

# VOEGELINIANA

OCCASIONAL PAPERS

— No. 86 —

Johannes Corrodi Katzenstein

Eric Voegelin and Theology.  
The Case of 'Dogmatization' in Western Intellectual  
and Political History





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Hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz

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Eric Voegelin and Theology.

The Case of 'Dogmatization' in Western Intellectual and Political History

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## INHALTSVERZEICHNIS

1. Introduction .....	7
2. Voegelin's critique of theology and 'dogmatization' .....	8
4. Voegelin's theory and history of order .....	15
4. 'Doctrinization' .....	19
4.1 Degradation of philosophical concepts in pre-Christian Hellenism .....	20
4.2. Metaphysics and the misreading of noetic and pneumatic truth .....	21
4.3. The increasing separation of 'natural' theology and 'supernatural revelation' .....	22
4.4. The distorting influence of imperial 'political theology' .....	23
4.5. The revolt against hierarchy .....	24
4.6. The destructive effects of sectarian and ideological movements .....	25
5. Contested issues .....	28
5.1. Voegelin's 'experiential-expressivist' hermeneutics .....	28
5.2. Christ and the metaxy .....	30
5.3. Gnosticism .....	33
 <i>Collected Works</i> by Eric Voegelin quoted or mentioned in the text .....	35

## 1. Introduction

Over his long and prolific scholarly career political philosopher and Nazi-refugee Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) worked out a sophisticated account of the historical process of deformation of human consciousness that he saw culminate in the tyranny of ideological movements within ‘enlightened’ Europe.<sup>1</sup> Through his published work and teaching Voegelin sought to contribute to the recovery of reason and spiritual order. The *magnum opus* of the German-American thinker bears the appropriate title “Order and History”.

To do justice to Voegelin’s multifaceted perspective on political and spiritual (dis)order, a concerted effort is needed beyond the current reception and critical development of his work within the field of political philosophy. The present study attempts to make a contribution to the growing awareness of this thinker’s significance from the perspectives of theology and the philosophy of religion. In particular, I shall look at the problematics of what Voegelin called the ‘dogmatization’ of pneumatic revelation and noetic philosophy. Voegelin’s notoriously ambivalent view of historic Christianity, a view that has perplexed self-professed believers and their opponents in like fashion, arises from this multifaceted phenomenon.

In Voegelin’s account the development of religious dogma is closely associated with that of ‘propositional metaphysics’. Accordingly, through the growing hold of metaphysical thought-forms, the symbolically differentiated indices of God, world, human being and society are increasingly treated as referring to determinate substances or beings in the ‘external world’. There results a pernicious ‘fundamentalism’ which, according to Voegelin, spoils much of post-classical philosophical and theological discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> The following text has originally been submitted to the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) as a research proposal in 2010. I here wish to express my gratitude to the SNF for the generous funding that has subsequently been granted to support the project. I also wish to thank Prof. Dr. U.I. Dalferth for taking this project under his auspices.

Cf. <http://www.projectdb.snf.ch/WebForms/Frameset.aspx> for more details on the project.

Against ‘dogmatization’ in philosophy and theology Voegelin sets the Platonic principle of the ‘mystic philosopher’ according to which the noetic disclosure of the structures of experience has the character of a theophanic event in the *metaxy* (‘in-between’) of human existence in tension with the divine ground of being. Voegelin spends enormous effort in tracing the emergence of ‘dogmatic’ discourse and theological belief-systems so much engrained in the Western world throughout its history. It is thus of considerable interest that Voegelin cannot ultimately dismiss such doctrines out of hand.

My aim in this study is twofold. First, I want to reconstruct the main elements of Voegelin’s critique of Western theological discourse in the context of an alleged movement towards the ‘dogmatization’ of noetic and pneumatic truth. I then want to explore the most promising avenues of assessing, rebutting or moving beyond the critique taken by commentators interested in the religious and theological dimension of Voegelin’s work. The leading conviction is that both Voegelin studies and theology can greatly profit from closer interaction.

## **2. Voegelin’s critique of theology and ‘dogmatization’**

Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) was a scholar and thinker of almost larger-than-life stature. Readers of his work generally acknowledge his immense erudition, path-breaking scholarship, and outstanding theoretical acumen put to the service of a single vision. There can, indeed, be no doubt that Voegelin himself saw his work as contributing to the restoration of the life of reason in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, or precisely because of this, his importance for philosophy, theology, historical scholarship and the wider culture is slow in being recognized.

Two immediate reasons for this neglect spring to mind. Voegelin was convinced that the reality of human reason could not be

divorced from (1) the reality of political order, and (2) divine reality. Our human perceptions of reason, politics and God were for him bound to atrophy if separated from each other. Voegelin thus brought back 'classical' political philosophy to German intellectual culture. And it is within political philosophy that his work has found its main reception so far. But despite his consistent disavowal of the terms on both an existential and theoretical level, he also was an outstanding 'religious' and even 'theological' thinker. Both factors go a long way to explain the difficulties of a 'secular' or even 'post-secular' age to come to grips with this outstanding figure.

Voegelin also was a Nazi-refugee, escaping from an 'enlightened' civilization on the verge of being destroyed by its own political ideologies and scientific achievements. The risk of material and spiritual self-annihilation unmistakably provides the proximate historical background of Voegelin's unrelenting quest for reason, political order, and God. What were the roots of the developments that had brought tyranny and mass murder to one of the culturally leading nations in Europe? What was it that made millions of people on the whole continent prone to surrender to ideological double-thinking and violence? Struggling with these questions over a long and prolific career, Voegelin worked out a wide-ranging theory of the deformation of human consciousness and the possible recovery of its balance.

The theory has taken the form of a philosophy of history. Its guiding principle is that "the order of history emerges from the history of order."<sup>2</sup> Negatively speaking, ontology and history can thus be neither be separated nor combined into an abstract 'phenomenon' of historicity. Positively speaking, this principle involved a massive load of historical *and* philosophical work indeed. More specifically, it necessitated the critical recuperation of more than two thousand years of Western thought which 'scientific' philosophers from the Enlightenment to E. Husserl had simply dismissed as irrelevant. For the all too common approach, in some ways anticipated by R. Descartes, that let the true history of reason begin anew in a present

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan, *CW 14, OH 1* (Columbia, London: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 19.

seemingly established by one's own 'critical' system, was abhorred and ridiculed by Voegelin.<sup>3</sup> It was conveniently overlooked that modern rationalism and 'scientific' phenomenology hinged upon a specific reading of a much older, i.e. Christian-Augustinian type of meditation.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the declared purpose of Voegelin's theory and 'history of order' was to recapture the experiential foundations of classical and Christian thought through "impartial and searching analysis", as Ellis Sandoz, one of Voegelin's students and main editors of his *Collected Works*, recently put it.<sup>5</sup> The *magnum opus* of the "unknown known"<sup>6</sup> German-American thinker thus bears the appropriate title *Order and History*.<sup>7</sup> If nothing else, Voegelin's work suggests that the spiritual sources of the European crisis in the first half of the twentieth century have neither been removed much less been adequately understood simply because the pragmatic events and subsequent political systems turned out as they did – no doubt for the better. To be sure, the underlying view that secular modernity does not have the resources to diagnose, and much less cure, its own spiritual ills, has lost nothing of its provocative character, especially where (monotheistic) religion is often construed as a main source of violence.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis. Zur Theorie der Geschichte und Politik* (Freiburg: Alber, 2005), 27. Cf. Gerhart Niemeyer, "Christian Faith, and Religion, in Eric Voegelin's Work", *The Review of Politics* 57, no. 1 (1995), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Niemeyer, "Christian Faith", 33.

<sup>5</sup> The *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 34 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 18:21. Hereafter abbreviated as *CW* followed by volume and page numbers. For an overview see James M. Rhodes, "On Voegelin: His *Collected Works* and His Significance", *The Review of Politics* 54, no. 4 (1992).

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Weiss, "Between Gnosis and Anamnesis: European Perspectives on Eric Voegelin", *The Review of Politics* 62, no. 4 (2000), 753, referring to Michael Henkel, *Eric Voegelin zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1998), 7.

<sup>7</sup> *CW* 34:46; Michael P. Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 2.

Thus, to do justice to Voegelin's multifaceted perspective on political and spiritual order and disorder in history and society a critical effort is needed beyond the reception and development of his thought within the field of political philosophy.<sup>8</sup> The present study attempts to make a contribution to the growing awareness of this thinker's significance from the perspectives of Christian theology and the philosophy of religion.<sup>9</sup> Although there can be no doubt that

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<sup>8</sup> Among the burgeoning literature on Voegelin in political philosophy see: Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999); Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt. The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Dante Germino, *Political Philosophy and the Open Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Thomas W. Heilke, *Eric Voegelin. In Quest of Reality* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Jeffrey C. Herndon, *Eric Voegelin and the Problem of Christian Political Order* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007); Glenn Hughes, *The Politics of the Soul. Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); John J. Ranieri, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995). On the reception of Voegelin's work see Regina Braach, *Eric Voegelins politische Anthropologie* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003); Giuseppe Duso and Sandro Chignola, "Die Rezeption Voegelins in Italien. Ein neuer Weg der politischen Philosophie", *Zeitschrift für Politik* 37, no. 4 (1990); Peter J. Opitz, "Spurensuche. Zum Einfluss Eric Voegelins auf die politische Wissenschaft in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland", *Zeitschrift für Politik* 36 (1989); Weiss, "Gnosis". Further references are found in G. Price, *Eric Voegelin: International Bibliography, 1921-2000* (München: Fink, 2000); see also "Voegeliniana. Veröffentlichungen von und zu Eric Voegelin, 2000-2009", *Occasional Papers XLVI* (2009).

<sup>9</sup> There are a few book-length discussions of Voegelin's writings sensitive to issues of theology and biblical scholarship. Cf. Bernhard W. Anderson, "Revisiting Voegelin's 'Israel and Revelation' after Twenty-Five Years" in *Voegelin's Israel and Revelation. An Interdisciplinary Debate and Anthology*, ed. William M. Thompson and David L. Morse (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000); John Kirby and William M. Thompson, eds., *Voegelin and the Theologian: Ten Studies in Interpretation* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983); Morrissey, *Consciousness*. A wider number of scholarly articles and book sections illuminate the relation between Voegelin and Christianity: Charles W. Burchfield and Patrick N. Fuller, "The Role of Faith and Love in Voegelin's Mystical Epistemology." *Humanitas* (Journal

Voegelin's work is truly interdisciplinary<sup>10</sup>, philosophical<sup>11</sup> and theological in character – T. J. Altizer called him the only genuine mind engaged in political theology<sup>12</sup> – his own references to

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of the National Humanities Institute) 9, n. 1 (1996): 35-51; Bruce Douglass, "A Diminished Gospel: A Critique of Voegelin's Interpretation of Christianity" in *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 139-155; "The Gospel and Political Order: Eric Voegelin on the Political Role of Christianity", *The Journal of Politics* 38, no. 1 (1976): 25-45; Michael Henry, "Eric Voegelin on the Incarnate Christ", *Modern Age* 50, no. 4 (2008): 332-344; Glenn Hughes, "Eric Voegelin and Christianity", *The Intercollegiate Review* Fall/Winter (2004): 24-34; Mark Mitchell, "Regaining the Balance: An Augustinian Response to Eric Voegelin", *Humanitas* (Journal of the National Humanities Institute) 15, n. 1 (2002): 4-31; Gerhart Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind" *Modern Age* 20, n. 1 (1976): 28-39; Maben W. Poirier, "Eric Voegelin on Christ and Christianity", *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 68, no. 2 (2004): 259-286; James Rhodes, "Voegelin and Christian Faith", *Center Journal* 2, no. 3 (1983): 55-105; "Christian Faith, Jesus the Christ, And History", *Political Science Reviewer* 27 (1998): 44-67; William R. Stevenson Jr., "An Agnostic View of Voegelin's Gnostic Calvin", *The Review of Politics* 66, n. 3 (2004): 415-443; Harold L. Weatherby, "Myth, Fact, and History: Voegelin on Christianity", *Modern Age* 22 (1978): 144-150. The influence of important theologians and biblical scholars of the twentieth century – with many of whom Voegelin was in contact at least by correspondence – on the development of his thought, opens up a vast field of research that so far has received only insufficient attention. A good start is made by Giuliana Parotto, "Zum Einfluß von Urs von Balthasar auf Eric Voegelin", *Occasional Papers XXVIII* (2002), taken up in Giuliana Parotto, *Il simbolo della storia. Studi su Eric Voegelin* (Padova: CEDAM, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Stephen A. McKnight, *International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> David Walsh, "Voegelin's Place in Modern Philosophy", *Modern Age* 49, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Review: Anamnesis by E. Voegelin, transl. and edited by G. Niemeyer (1978)", *The Journal of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1979), 375. Cf. also the entry "Eric Voegelin" in the *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, Vol. 16 (Detroit: Gale, 2004), 6-8, contending that Voegelin "will probably gain influence as the most subtle rethinker of Augustine's *City of God* and the leading Christian philosopher of history of the 20th century", 6.

'theology' are more often than not pejorative. In effect, Voegelin's work may seem to question the viability of theological discourse as such. Certainly this attitude must count as one reason why a theologically informed discourse and appreciation of the religious and theological dimension of Voegelin's work has been slow to arise. Thus, a massive overlap of concern between important and exciting developments in theological scholarship of the last three decades and Voegelin studies has gone largely unnoticed. This deplorable situation should be redressed in favor of both sides.

There is some irony here given that Voegelin's work radically challenges the wall of separation so often assumed to exist between theology and philosophy (*CW* 33:420), as much as that between these and the cultural-historical disciplines. In this respect he was no doubt ahead of his times. Voegelin's increasingly dismissive attitude towards 'theology' – and much of what went under the name of 'scientific' (*wissenschaftlich*) thought in philosophy – must therefore be explained as a perhaps exaggerated reaction. Like many other thinkers worried about the deformation of noetic thought and pneumatic revelation, Voegelin reacted to the perceived theological attempt to *monopolize*, and the concomitant philosophical attempt to *exclude*, the dimension of divine presence (*parousia*) within human experience. (*CW* 18:58) As he saw it, both theological and prevailing 'scientific' attitudes turned the respective disciplines into 'dogmatic' enterprises by obscuring the dynamic structure of the *metaxy* or 'In-between' of human existence.

With this Platonic term, standing at the centre of this mature thought, Voegelin meant to direct the awareness of his contemporaries to "the region of reality where human consciousness searches for, is drawn by, and encounters the (...) mysterious transcendent flux of divine presence."<sup>13</sup> It is from the 'tension' of the human *psyche* or *nous* toward the 'divine ground' or *Nous* that experiences of order and their history-shaping symbols arise. But the tension is on the way of being stifled when the 'flux' of divine presence together with its symbols is channeled into quasi-empirical concepts and institutional

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Henry, "Eric Voegelin on the Incarnate Christ", *Modern Age* 50, no. 4 (2008), 335.

power-structures. Concomitantly, the poles or ‘partners’ in the *metaxy* are ‘reified’ into independent entities. But neither must the divine ‘partner’ be doctrinally hypostatized into an object, nor the human partner into a subject, of cognition. As has been observed more than once, Voegelin “forcefully negates any theological categories or distinctions which cross his path”.<sup>14</sup> To his mind, the dynamic structure of the *metaxy* is above all threatened by ‘propositions’ taking the form of theological and philosophical doctrines. Such doctrines carry presumed ‘truths’ that have become detached from the experiences that give them their meaning and force in the first place. The undesired legacy and great stumbling block of theology is, in Voegelin’s eyes, the separation of symbol from the concrete experience of God. The ‘Word of God’ then degenerates into a word of man “that one can believe or not.” (CW 17:105)

The first victim of doctrinally deformed consciousness has, of course, been Plato himself. But not only the ‘noetic core’ of classical and all genuine philosophy, the ‘truths’ emerging from pneumatic revelation in the Jewish and Christian traditions, too, have been detached from the living experience of a theophanous presence in the *metaxy*. Once noetic and pneumatic ‘truth’ has been consigned to the dogmatic format of a ‘history of ideas’ or an ecclesial dogma, it turns into a system of beliefs falsely taken to be in our possession and subject to logical control. In other words, “‘doctrinization’ of experience... attempts to capture truth for all time.”<sup>15</sup> Truth is reified into units of intelligibility to which nothing essential could be added or taken away without changing their identity altogether. This is no less the case when it is also recognized that such units are, in an ultimate sense, religiously inadequate to the reality they purportedly get hold of. The ‘truth of experience’ can thus only be recovered through close exegesis of the linguistic symbols arising from the concrete

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, “A New History and a New but Ancient God? A Review-Essay”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43, no. 4 (1975), 760.

<sup>15</sup> Michael P. Federici, “Voegelin’s Christian Critics”, *Modern Age* 36 (1994), 332.

experience itself.<sup>16</sup> This raises the question as to the causes of the ‘dogmatization’ of truth and the conditions of its possible reversal. It is precisely Voegelin’s account of the development of a ‘dogmatic’ stance in theological and philosophical thought, together with its social consequences, that needs to be examined and assessed in much greater depth.

#### 4. Voegelin’s theory and history of order

In the following paragraphs I attempt to adumbrate the contours of Voegelin’s theory and history of order. Its purpose is to make the complex issue under investigation stand out in its scholarly and cultural interest. Central to Voegelin’s approach is the claim that in the epoch of the ‘Ecumenic Age’<sup>17</sup> a momentous transition or ‘leap’ occurred in the movement from a ‘compact’ experience of reality to the noetic and pneumatic differentiation of the primary ‘community of being’. God, human being, world and society become distinguishable partners in the unfolding drama of existence. Previously self-sufficient ‘cosmological’ civilizations disintegrate. In their wake there arises, on the pragmatic level, an apparently indefinite series of imperial conquests and territorial discoveries. On the paradigmatic level one can observe a spiritual exodus of the *psyche* or ‘heart’ towards a world-transcendent source of order (CW 17:204). “A dedivinized world takes the place of a cosmos full of gods, and cor-

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<sup>16</sup> Strict attentiveness to the *particula veri* or empirical ‘given’ of experience in the *metaxy* is of paramount hermeneutic importance for Voegelin: “There is no language in the abstract (...) which man can refer to the hierophantic events of the noetic and pneumatic differentiations but only the concrete language created in the articulation of the event.” CW 17:86. From here results Voegelin’s insistence on transforming an architectural view of psychoanalytic theory into a properly historic reading of the *psyche*.

<sup>17</sup> The term ‘ecumene’ appears in Herodotus and gains importance in Polybius’ construction of Rome as the consummation of empire. Cf. Eric Voegelin, “The Beyond and its Parousia”, *Occasional Papers XVII* (2004), 24, and CW 17:202.

relatively, the divine is concentrated into a world-transcendent ground of being.” (CW 6:357) The marked loss of undifferentiated ‘porosity’ or ‘consubstantiality’ between the fourfold dimensions of reality – symbolized by the *indices* God, human being, world and society<sup>18</sup> – results in the dissociation of cosmic order into an ever threatened dynamic balance of the experience of power and ‘spirit’ (CW 17:202). Cosmic analogies among the four dimensions of reality give way to a moving field of historical configurations. Human society no longer forms a ‘cosmion’ or microcosmos. (CW 14:43)

The Ecumenic Age begins with the Achaemenian-Persian empire (550-330 BC) and ends with the decline of the Roman empire. In essence, Voegelin traces the aspirations and problems constitutive of Western modernity back to this epoch.<sup>19</sup> “... The Achaemenians gained an empire but got involved in the problem of making spiritual sense of an order that was neither an analogue of the cosmos nor the order of a people.” (ibid., 205) Henceforth, “(t)he conflict between spiritual order and imperial expansive movement is the subject matter that requires detailed description.”<sup>20</sup> The subject matter also raises the question as to the ‘real subject’ of history, ultimately located by Voegelin in an emerging global humanity transcending even the Western *ecumene*.<sup>21</sup> Noetic philosophy and pneumatic revelation are the two most important factors setting humanity on this historic path.

Under the pressure of the great ‘spiritual outbursts’ or ‘break-throughs’ of pneumatic revelation (Israel) and noetic philosophy

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<sup>18</sup> In Voegelin’s approach ‘God’, ‘world’, ‘man’ and ‘society’ function as indices rather than names or concepts, for no one has ever observed what these terms refer to. And even to conceive of these terms as referring to unobservable entities postulated for their presumed superior explanatory value in a scientific-theoretical context is to commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. For the existence of these alleged ‘entities’ has still to be verifiable by means of observation-cum-reflection.

<sup>19</sup> Clearly this is meant as an alternative account of K. Jasper’s celebrated notion of an ‘axis time’. Cf. *The Ecumenic Age* (CW 17), 380-385.

<sup>20</sup> Voegelin, “The Beyond and its Parousia”, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the last two chapters of CW 17 entitled “The Chinese Ecumene” and “Universal Humanity”.

(Hellas), the primary experience of *cosmos* turns into the more differentiated experience of *being*. (CW 6:164) Differentiation, however, is not the same as ‘progress’ towards a fully and exclusively ‘human’ world envisaged by modern ideologies. Since the human person continues to participate in the ‘whole’ of being, the mythical substratum of experience never wears out completely even in differentiated consciousness (cf. CW 6:348; 18:115-116).<sup>22</sup> Still, no way leads back to cosmological styles of truth and empire. Rather, the claims of ‘autonomy’ of the distinct ‘regions’ of being on human consciousness increase the risk of a loss of balance and distorted visions of order. Indeed, each differentiated region can appear to be the ‘whole’ of reality itself. The process of pneumatic and noetic differentiation thus harbors the risk of a ‘derailment’ of consciousness followed by a concomitant type of social disorder. There arises the conundrum of loss of meaning and of its renewal through a theophanic event in the *metaxy* of the divine-human encounter. Clearly, for Voegelin, a renewed awareness of the ‘in-between’ character of human existence is of primordial importance if Western culture is to have a future.<sup>23</sup>

Both noetic philosophy and pneumatic revelation share the awareness that human existence points beyond itself. They agree that only in relation to what is ‘beyond’ can human existence be itself and at

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<sup>22</sup> With the composing of the fourth volume of *Order & History* (published 1974, eighteen years after publication of the first volume), at the latest, Voegelin’s conception of history as a unilinear succession of distinct types of order had broken down. His later conviction was that types of order characterized by different degrees of differentiation press for simultaneous instantiation in any given society. In other words, the lapse from differentiated consciousness is a historical force as well as ‘radical symbolization’. Cf. Editor’s Introduction to CW 17, 12 and Stephen A. McKnight, “Recent Developments in Voegelin’s Philosophy of History”, *Sociological Analysis* 36 (1975), 364.

<sup>23</sup> William Desmond is the thinker whose sustained attention to the metaxological character of human thought and existence stands out in the contemporary philosophical landscape; cf. *Being and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), *Ethics and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), *God and the Between* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

once more than itself. "Existence is experienced as a tension-filled 'in-betweenness' (sc. *metaxy*), in which there emerges a sense that a direction is to be found or missed."<sup>24</sup> Human consciousness, however, has a tendency to deform itself by attempting to resolve this tension. Noetic reason is then reduced to an instrument of inner-worldly domination while pneumatic faith promises escape from 'fallen' creation into 'gnostic' dreams of divine fulfillment. Rather than accepting the lasting structure of historical reality as the mysterious movement beyond its own structure, the human person is split into a temporal 'power-self' and a rational (alias immortal) 'soul'. Given such a split, humanity could easily be reduced to the one or the other pole, depending on the thinker's perspective or the dominant outlook in the wider culture.

Here Voegelin's problems with Christianity begin to take shape. In an earlier phase of his thought,<sup>25</sup> the idea was that early Christianity offered a somewhat successful realization and future prospect of the historical balance between noetic and pneumatic components of divine presence. Having quoted Clement of Alexandria to the effect that Christianity has two 'Old Testaments', that of the Hebrew and that of the Greek tradition, the impression is that "he leaves a hint that in the Christian 'leap' the two former leaps of being have converged."<sup>26</sup> However, later on in his career, Voegelin increasingly came to stress the burden Christian faith holds out for the masses of ordinary people who are not philosophers, prophets, or saints. The quest for noetic truth is apparently less prone to derailment than biblical revelation. To be sure, the precise nature of the so-called break<sup>27</sup> in his 'program' remains an issue of contention among critics. Even in *The New Science of Politics* Voegelin observed: "The feeling of security in a 'world full of gods' is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, in

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<sup>24</sup> Douglass, "Gospel", 28.

<sup>25</sup> Represented by his now classic work *The New Science of Politics* (1952).

<sup>26</sup> Gerhart Niemeyer, "Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind", *Modern Age* 20, no. 1 (1976), 29.

<sup>27</sup> *CW* 17:45. Cf. Bruce Douglass, "The Break in Voegelin's Programme", *Political Science Reviewer* 7 (1977).

the sense of Heb. 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen.” (CW 5:187) But the bond is tenuous, “and it may snap easily.” (ibid.)

#### 4. ‘Doctrinization’

At this point we have reached a critical juncture in Voegelin’s thought that so far has not received sufficient attention in the critical interpretation of his work. It affects the very meaning of ‘dogmatization’ of noetic and pneumatic truth. Voegelin characterizes the specific type(s) and process(es) of deformation to be investigated in our study as ‘doctrinization’, ‘dogmatization’, ‘dogmatomachy’, ‘literalization’, ‘reification’, ‘objectification’, etc. All of these terms invariably point to a process of despiritualization and deculturation. (CW 12:176) The process seems to manifest itself in a deformation of the *metaxy* occurring at different junctures in Western history. In Voegelin’s interpretation, negative prominence accrues to ‘doctrinization’ in the period immediately following Plato and Aristotle, the other low-point in this regard ostensibly besetting late-medieval and Reformation times. The forces and counter-forces of ‘doctrinization’ disfigure both philosophy and the biblical traditions. For this reason they continue to make themselves felt up to the present. But they also seem to threaten Voegelin’s “greatest project”, which “is his herculean effort to unite these breakthroughs into one revelation and one theophany.”<sup>28</sup> The later Voegelin’s ambivalent assessment of historic Christianity, which has perplexed self-professed believers and their opponents alike, arises from this complex phenomenon and its presumed consequences.<sup>29</sup> So much has often been observed in the relevant literature. But where does Voegelin ultimately identify the roots and constitutive elements of ‘dogmatization’? On this score

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<sup>28</sup> Altizer, “New History”, 764.

<sup>29</sup> B. Douglass gives a succinct statement of Voegelin’s account of the reasons of the modern decline of Christianity in the West, “Gospel”, 34.

there has been, and there still is, much unclarity. Yet, the issue seems to go to the very core of his thought.

Elucidating the grammar of Voegelin's concept of 'doctrinization' is indispensable for the simple reason that the concept carries a huge explanatory load. Thus we must determine the range of phenomena it is meant to interpret as precisely as possible. I proceed by enumerating six important, interlocking clues that emerge from the textual corpus. Of course, each of them is disputable on the factual level of historical scholarship. But in Voegelin studies they together force the more important interpretive question of how or whether they combine to form a coherent picture in Voegelin's overall account.

#### ***4.1 Degradation of philosophical concepts in pre-Christian Hellenism***

It is beyond reasonable dispute that 'dogmatization' precedes Christianity. Already in Hellenic thought mythopoetic symbols are objectified into quasi-entitary 'gods' whose various deeds must then be allegorized. (CW 17:86) Here is what Voegelin says about the after-life of Hellenic *nous*:

After Aristotle there followed no great flowering of philosophy accompanied by a noetic reordering of the polis; instead, the poleis were drawn into the power sphere of the ecumenic empires, while on the spiritual level Alexander's cosmic imperial religion expressed his understanding of the order he intended to realize through his conquests. Noesis, on the contrary, derailed into the philosophical dogmatism of the schools, and that dogmatism in turn provoked the phenomenon of scepticism, with Sextus Empiricus as collector of its arsenal of arguments. (CW 6:383-384)

Through the dogmatization of philosophy, which began with the Stoics and has not been wholly overcome to this day, the symbol of noetic exegesis was gradually separated from its underlying experience and turned, under the title 'natural law', into a topic of the schools of philosophy. (CW 6:140; CW 17:86)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. David A. Nordquest, "Voegelin and Dogmatism: The Case of Natural Law", *Modern Age* 41 (1999).

It is within the confines of this deteriorated intellectual situation that Christian theological discourse had to forge its own symbols and find its path into the future.

#### ***4.2. Metaphysics and the misreading of noetic and pneumatic truth***

The quoted passages aim to critique the ensuing developments in both Western history and thought that have become rather commonplace today.<sup>31</sup> In Voegelin's account, the phenomenon of religious dogma is closely associated with that of 'propositional metaphysics', or metaphysics *tout court*.<sup>32</sup> Through the growing hold of metaphysical thought-forms the symbolically differentiated indices of God, world, human being and society are treated, by lesser thinkers, as referring to determinate substances or beings (e.g. objects and their properties, causal structures, etc.). The community of being<sup>33</sup> in its fourfold structure is in danger of being hypostatized and its 'partners' separated within fragmented consciousness. (CW 12:349) As already pointed out, the divine pole of the tension that grounds the 'in-between' character of human existence threatens to turn into a determinate object of knowledge over against an independent subject of cognition. (CW 28:179) Meaning and truth of differentiated noetic and pneumatic symbols are increasingly obscured and distorted.

In his account of the process, Voegelin relies on broadly speaking Kantian presuppositions. Accordingly, concepts and propositions are adequate for dealing with inner-worldly entities and the structural

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<sup>31</sup> Still important works on this issue consulted by Voegelin himself include: Philip Merlan, *From Platonism to Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960) and Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

<sup>32</sup> Morrissey, *Consciousness*, 6; Stefan Rossbach, "'Gnosis' in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy." *Political Science Reviewer* 34 (2005): 91.

On the history of the term 'metaphysics' and its meanings see CW 6:391-393.

<sup>33</sup> Later called the 'It-reality' comprehending the thing-reality of the cosmos and its non-thing ground. The notion of 'It' is first introduced in CW 12:362.

laws governing them.<sup>34</sup> When concepts and propositions are (mis)used to determine the ‘content’ of other dimensions of reality, human consciousness necessarily derails. There results a type of ‘fundamentalism’ which seems to derange all biblical and theological discourse to a greater or lesser degree, starting with the very symbol of ‘Scripture’ superimposed upon the symbol of the ‘Word of God’.<sup>35</sup> A closure of ‘the text’ suggests a potential closure of noetic and pneumatic revelation. It also feeds into the false dichotomy between ‘dogmatic’ and ‘mystical’ theology.

### ***4.3. The increasing separation of ‘natural’ theology and ‘supernatural revelation’***

Early scriptural fundamentalism is exacerbated by the gap opening up between so-called natural theology and divine self-revelation. In the wake of this distinction, knowledge revealed in and through faith must, in the present dispensation, be ‘founded’ in natural theology. Natural theology, in turn, is corrected and perfected by faith and grace. These are mediated by the Church, which is the custodian of mystery and the primary receptacle of divine presence in the world. Later developments in theology and philosophy have purported to undo this distinction, even while negatively presupposing it in their attempts to keep the gospel of Jesus Christ pure from non-Christian or ‘alien’ elements.<sup>36</sup> Against the advent of a type of reason presumed to be ‘natural’ and ‘free-standing’, Voegelin sets the Platonic insight of the ‘mystic philosopher’ according to which the noetic disclosure of the structures of experience has the character of a theo-

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<sup>34</sup> Rhodes, “Christian Faith”, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. C. J. Thornhill, *German Political Philosophy. The Metaphysics of Law* (London: Routledge, 2007), 24. On the charges and countercharges of ‘Hellenization’ abounding since the Reformation cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture. The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1993), 21.

phanic event in the *metaxy* of existence.<sup>37</sup> Again, pneumatic revelation and noetic philosophy are but two sides of the same coin, distinguished by historical circumstance more than by insight into truth. All attempts to subordinate the one to the other are ‘dogmatic’ and lead to the eclipse of both. Philosophy is neither a preamble to revelation, nor can revelation be independent of the truth of being revealed by noetic exegesis. The flux of divine presence cannot be separated into natural and supernatural realms of experience. For Voegelin, the distinction between natural and revealed knowledge seems to make no sense at all. Because of the radicality of such a perspective his thought resists being ‘positioned’ in conventional terms.

#### ***4.4. The distorting influence of imperial ‘political theology’***

Hellenistic natural theology has a distinct pragmatic slant, making it a suitable means for buttressing the claims of imperial theology. Within the outlook of ‘monarchic theism’, Voegelin alleges, the ‘world itself’ was conceived as a quasi-spatial object of conquest and discovery. He says:

This type of derailment is of special interest to the political theorist, because it provoked a tragic-comic situation in the period of the ecumenic empires, as ‘world-rulers’ discovered that a piece of real estate, regardless how extensive its boundaries, does not become a world, and that an empire, in order to truly become one, requires more than spatial extension... To this day we are plagued by empires that seek to attain their ‘world’ by means of expansion... (CW 6:332)

The ‘dogmatization’ of truth is here closely linked to its function as a ground of spiritual legitimacy of territorial expansion and political domination. Voegelin draws attention to the point that the development of trinitarian discourse seriously disturbed the “monotheistic ideology on which depended the conception of the emperor as the

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<sup>37</sup> In “Was ist politische Realität?” (in *Anamnesis. Zur Theorie der Geschichte und Politik*. Freiburg: Alber, 2005, 283-354) classical noesis and mysticism are identified as the two pre-dogmatic expressions of an optimally differentiated consciousness.

representative of the one God".<sup>38</sup> However, for reasons indicated below, Voegelin felt seemingly unable to accord trinitarian discourse much more positive value.

#### 4.5. *The revolt against hierarchy*

Parallel to the establishment of an 'imperial orthodoxy' and the objectification of symbols of transcendence into rational 'attributes' of an omnipotent God-king, there emerges the possibility of the obverse derailment. Against the backdrop of a hierarchic arrangement of natural and supernatural reality that was no longer supported by the general experience of a divinely ordered cosmos, the 'world' gains an unprecedented opportunity of revolt. Against an Augustinian view that held secular history to be devoid of intrinsic meaning, it can claim an existence independent of the divine ground of being. This movement eventually finds expression in the modern symbol of 'the death of God'. The divine source of order *and* freedom must be 'reasonably' denied in the name of an 'immanent' freedom from that very source. Of course, as Voegelin points out, this possibility took a few intervening centuries to gain momentum, and it assumes hugely varied and complex forms. In the long run, however, it produces the idea of a self-contained universe, society or self as the ultimate ground of its own existence and order. For example, "if the index character of the term (sc. world), i.e., its origin in the experience of being, is forgotten and, as a result, the indexed autonomous structure (*Eigenstruktur*) becomes objectivized, there emerge antitheistic, ideological 'worlds', e.g., the world of objects of sense perception, laying a claim to a monopoly on reality." (CW 6:332) At best, then, we are left with a compartmentalized consciousness in which the divine and the 'world' each go about their own business. Theological and philosophical thinking is confronted with the "the *aporia* (impasse) of having to reunite the 'objects' called temporal and eternal being, which not only were never separated, but which have never existed as objects at all." (CW 6:328-329) Yet in the worst cases of deformation the world and/or society is apparently all there is. The

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. *The New Science of Politics* in CW 5, 173.

*psyche* of man, i.e. the “sensorium of human participation” in divine order (CW 6:361) is absorbed within self-enclosed natural or political structures, after having absorbed God within itself. (CW 18:35)

#### ***4.6. The destructive effects of sectarian and ideological movements***

The process of ‘doctrinization’ creates a spiritual vacuum that is subsequently filled by sectarian and ideological movements. Instead of pushing ahead with the noetic re-symbolization of the structural order of the ‘cosmos’ in the light of differentiated pneumatic consciousness, Christian thinkers, influenced by Stoic philosophy, tended to degrade cosmological myth to superstition and Greek *nous* to natural reason. The differentiated community of ‘being’ contracts into that segment of experience which seems to be of utmost concern: the right relationship between human being and God mediated by the Church. This, of course, is not all negative. The positive achievement of a *homonoia* (CW 6:349) or ‘likeminded community’ beyond the bonds determined by political status is that both society and nature are de-divinized. Thus, human beings gain a new freedom with respect to both. The obverse side of the coin is that the type of freedom proposed by Christian faith proves too much for many people. Furthermore, nature and society also cease to play a significant role in the process of noetic disclosure.<sup>39</sup> As a consequence, the theoretical disclosure of the natural and social dimensions of reality leaves behind its moorings not only in ‘imperial’ but also in ‘natural’ theology. Thus, the nonrevelatory reason, imagined by the theologians as a servant, becomes a self-assertive master. “The imagined nonrevelatory reason has become the real antirevelatory reason of the Enlightenment revolt against the Church.” (CW 18:58) Since the natural and social aspects of human existence cannot but strive for spiritual guidance and legitimacy even after the eclipse of cosmological and metaphysical frameworks of meaning, the divinization of immanent structures of experience turns into *the* problem of modernity. Paradoxically enough, the ‘autonomous’ individual is

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<sup>39</sup> Douglass, “Gospel”, 39.

often seen to exist for the ‘rational’ order which finds its inner-worldly fulfillment in the classless society, the ‘absolute’ state, or the capitalist market. In one form or another ideology thus holds sway, with the result that “theoretical debate concerning issues that involve the truth of human existence is impossible in public.” (CW 5:203)

Voegelin spends enormous effort in tracing the emergence of ‘dogmatic’ and politico-metaphysical belief-systems so much engrained in the Western world throughout its history. Other thinkers before and besides him have attended to the presumed deleterious role of metaphysics (identified with ‘onto-theology’ by M. Heidegger and his followers<sup>40</sup>). But, arguably, no one has explored the intertwinement of religious, intellectual and political dimensions of doctrinal-metaphysical thought in greater range and depth than he.<sup>41</sup> It is therefore of no small import that even Voegelin cannot simply dismiss theological and metaphysical doctrines out of hand. Such doctrines continue to play a not quite dispensable, even if highly protean role. Arguably, they seem to carry in however ossified a form an experiential substance and spiritual meaning that no Western sociopolitical order can afford to ignore.

In effect, Voegelin here confronts us with something of a dilemma. On the one hand he seems to echo the French thinker M. Blondel,

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<sup>40</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 66.

<sup>41</sup> There is no small irony in the fact that M. Heidegger, who has done the most to elevate ontotheology to the rank of the foremost deviation within Western thought, came to embrace a version of the very ‘political religion’ whose intrusion into Austria had forced Voegelin to emigrate. Cf. CW 18:67. The spiritual and intellectual reservations Voegelin held against Heidegger did, however, not stem from a simplistic association of the latter’s philosophy with his political leanings. (But see Walsh, “Voegelin’s Place”, 15) They rather centered in the German philosopher’s attempt to force a new *parousia* of Being (*Sein*) which Voegelin considered to be a hallmark of all modern ‘Gnosticism’. (CW 5:275) On the term ‘political religions’ see Voegelin’s early treatise (first published in Vienna in April 1938) with the same title (CW 5:19-73); cf. now Evelyn Völkel, *Der totalitäre Staat - das Produkt einer säkularen Religion? Die frühen Schriften von Frederick A. Voigt, Eric Voegelin sowie Raymond Aron und die totalitäre Wirklichkeit im Dritten Reich* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009).

who once wrote that “one cannot exclude metaphysics except by a metaphysical critique.”<sup>42</sup> Doctrinal deformation of pneumatic and noetic symbols into metaphysical ‘truth’ can thus not be banned or even amended by the well-intentioned purpose to ‘overcome’ metaphysics.<sup>43</sup> And of course the history of deformation does not go away by having some public intellectuals repeat that ‘we’ live in a post-metaphysical age now. True enough, engaging in a close reading of the metaphysical tradition – which seems virtually indistinguishable from the greater part of the history of philosophy, theology and positive ‘science’ (*Wissenschaft*) – involves the risk that one is being turned in by metaphysical (pseudo-)problems oneself.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, considering traditional metaphysics as a taboo zone (*CW* 5:104, 202) cannot but diminish the process of noetic and pneumatic revelation.<sup>45</sup> Since this process, for Voegelin, is the ultimate source of genuine thought and meaningful order, a protracted stance of non-engagement is in peril of throwing out the baby with the bath-water. Theological ‘doctrine’ offers both resistance and access to the history of noetic and pneumatic truth without which Western culture, for Voegelin, is unthinkable. The modern process that has syphoned off much of the cultural authority of Christianity at once betokens a resistance to renewed ‘noesis’ in the classical sense. By acquiescing in this process Western democratic societies make themselves vulnerable to ‘sectarian’ and ideological attacks on their own spiritual foundations. If this point be accepted, it is all the more imperative to get a clearer picture of the process of ‘dogmatization’.

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<sup>42</sup> Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893)*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 358.

<sup>43</sup> For an influential account of the nature of doctrine along regulative-grammatical rather than propositional-metaphysical lines see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>44</sup> The metaphysical “hardening of consciousness can corrupt even the greatest minds who attempt to resist its linguistic deformation.” Morrissey, *Consciousness*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> But see Rhodes, “Christian Faith”, 45.

## 5. Contested issues

In conclusion, I make an attempt to identify the most divisive issues and areas of contention that are in need of greater elucidation if a fruitful interaction between Voegelin studies and theology is to take place. I group them under the headings of (5.1) the hermeneutics of noetic and pneumatic symbols-cum-experience, (5.2) Christ and the *metaxy*, and (5.3) the meaning and function of ‘gnosis’ in Voegelin’s account.

### 5.1. Voegelin’s ‘experiential-expressivist’ hermeneutics

Voegelin’s approach to the ‘exegesis’ of noetic and pneumatic symbols along with the experiential states they are supposed to express has raised a chain of important questions and conundrums. My aim is to show that these can be fruitfully addressed in the context of a type of ‘narrative theology’ which has gained momentum since the publication of H. Frei’s programmatic text entitled *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.<sup>46</sup> The basic methodological question raised by scholars who have taken up the challenge posed by this ‘new’ perspective – among them astute readers of Voegelin himself – is this: how can the interpreter retrieve the experiences underlying some noetic and pneumatic symbolism so as to make them come alive again in the present dispensation?<sup>47</sup> The risk of interpretive arbitrariness seems to loom large even where the degree of attention to the particular and sense of detail is as greatly developed as in Voegelin. How are we to access the ‘originary’ experience without reading ‘later’ doctrinal symbols back into the ‘content’ of the supposed

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<sup>46</sup> H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1974). Another pivotal and no less influential text is Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>47</sup> So also James Rhodes, “Voegelin and Christian Faith”, *Center Journal* 2, no. 3 (1983), 91.

experience? It may seem that the only alternative is to illuminate – or even ‘recreate’ – the experience in question by drawing upon one’s own metaxic consciousness. A passage like the following makes the issue a pressing one indeed:

Ever since Philo, the theologians sought to assign to philosophy the role of *ancilla theologiae*. This endeavor was understandable for the theologians saw the fullness of truth about God, man, and the world given by revelation; hence philosophy needed to be no more than a tool for supporting revelatory truth with *ratio* as a substratum. In this relationship, the critical function of noesis to lay open radically the realms of the world and history could not become fully effective, since the perverse transformation of noetic symbols into concepts of dogmatic metaphysics had weakened the authenticity of noetic insight – an authenticity that is present *only in the process of the exegesis itself*. (CW 6, 384-385, my italics)<sup>48</sup>

‘Radical symbolization’ (CW 30:131), i.e. the disclosure of the experiential sources of order by the ‘open soul’ (CW 5:215) living in tension with and towards the divine ground of being, is seemingly forfeited unless restored by philosophers and scholars like Voegelin himself.

The impression is thus created that philosophy and Christianity have lived through two millennia of derailment. (cf. Editor’s Introduction, CW 6:20) Of course, there need be nothing wrong with the fact that Voegelin’s analysis is meant to become the occasion for a rediscovery of reason and order in our own times.<sup>49</sup> However, no one who appreciates Voegelin’s earlier work “can make the mistake of assuming that truth had ceased to be a vital concern of the thinkers and societies of the intervening period.” (ibid.) It would be ludicrous to suggest that Christian thinkers in general were not aware of the limitations undergirding ‘doctrinal’ thought and language’s ability to express the reality of the divine-human encounter.<sup>50</sup> The element of

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<sup>48</sup> Some critics have accused Voegelin himself of turning philosophy into the handmaiden of faith; thus Stanley Rosen in his review of *Order & History*. Cf. *Review of Metaphysics* 12 (1958), 261.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Niemeyer, “Voegelin, Eric: The World of the Polis (Book Review)”, *Review of Politics* 21 (1959), 593.

<sup>50</sup> Pelikan, *Christianity*, 44.

*apophaticism*, or negative theology, is too much engrained in pre-modern Christian thought for the suggestion to hold any water.

One must ask whether Voegelin is not perhaps led into difficulties of his own making here by grounding his account of ‘dogmatization’ in a problematic notion of ‘self-authenticating’ experiences of divine presence. (cf. *CW* 16:252) At least, such a possibility is strongly suggested by theologically informed commentators who have noticed the lack of attention given by Voegelin to the *narrative* structure, or *history-like* shape of many biblical texts. These texts, and even ‘Scripture’ as a whole, are not to be (primarily or even exclusively) construed as expressive of human ‘experience’ or productive of cognitive ‘belief’. Rather, they purport to narratively ‘render’ the character of human and divine protagonists in whose ongoing relation we are invited to place our own life-stories. Narrative rendering of God, humans, world and society is thus at the basis of a specific form of life that has its own pre-theoretical integrity. The ‘text’ therefore requires a communal reading. Doctrinal truth can then be seen as a kind of ‘grammar’ regulating the possible variations and figurative extension of the textual meaning. Thus, the retrieval of biblical narrative seems indispensable to an account of much premodern religious and theological discourse. The ‘history-like’ character of Scripture in premodern readings should not be confused with the presumed ‘historical’ meaning and truth in which critics from the late eighteenth century onward were increasingly interested – whether finally to uphold or to debunk it. The serious question here is whether Voegelin has not evacuated the biblical text of its narrative shape so as to provide his own visionary metanarrative as the only ‘rational’ frame of interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

## 5.2. *Christ and the metaxy*

The basic issue here can be thrown into relief by attending to a specific type of defense that Voegelin’s account of ‘doctrinization’ has provoked from some of his theological readers. Some of those who

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Rossbach, “Gnosis”, 93.

contest Voegelin's (account of) Christianity do so on the grounds of a distinction between what we can know about *God himself* – and be it only analogically or even negatively – and the *symbols* expressive of the 'luminosity' of human consciousness in the *metaxy*.<sup>52</sup> What from such a perspective appears to be missing in Voegelin's work is exactly what the latter was intent on undermining: an epistemological longing to get outside one's 'subjective' consciousness in order to ascertain whether its content accords with an 'objective' state of affairs as determined by reason and supernatural revelation. Such a longing once more presupposes the distinction between 'natural' reason and 'revealed' faith as distinct sources of truth 'outside' or 'independent' of the 'mystical' thinker.

This type of reply to the charge of doctrinal deformation no doubt begs the question.<sup>53</sup> It also seems to leave us in the clutches of a 'Beyond' claimed to be beyond our human experience of the presence of a Beyond.<sup>54</sup> (The reverse side of this picture being a merely immanent world and view of the human person; cf. *CW* 6:375). However, the experience of a divine Beyond of experience is as much a human experience in the *metaxy* as is the experience of an immanent realm of beings, namely, the 'world'. These 'regions' of reality necessarily belong together, since there is no transcendence without immanence, and vice versa. For Voegelin, the real question, is how to articulate their relationship. To the degree that theological discourse ascribes determinate properties to, or withholds deter-

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<sup>52</sup> On the distinction between intentionality and luminosity as different dimensions of consciousness see the posthumously published *CW* 18, 28-31.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Federici, "Voegelin's Christian Critics", 334.

<sup>54</sup> Barry Cooper, *Beginning the Quest. Law and Politics in the Early Work of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 5. Cf. *CW* 18:83. Apparently, this is what happened to the term 'ousia' when taken to refer to an ineffable divine essence. "The deficiencies of Aristotle's vocabulary were one of the factors that steered post-Aristotelian philosophy in the direction of dogmatic metaphysics. The specific point of departure for this development was the symbolism of *ousia*." (*CW* 6:358) Cf. Edward Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

minate properties from, a transcendent being named 'God', it partakes in 'objectifying' thought and must therefore be read against itself. Here the language of divine 'natures' or 'hypostases' is one of the main culprits in the story of 'doctrinization', precisely because it seems to militate against the *metaxy* of the divine-human encounter.

It is precisely such a metaxological language that Voegelin was groping for in his later reflections. Their path-braking character should prevent the theological reader from taking the critique of a doctrinal understanding of the figure and role of Christ as complicit in some form of deflationary skepticism or agnosticism. Rather, it seems that Voegelin's critique of historic Christianity stems from the complex ways in which conceptually deformed symbols of noetic and pneumatic theophany come back to haunt 'orthodox' theological belief-systems *as much as the thought and attitude of those who revolt against them.*

Having said that, one must still ask whether Voegelin's manifest circumvention of orthodox Christology and 'dogmatic' trinitarian discourse can itself claim to be true to the narrative and symbolic universe of the New Testament.<sup>55</sup> It has seemed to many readers that the specific narrative and symbolic renderings of Christ in the Gospel and Pauline texts have been unduly sacrificed to a pre-conceived model of theophany or divine manifestation. Voegelin's essential ('Neoplatonist') commitment to aboriginal divine manifestation *and* ineffability thus seems to undermine the possibility of a 'hypostatic' or personal interpretation of the Trinity only at the price of undermining the biblical text itself. "It seems that this once Voegelin has approached a great spiritual reality from a standpoint extraneous to it."<sup>56</sup> Assessing such negative reactions from the side of even the most loyal theological readers is a necessary step in the course of investigation here adumbrated.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Niemeyer, "Voegelin's Philosophy", 35.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

### 5.3. *Gnosticism*

Voegelin's highly controversial account of 'gnosis' and 'gnostic' deformation of consciousness has sparked a wide-ranging discussion.<sup>57</sup> In Voegelin's earlier account, 'dogmatization' of noetic and pneumatic truth exerts its most devastating impact on subsequent history in indirect fashion, that is, through the 'gnostic' reactions it has provoked. 'Gnostic' thinkers attempt to redress the prior deformations – "the trauma of the Orthodox environment" victimizing most of the great German thinkers from Leibniz to Heidegger (cf. *CW* 18:79) – with theoretical-immanent means; they seek to substitute *firm knowledge* for the love of wisdom and erotic tension characteristic of the classical philosophical quest. The desire for firm knowledge is ultimately seen to yield revolutionary terror aiming at the realization of the meaning of history *within*, rather than *beyond* history. In short, the 'gnostic' mind "lust(s) for massively possessive experience" (*CW* 5:188). In Voegelin's account, the 'gnostic' thinker cannot live with pneumatic faith that is the substance of things hoped for and finds its only proof within itself. (*ibid.*,187) Neither is he satisfied with the recovery of noetic exegesis in the sense given to it by Plato. For Voegelin, the history of much modern thought and politics is thus marked by increasingly violent 'gnostic' attempts of elevating an immanent (dis)order of things to the meaning and goal *of* history.

At this point, both theological and non-theological commentators and disciples of Voegelin face a difficulty. For in his later publications, he traces significant roots of Gnosticism back to the New Testament itself.<sup>58</sup> Theological doctrines derived from the 'affected' biblical material therefore seem to lose even their former protective role in the theophanous process. Rather, they now are directly complicit in the support of 'gnostic' movements throughout the ages. But whatever one makes of the admittedly brilliant reading Voegelin

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<sup>57</sup> For a recent overview see Rossbach, "Gnosis".

<sup>58</sup> In this respect, chap. 5 of *The Ecumenic Age* entitled "The Pauline Vision of the Resurrected" has achieved the greatest degree of notoriety in the corpus.

gives the New Testament texts, which he presumes to betray a 'gnostic' drift, the methodological paradigm and interpretive criteria deployed to identify such drift turn out to be much too vague to be of service within a disciplined inquiry of ancient and modern Gnosticism.<sup>59</sup>

Extending this line of criticism, one could even argue that by failing to appreciate the 'grammatical' role of Christological and Trinitarian symbolism, Voegelin makes himself blind to radical Gnostic movements of narrative disfiguration-refiguration of the 'text' in the original Hellenistic field. Here is what one of the foremost contemporary proponents of the thesis of a return of Gnostic discourse in modernity says: "Eric Voegelin is, arguably, the thinker most responsible for the polemical and pathological use of the term *Gnostic* with respect to modern discourse. Not denying the sometimes high level of insight and sound judgment with respect to a number of major modern thinkers, the careless attribution of Gnosticism risks making Gnosticism an element of a demonological discourse."<sup>60</sup> Remarkably, the author of these words is a contemporary theologian who probably has done most to vindicate Voegelin's 'discovery' of the perduring reality of Gnosticism in the modern period. Voegelin-studies can hardly afford to ignore the extremely sophisticated model developed by this scholar to prove his and – at least on one reading – Voegelin's ambitious case.

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<sup>59</sup> Commentators have observed that the inquiry pursued by the later Voegelin takes the form of a self-referential meditation seeking to distance itself from an inquiry into the 'given' structures of the 'external world'. The methodological shortcomings involved in Voegelin's approach to 'Gnosticism' are helpfully discussed in Rossbach ("Gnosis", 100-113) against the background of Voegelin's own interpretive principles and 'mystic' stance.

<sup>60</sup> Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse. Jacob Boehme's Haunted Narrative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). An important contribution from a Voegelinian perspective to the role of Boehme for the thesis of a Gnostic return has been made by David Walsh, *The Mysticism of Innerworldly Fulfillment: A Study of Jacob Boehme* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida), 1983.

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