolerance. Commenting on Bodin's *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*, Voegelin understood the essence of tolerance to be found in a "balance between silence and the expression of a reality of knowledge" (where "reality of knowledge" is synonymous with reason as "existential transcending toward the ground"). Tolerance, thus understood, is the fruit of an awareness of "a reality transcending incomprehensibly everything that we experience in participation," accompanied by the realization that any language we use is ultimately inadequate in describing this reality.²⁷ The true source of tolerance is to be found in *conversio*; "a being-carried in by love" by allowing oneself to be moved by the divine ground. A person thus converted understands that symbols and doctrines merely point to reality; they are not final truths that would justify intolerance and violence.

No doubt there are some for whom the idea that religious experience may serve as a source of tolerance represents a contradiction in terms. Others might question the usefulness or practicality of Voegelin's approach. Still others might simply dismiss it as little more than pious romanticism. Yet anyone familiar with Voegelin's life and writings would hardly label him as politically naïve. Voegelin knew from personal experience the damage done by the doctrinaire in this century, and he was also conscious that little or no practical good could come from so-called "dialogues" in which each party simply repeats its own orthodoxy. Nor did he have any illusions about the difficulties involved in recovering a language capable of grounding authentic dialogue. He remained convinced though, that the common discourse necessary for genuine conversation had its basis in experiences of transcendence. Public order and public discourse would be best safeguarded by encouraging as many people as possible to recover these experiences in themselves.

Thus any surface similarities between Voegelin's anti-dogmatism and that of liberalism are found to mask far greater differences. From Voegelin's perspective, the problem with liberal toleration is that it is the product of an epistemological context in which the experience of

²⁷"What Is Political Reality," pp. 197. 183. 199.

reason as openness to the ground has been lost. Within this context, liberalism looks at the destruction induced by wars of religion and decides that one way to end the violence is to marginalize religion by relegating it to the status of private, epistemologically uncertain opinion. Viewed this way, religion comes to be understood in opposition to reason. In order to prevent theological controversy from disturbing the public sphere, religion must be subordinated to the more pragmatically effective, instrumental reason that comes increasingly to dominate the public realm. Voegelin was well aware of the problems caused by the intolerance of dogmatism, but in his view this was the result of a situation in which the originating experiences upon which doctrine ultimately rests had been eclipsed in the minds and hearts of many in society. He saw the solution to this problem in the recovery of those experiences that foster conversion of mind and heart; not in obstructing access to such experiences through a philosophical stance that reduces questions concerning the ground to a matter of private opinion. From Voegelin's perspective, the problem with liberal society was that it tried to provide lasting foundations for rational discourse and public order by using an impoverished language that had lost the connection with its experiential origins.

Of course one could ask what difference it makes whether one justifies tolerance on a modern, liberal basis or in a more religiously oriented way if, in the end, no one is being harmed or coerced. But this is to miss Voegelin's point. From his perspective, the principles undergirding liberal democracy can be easily misused if enshrined as absolutes. Without a higher control (rooted in humanity's constitutive orientation to the transcendent) to govern their application, these principles can be manipulated to undermine the very public good they are meant to protect. Voegelin was not opposed to the principles themselves, but he was concerned that they be guided by a reason that had not become disengaged from the experiences that are the source of both personal and social order.

This approach to matters of public order sometimes led to disagreements with those with whom he otherwise shared a common concern for the restoration of reason in contemporary society. An example of this is the exchange of correspondence between Voegelin and Hannah Arendt concerning his review of her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Briefly summarized, Voegelin believed that Arendt failed to

perceive the essential similarities between liberalism and totalitarianism, i.e., their common indifference if not hostility toward the divine ground of reason. In response, Arendt, arguing on the basis of historical events, thought that Voegelin had treated the "phenomenal differences," which from her perspective "as differences of factuality are all important," as "minor outgrowths of some essential sameness."²⁸ She concluded her reply with the observation that *in fact*, liberals were obviously not the same as totalitarians.

Voegelin remained unconvinced, and while he acknowledged that analysis had to begin with the social/political phenomena at hand, he also insisted that:

The question of theoretically justifiable units in political science cannot be solved by accepting the units thrown up in the stream of history at their face value. What a unit is will emerge when the principles furnished by a philosophical anthropology are applied to historical materials. It then may happen that political movements, which on the scene of history are bitterly opposed to one another, will prove to be closely related on the level of essence.²⁹

Voegelin believed that external differences on the level of history masked a more profound identity, an identity that could be discovered only through an analysis of the underlying experiences of reality.

While Arendt's insistence that liberals are *not* totalitarians is a point well taken, one wonders whether she has fully appreciated the strength of Voegelin's position and whether her response is an adequate answer to Voegelin's criticism. He maintained that "the true dividing line in the contemporary crisis does not run between liberals and totalitarians, but between the religious and philosophical transcendentalists on the one side, and the liberal and totalitarian immanentist sectarians on the other side."³⁰ Voegelin's language is strong; but if he is correct in his understanding of humanity as constituted by its relationship to the divine ground, then does not liberalism's agnosticism on questions concerning our ultimate ends express a view of humanity as impoverished as

²⁸Eric Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," *The Review of Politics* 15 (1953), p. 69.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 75.

that of totalitarianism, which, over time, will exact an equally terrible price?

In answer, then, to the question as to whether it makes any difference on what basis one defends tolerance and the other values needed to sustain a public order, Voegelin would likely respond with another question—Is it better to live one's life attuned to structure of reality or in state of alienation from reality? The problem he detected in some modern responses to this question was that the question itself was considered unanswerable and therefore irrelevant to matters of the public good. While a great admirer of the Anglo-American tradition's ability to deal effectively with public affairs on a pragmatic level, Voegelin also saw clearly the limitations of the tradition with regard to sustaining the life of reason essential to a good society. In the short term, it may make little difference whether one grounds tolerance (as well as the other basic principles of a liberal polity) upon a conception of reason as calculative and instrumental, or whether reason is grounded in experiences of openness to transcendence. But given the present condition of contemporary society, the deterioration of public discourse, and the apparent desire on the part of many sincere people for a retrieval of commonly shared values, it would seem that our long term survival requires that we reflect seriously on the transcendent ground of our commonality.

It is on these matters that the thought of Eric Voegelin has something of importance to contribute to our current discussions. For we find in Voegelin's philosophy a genuinely multicultural perspective, a deep concern for the tolerance necessary to sustain a pluralistic society, and, at the same time, a rejection of moral and cultural relativism. Where Voegelin parts company with liberalism is in his claim that the more one seriously analyzes and "gets behind" the symbols that articulate a society's experience of reality, the more one becomes capable of developing a language by which to judge the authenticity of personal and social order. In this regard he represents a non-liberal approach that is open to cultural diversity and sensitive to the varieties of religious experience, while at the same time not being afraid to raise and address questions of cultural, moral, and religious authenticity. The normativity of which Voegelin writes is not tied to an acceptance of any particular cultural worldview; it is discovered through careful attention to those experiences of participation in which humanity's constitutive orientation to the ground is manifest. Access to these experiences may be gained

through the literary, artistic, philosophical, and religious “classics” of every culture. The key to the restoration of genuine public discourse lies not in the imposition or acceptance of one particular community’s cultural language, but in an openness to the classics of every culture, classics which speak of what is common to all.

Voegelin challenges us to deal seriously with the claims posed by the constitutive expressions of meaning incarnate in every culture, and to be willing to contend with the question of truth implied in their abiding relevance. Liberal agnosticism on such questions drew Voegelin’s ire because it represented a refusal to reflect deeply enough upon the fundamental sources of reason and community. Such a refusal, would, he believed, eventually undermine the ground of public discourse upon which democracy depends. In addition, while liberal attitudes toward toleration might forestall violence by persuading people that their most deeply held beliefs were little more than personal opinions and hence not worth arguing over, Voegelin saw that, philosophically, this was a thin and impoverished soil, incapable of sustaining and protecting the life of reason as it manifested itself in diverse and varied traditions. He saw the role of philosophy as therapeutic - to restore the basis for rational discussion through a return to its deepest origins. It was Voegelin’s hope that such an enterprise would bear fruit in the creation of communities of discourse that might one day render the life of reason socially effective and provide liberal democracy with the foundation it so sorely needs. ↪