
THE QUESTION OF ERIC VOEGELIN'S FAITH (OR ATHEISM?):

A COMMENT ON MABEN POIRIER'S CRITIQUE

Eugene Webb

Abstract:

Poirier argues that Voegelin was neither a 'deeply spiritual person' nor a Christian in any 'acceptable' sense of the term but 'a subjectivistic immanentist' and an atheist. The charge of subjectivistic immanentism is based on an inadequate reading of Voegelin's central concept of metaxy existence. However, the charge of atheism does raise interesting questions. Christian orthodoxy has room for ways of thinking about God that are more commodious than Poirier's and more compatible with Voegelin's, who in his own way really was deeply spiritual, but there is no place in Voegelin for the central Christian belief in eschatological fulfilment.

Key words:

Metaxy, Christianity, orthodoxy, immanentism, God, christology, incarnation, Voegelin, Niebuhr, Maritain, Aquinas, Chalcedon.

I have been asked to comment on Maben Poirier's, 'Eric Voegelin's Immanentism: A Man At Odds With The Transcendent?' published in *Appraisal*, Vol. 7, Nos. 2 and 3 (Oct. 2008-March 2009), and I welcome the opportunity to do so, because the questions Poirier raises are interesting and important ones. My own approach to them will be rather different from his, but I think he articulates those questions in a way that opens up possibilities for discussing the topics of God, faith, and atheism that offer a welcome relief from the simplistic and shallow framework of discussion dictated by what is currently being called 'the new atheism.'

To sum up his main points briefly, Professor Poirier says that although Voegelin is often interpreted 'as a classically based Christian thinker, and sometimes simply as a deeply spiritual person, who was critical of modernity,' he was in reality 'not only not a Christian in any sense of the term that is acceptable, but he was not a theist or even a deist.' Putting it more bluntly, he says, 'I argue rather that Voegelin was a modern thinker and an atheist,' because 'his seeming support for Christianity in his writings stemmed from his desire to use a modified or immanentised understanding of Christianity as the basis on which to erect a civil theology.' Christianity, that is, and belief in God were, for Voegelin, simply useful fictions. As evidence Poirier cites a conversation of Voegelin with his friend Robert Heilman:¹

Professor Heilman reported that Voegelin, on one memorable occasion, said to him: 'Of course there is no God. But we must believe in Him.' Now, if the issue here is whether Voegelin believed or did not believe in the independent existence of the Ground, in short, whether he was or was not a deeply spiritual person in the traditional, and, some might even say, naive sense of the word 'spiritual,' namely, a person who wished to rekindle man's relationship with the independently existing Reality Who is the Divine, then the answer, it seems to me, is unambiguous.

Poirier also interprets Voegelin as an 'immanentist' who denied the reality of anything beyond his own subjectivity: Voegelin may have talked about 'the Beyond' and about an experience of 'the Ground,' 'but, for him,' says Poirier, 'the Ground that he experienced did not exist in the world beyond the experiencing subject.' Rather, it was no more than 'an expression of the existential consciousness of the experiencing subject.' And the same is true of 'the Beyond' that Voegelin talked about: 'Man is at one end of the experiential complex and 'the Beyond' is experienced as being at the other end. But 'the Beyond' is really not beyond. It is within, ...within consciousness.'

Let me list the charges in the order I will take them up:

1. Voegelin was a modern thinker.
2. He was not a Christian.
3. He was a subjectivistic immanentist.
4. He was an atheist.
5. He did not believe in any form of real transcendence.
6. He was not 'a deeply spiritual person.'

I do not necessarily intend to dispute each of these claims. I do differ from Poirier regarding most, though not all, of them, since I tend to approach them from a very different angle, but I am less concerned with arguing a simple 'yes' or 'no' with regard to them than with exploring them in a bit more depth in the hope that this may help us to understand somewhat better both those issues and Voegelin's own thought. What I say will be based in part on my reading of his writings, and also in part on the many conversations Voegelin and I had as I was writing my book on his thought—conversations in which I was trying at the time to get a better handle on some of these same questions than his writings alone seemed able to give me. Since mine was the first book published on him, I had no other interpreters to

serve as mediators between my understanding and his intentions; I simply had to read for myself and then discuss my interpretations with him. That Voegelin was pleased with the end result gives me some confidence that I can contribute usefully to the discussion of these issues. I also hope the fact that although I shared a great deal with him, I was not a 'follower' of Voegelin and did not coincide with him on all points (as will become clear below) may help me to build a bridge between Voegelin's point of view and that of Professor Poirier and of others who may share his concerns.²

With regard to the first item on the above list, that Voegelin was a modern thinker, I do not disagree. In fact, far from being what would commonly be called a 'traditional' thinker, Voegelin was a very modern thinker in that he was deeply committed to rational inquiry and respect for empirical evidence as well as skeptical of any reliance on traditional authority. His approach to the study of traditional thought was always by way of critically reflective inquiry and attention to the ways in which traditions were historically formed. The interesting question about Voegelin's modernity, I think, has to do with the extent to which his own thought may have been shaped more in various ways by some patterns of modern thinking than he himself was fully aware, and I think this is probably what Poirier is really trying to get at as well. Even a thinker as radically self-reflective as Voegelin could hardly expect to extricate himself entirely from the flux of history and stand serenely above the currents of thought that flowed through the time in which he lived. I do not have a simple answer to this question, but perhaps the discussion of some of the other points in our list may at least throw some light on it, especially the next two, the question of his relation to Christianity and to belief in some conception of 'what is called God.'³

The question of Voegelin's relation to Christianity is one I was intrigued by myself, as I indicated in my book in the chapter on his 'philosophy of religion.' After looking at it from various angles and culling citations from his writings that would support both 'pro' and 'con' arguments as to his being at least in some sense a Christian thinker, I wrote:

From all of this it would seem that an interpreter who wished to put together an argument to the effect that Voegelin is not a Christian would be able to find as much evidence for his position as one who argued the opposite. The resolution of this apparent dilemma, however, cannot best be found by settling for one side or the other, but by refining the question. The most penetrating question is not whether Voegelin is a Christian or not but what is the shape of his particular variety of Christian thought—for that his

thought is Christian in at least some sense seems incontestable. Those of his critics who have attacked his treatment of Christianity have in effect been arguing not that Voegelin is not a Christian at all but that he is not a Christian by their standards. And he would agree.⁴

I also suggested there that in comparison with many prominent Christian theologians of his century who not only 'accepted the positivist critique of miracles' but also went 'some distance toward separating the symbolism of the Christian story from history altogether,' Voegelin took the historicity of Jesus and of divine Incarnation in him very seriously; 'If one wishes to find a modern reduction of Jesus to a disincarnate symbol,' I said, 'one can find much better evidence of it in such thinkers as Tillich or Bultmann.'⁵

On the historicity of the Incarnation, Voegelin himself had said in 'The Gospel and Culture': 'At a time when the reality of the gospel threatens to fall apart into the constructions of an historical Jesus and a doctrinal Christ, one cannot stress strongly enough the status of a gospel as a symbolism engendered in the *metaxy* of existence by a disciple's response to the drama of the Son of God. The drama of the Unknown God who reveals his kingdom through his presence in a man, and of the man who reveals what has been delivered to him by delivering it to his fellowmen, is continued by the existentially responsive disciple in the gospel drama by which he carries on the work of delivering these things from God to man.'⁶ And lest this sound as if it might with deliberate 'ambiguity' be reducing Jesus, as Poirier might phrase it,⁷ to merely an imaginary dramatic figure in someone else's 'immanentist' *metaxy* experience, Voegelin goes on to say that 'a gospel is neither a poet's work of dramatic art, nor an historian's biography of Jesus, but the symbolization of a divine movement that went through the person of Jesus into society and history.'⁸ The entire Christian movement, that is, began with the concrete experience, and self-interpretation through Israel's heritage of symbols, of the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth—'from the constitution of his consciousness as the Son of God in the encounters with God and the devil, to the full realization of what it means to be the Son of God, to the submission to the passion and the last word: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?''⁹—and Jesus's communication of this experience and interpretation to those who would bear witness to him.

I realize that the whole idea of associating Jesus with Voegelin's idea of *metaxy* existence may seem problematic to someone who interprets that idea the way Poirier does. The problem is worth stopping over. The experience of *metaxy* existence is the

absolute centre of all of Voegelin's thought, and since, as I think Poirier would probably agree, the idea of divine incarnation in Jesus is itself the center of orthodox Christian theology, to discuss both of them in relation to one another may help to clarify some underlying issues.

That Voegelin took the idea of divine incarnation in Jesus very seriously, i.e., that he had a Christology, is clear from many statements he made over the years. For example, in the first volume of *Order and History, Israel and Revelation*, Voegelin said, 'With the appearance of Jesus, God himself entered into the eternal present of history.'¹⁰ And in 'The Gospel and Culture,' he said, 'In the historical drama of revelation, the Unknown God ultimately becomes the God known through his presence in Christ.'¹¹

I realize, of course, that such citations will not suffice to answer Poirier's objections, which focus especially on the fact that to interpret Jesus as a person whose experience of existence in the *metaxy* was essentially like that of any other human being—even if in him it was uniquely 'open' (as Voegelin uses that term)¹² and faithful to the directional pull of the 'tension of existence'¹³—would be to see Jesus as one man among others. And Voegelin would not disagree; in fact, he would insist on it, since from his point of view, for divine incarnation to take place, it must take place in a concrete human being, and to be human is to live, whether with greater or with lesser openness and clarity, in the *metaxy*—since that is the only existence human beings actually experience. Voegelin interprets the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith in precisely these terms:

...I shall quote the essential passage from the Definition of Chalcedon (A. D. 451), concerning the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ...truly God and truly man...recognized in two natures...the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence.' This valiant attempt of the *patres* to express the two-in-one reality of God's participation in man, without either compromising the separateness of the two or splitting the one, concerns the same structure of intermediate reality, of the *metaxy*, the philosopher encounters when he analyzes man's consciousness of participation in the divine ground of his existence. The reality of the Mediator and the intermediate reality of consciousness have the same structure.¹⁴

For Voegelin, philosophy and theology, reflection and revelation—when they are genuine and not just a play of abstractions—all begin with the material of concrete experience, and human experience always has the structure of a tension between two (upper

and lower) poles, which he frequently refers to as 'God' or 'the divine ground' on the one hand and 'man' on the other, and sometimes with a variety of other terms, as in this list in his 'Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization':

Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic *metaxy*, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness; between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence; between *amor Dei* and *amor sui*, *l'âme ouverte* and *l'âme close*; between virtues of openness toward the ground of being such as faith, love, and hope, and the vices of infolding closure such as hybris and revolt; between the moods of joy and despair; and between alienation in its double meaning of alienation from the world and alienation from God.¹⁵

In *The Ecumenic Age* Voegelin says that all genuine insights and all experiences of revelation 'occur in the *Metaxy*, i.e., in the concrete psyche of concrete human beings in their encounters with divine presence. There are no Greek insights into the structure of reality apart from those of the philosophers in whose psyches the noetic theophany occurred; nor are there Israelite, Jewish, and Christian insights into the dynamics of transfiguration apart from the prophets, apostles, and above all, Jesus, in whose psyche the pneumatic revelations occurred.'¹⁶ The 'dynamics of transfiguration' he speaks of there is itself a structural feature of the existential tension that is experienced (when one yields to or opens oneself to it) as a dynamism moving (or being drawn) toward the upper pole. One of Voegelin's terms for this is 'Exodus within Reality,' in which 'Reality is experienced as moving beyond its own structure toward a state of transfiguration.'¹⁷

To put this package in other (I hope a little plainer) words, human experience is pervasively an experience of longing for fulfillment; we live in a perpetual condition of incompleteness, but it is intrinsic to our longing that its tension is experienced as a reaching beyond unfulfilment toward the completeness, the perfect being, that would satisfy its longing. It can never really escape its own structure (that is, that of being 'between' [*metaxu*] poles of emptiness and fullness, etc.), but it can have a vivid sense of movement beyond incompleteness, and it is this movement that Voegelin refers to as 'transfiguration.'

In the same place in *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin also says, emphasizing the universality of this experience, 'Transfiguring incarnation...does not begin with Christ, as Paul assumed, but becomes

conscious through Christ and Paul's vision as the eschatological *telos* of the transfiguring process that goes on in history before and after Christ and constitutes its meaning.¹⁸

This very universality is, of course, one of the points Poirier objects to when he says that 'for Voegelin, the expression 'the spirit of Christianity' is not specific to Christianity. It is a spirit that is present in the thought of all who live an open experiential life. It is present in the thought of Plato, the Hebrew prophets, the Buddha and Buddhists generally, etc.....'

Perhaps it will help to clarify the problem involved here if I point out that a crucial point of difference between Voegelin's Christology and that of some critics like Poirier has to do with the question of the uniqueness of the incarnation of God in Jesus. Christianity has from the beginning interpreted the incarnation in Jesus as in some manner unique, but the nature of that uniqueness has never been dogmatically defined. In the first essay I wrote on Voegelin, I addressed this very question (as it was raised at that time by some of the writers Poirier refers to, especially Gerhart Niemeyer and Frederick D. Wilhelmsen¹⁹), pointing out that:

There is another way of formulating the underlying issue that never occurred to the earlier tradition, and that is to ask if the union of man and God in Christ is to be interpreted as unique in kind or in degree. ...it is sufficient to identify it as a possible approach to show that the conflict between Voegelin's position and that of orthodoxy may not be a complete impasse. This very question has in fact, been taken up in recent times by theologians who grow out of the orthodox tradition and intend fidelity to it [I referred to Donald M. Baillie's *God Was in Christ* and W. Norman Pittenger's *The Word Incarnate*] but who do not interpret orthodoxy as requiring the more customary interpretation [i.e., that the divine-human union in Jesus was unique in kind]. It is worth remembering that, as Alan Richardson said in his *Creeds in the Making*, the Chalcedonian Definition did not prescribe a theory of how Godhead and manhood were united in Christ but contented itself with insisting on the mere fact of their union in him. 'Thus,' he says, 'it permits the formulation of theories provided that the principle is safeguarded in them.' Voegelin's interpretation of Incarnation in terms of continuity and universality would not in any way contradict this principle; rather, it is one possible theoretical approach beginning from it.²⁰

The Chalcedonian Definition itself, in fact, would seem to imply uniqueness in degree rather than in kind since it explicitly refers to Jesus as being 'like us in every way except for sin.'²¹ The root meaning of the word it uses, *hamartia*, translated as 'sin,' is failure, falling short, missing the target; the one who

was 'like us in every way except for sin' differed from us in not falling short of the calling to sonship to God that the Hebrew scriptures so frequently referred to as something Israel was called to but again and again failed to live up to (which is the specific Biblical symbolism that lay behind the early Christian references to Jesus as 'son of God'²²).

Even if Poirier might acknowledge the openness of Chalcedon to such interpretation, however, he would nevertheless object, as he himself puts it, that 'for Voegelin, Jesus is strictly human, namely, a being who likely realised a maximal measure of the human potential, but it is His human potential that was maximized.' This is why Poirier says that 'what Voegelin really wished to convey by speaking of dogmatism [at the Council of Nicea], and by his use of the expression 'pre-Nicene Christian'' to describe himself 'was his support for an experiential life that is immanentist, which was what was present in the Arian belief' that the council condemned as heretical.

Actually I have a very different conception of what might have made Voegelin think of himself as 'pre-Nicene,' and that too is connected with the centrality, indeed the ultimacy, of the *metaxy* idea in Voegelin's thought. But before explaining what I mean by this, I think it will be helpful to further clarify what Voegelin actually meant by 'the *metaxy*.'

I hope I am not oversimplifying, but it looks to me as if Poirier thinks that the non-existence of God ('the Ground that he experienced did not exist in the world beyond the experiencing subject' but 'existed only as an expression of the existential consciousness of the experiencing subject') and the interpretation of Jesus as only a man ('strictly human, and nothing more than human') are logical implications of Voegelin's idea of the *metaxy* and that therefore Voegelin's thought could involve no real parallel to the Christian idea of the Incarnation: 'Voegelin's modern immanentist belief that there is no world transcendent God was what led him to the view that Jesus was a man like all others, and so, Jesus—as the Arians contended—had to be strictly human and nothing more than that.'

I think Poirier's reading of Voegelin's *metaxy*, however, is fundamentally different from Voegelin's own intention. Voegelin himself would probably have said that Arianism involved hypostatizing the 'man' pole of the *metaxy* (and probably the 'God' side also). To explore further Voegelin's conception of the *metaxy* may help not only to clarify the question of Voegelin's Christology but also that of his possible 'atheism.'

Let us consider more closely what Poirier says

about what he thinks Voegelin meant by it. He says that *metaxy* existence is for Voegelin 'only ... an experience that man has—an experience that has man as its subject and its object—and that is all it is.... It is an experience that unfolds entirely within the immanent order of man's consciousness, and thus we are not justified in arguing that it says something about man's transmundane connections.' As illustration he cites a passage from Voegelin's 'Autobiographical Reflections' (in which Voegelin was describing his efforts to extricate himself from the positivistic currents of thought that surrounded him by developing a thoroughly experience-based mode of reflection like that of William James's 'radical empiricism'):

The term consciousness, therefore, could no longer mean to me a human consciousness which is conscious of a reality outside man's consciousness, but had to mean the in-between reality of the participatory pure experience which then analytically can be characterised through such terms as the poles of the experiential tension and the reality of the experiential tension in the *metaxy*. The term luminosity of consciousness ... tries to stress this In-Between character of the experience as against the immanentising language of a human consciousness which, as a subject, is opposed to an object of experience.

'Notice,' Poirier says, 'how Voegelin immanentises and subjectivises (i.e., intra-personalises) the expression 'the in-between.' ... it is about the character and quality of human consciousness and experience.' And he identifies this immanentizing and subjectivizing with Voegelin's often repeated injunction that the poles of the experiential tension 'must not be hypostatized into objects independent of the tension in which they are experienced as its poles.'²³ To Poirier, this is conclusive evidence that Voegelin was an immanentist and an atheist: '...neither pole, the Ground pole and the man pole, can exist independently of one another, which is what is implied by 'hypostatizing the poles.'²⁴

But actually, if one reads the quoted passage carefully, one can see that when Voegelin says that 'the term consciousness ... could no longer mean to me a human consciousness which is conscious of a reality outside man's consciousness' and rejects 'the immanentising language of a human consciousness which, as a subject, is opposed to an object of experience,' he is doing just the opposite of interpreting 'the participatory pure experience' as something contained within an immanentistically conceived human consciousness. To do that would be precisely to hypostatize 'the man pole.' Voegelin adopted a radically empiricist attention to the experience itself, prior to any assumptions about

whether there is an actually existing entity that might be assumed to be the 'subject' of the experience, or even an actually existing world of entities that that subject might both exist in and take items of as its objects.²⁵ Voegelin's approach is first of all phenomenological, a matter of holding back the urge to impose our accustomed categories of interpretation ('subject,' 'object,' 'entity,' 'world,' 'God,' 'man) so that we can notice the structure of the fundamental experience that is shared by all who participate in it, whatever the categories they might use to interpret it.

It looks as if the real underlying issue in Poirier's dispute with Voegelin here is that Poirier wants Voegelin to hypostatize God (the Beyond, the Ground) and assumes that if he refuses to do that, then he must be hypostatizing 'the man pole' as an individual consciousness that contains 'the God pole' as merely one of its ideas. But what Voegelin himself said was that 'any construction of man as a world immanent entity will destroy the meaning of existence.'²⁶ Nor are even 'language symbols' such as 'God' and 'man' to be understood immanentistically; as Voegelin put it in another part of the 'Autobiographical Reflections': 'This understanding of the In-Between character of consciousness, as well as of its luminosity—which is the luminosity not of a subjective consciousness but of the reality that enters into the experience from both sides—results furthermore in a better understanding of the problem of symbols: *Symbols* are the language phenomena engendered by the process of participatory experience. The language symbols expressing an experience are not inventions of an immanentist human consciousness but are engendered in the process of participation itself.'²⁷

For Voegelin to be a subjectivistic immanentist, as Poirier claims, Voegelin would first, contrary to his own repeated injunctions, have to hypostatize an immanent subject with an 'immanentist human consciousness.' I hope it is sufficiently clear that this was not what Voegelin intended. Still, I suspect that even if I could persuade Poirier that Voegelin did not suppose a hypostatized human consciousness as the container of a 'God' idea, he would still object that Voegelin's 'God pole' is only an idea, not a reality. So before continuing with the discussion of Voegelin's relation to Christian thought, I will begin to address the question of what Voegelin meant by 'God' and how that might relate to the way the term has been used in the mainstream tradition of Christianity.

Poirier seems to suppose that orthodox Christianity has traditionally held that God is a particular entity, an individually existing being, but that is not the case.

There probably are and have been many Christians who would say that God is an individually existing being, but the great majority of traditional theologians have spoken of God not as 'a being' but rather as 'Being Itself,' *Ipsum Esse*, to use St. Thomas Aquinas's phrase. That is to say, Christian theological reflection from late antiquity until at least the late Middle Ages, when William of Ockham *did* interpret God as a single, very powerful, individual entity, has generally tended toward what theologians now call 'pantheism' (literally, 'all-in-God-ism').²⁸

It is true that the God of the ancient Israelites, the Jews, and the Christians has almost always been pictured as though he were an individual entity, and if one were simply to read the Bible uncritically, one might get the impression that that is all there is to it. But this is an inherent function of narrative form as such. Even a well educated, critical reader, while reading the stories about God in the Bible must in doing so imagine him as a dramatic character of the sort one encounters in stories. But while a story needs a cast of characters, and reading a story requires an act of imaginative empathy, the enterprise of theology has always been an effort to step beyond mythic picture thinking so as to clarify the larger framework of meaning the myths serve. The Bible is a book with many historical layers, each with its own version of God, and to read it as a whole is to retrace a millennia-long process of imaginative interpretation in which the biblical God moves, in a first transformation, from being one god among many, even if the most powerful member of the genus, 'a great God and a great king above all gods,' as in Psalm 95, to being the only real member of the genus.²⁹ Eventually, in a more radical transformation, the Yahweh of the Israelites moves, in some of the later prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the second Isaiah, toward being conceived as radically transcendent, beyond the cosmos and even, as Aquinas later argued, beyond the genus of gods altogether.³⁰

In his treatise on 'the names of God,' Aquinas takes up a long list of names or terms that get applied to God, including whether it is appropriate to call God 'God.' His answer is that it can be appropriate, but that when that term is appropriately applied, its meaning is analogical, and that even its analogical meaning depends on the person who uses it having some real (i.e., experiential) knowledge of God.³¹ Of the names of God in use, Aquinas says that the most proper is '*Qui est*,' 'He Who Is' since 'the being of God is His essence itself, which can be said of no other.'³² And yet, he says, 'still more proper is the Tetragrammaton [YHWH], imposed to signify the substance of God itself, incommunicable

and, if one may so speak, singular.'³³ As I put it in *Worldview and Mind*, 'YHWH is not an analogy but an indicator that with the symbol 'Being,' one has reached the ultimate limit of metaphors; the tetragrammaton is the jumping-off point into absolute mystery.'³⁴

To state the matter succinctly, if Voegelin can be called an atheist because he did not think that God is an individual entity, then so could St. Thomas. And when he said to Bob Heilman, 'Of course there is no God. But we must believe in Him,' he could also have meant (as I think he really did) that the symbol 'God' is a mythic image taken from ancient mythology about a genus of entities of the type 'god,' but nevertheless, just as Aquinas's names of God are useful if imperfect analogies, it is a helpful image for the imagination to use in orienting itself in the direction of supreme transcendence.

I do not mean, however, simply to dismiss Poirier's challenge regarding the nature of Voegelin's God and whether that could really be said to be the God of traditional Christians, including Christians who think as deeply and subtly about it as Aquinas. I think that Poirier's challenge to Voegelin on this point has real force and that it offers an opportunity to bring to the fore some issues that neither Voegelin nor either his Christian followers or his Christian critics have made sufficiently explicit.

One of the most fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith from the start has been belief in Jesus's resurrection (see I Cor. 15 for a statement of this decades before the gospels were written). Another closely related one is expectation of eschatological fulfilment, of which Christians have believed Jesus's resurrection was both the sign and the actual beginning: 'But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming' (1 Cor. 15:20-23).

Even if Voegelin's belief that the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus was unique in degree but not in kind would not rule out Voegelin's being considered a Christian in the terms of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, disbelief in the resurrection clearly would. Indeed, since belief in the resurrection would probably seem as central to Christian orthodoxy as belief in the Incarnation, I was surprised to see that Poirier refers to it only in a footnote.³⁵

That may be because it is a question Voegelin never addressed in a clear and direct way in his writings. I can speak to this point myself, however,

on the basis of my conversations with him. Jesus's resurrection was not a topic that came up while I was writing my book on Voegelin, for the very reason that he had not written about that but rather about Paul's 'vision of the resurrected.' But not long after my book was published (I think it was sometime in the spring of 1981), we had a conversation in which I said something that indicated I myself took belief in the resurrection seriously, and this produced the response, 'I did not realize you were a fundamentalist.' He seemed shocked. And I was as surprised in my own way as he was—not so much by the fact that he expressed disbelief in that doctrine (I knew his mind pretty well by then), but by his simple identification of belief in the resurrection with fundamentalism. I hope I may be forgiven for speaking personally for a moment (since my own beliefs are not the topic at issue or even particularly relevant), but I suspect that although I consider myself an orthodox Christian in the Chalcedonian sense, I would probably have difficulty convincing many Christians, and perhaps Professor Poirier as well, of my orthodoxy (especially since I side with Voegelin on the 'unique in degree' vs. 'unique in kind' question). But I doubt if I would have any difficulty at all persuading them that I am not a fundamentalist. That Voegelin would simply equate belief in resurrection with fundamentalism suggests that Gerhart Niemeyer may not have been off the mark when he said that Christianity was the one great historical tradition Voegelin did not fully understand. Not only was the resurrection of Christ not an idea which he could consider at all credible, it was not even one that he could quite grasp the possibility of a Christian he respected actually believing in.

I spoke above of the ultimacy for Voegelin of the *metaxy* he found both in Plato and in his phenomenological analysis of his own meditative experience. He speaks of *metaxy* existence eloquently, brilliantly, and even with real reverence. But something else that I think Voegelin did not understand about the Christian faith is that Christianity has its own understanding of *metaxy* existence that not only includes everything Voegelin discerned in his own, but also a further dimension that seems to have been invisible to him: that Christian existence is lived between crucifixion and resurrection—between the crushing, palpable evidence in Jesus's crucifixion that the disciples' hope in him was misguided and the mysterious, impalpable evidence of an inchoate present fulfilment and the promise of a future, perfect fulfilment that is inherently mysterious and will always remain a radical challenge to our human imaginations, our

intellects, and even our sense of spiritual aspiration.

If we return, then, to the centrality, and as I suggested earlier, the real ultimacy, of the *metaxy* in Voegelin's framework of thought, I think we should be able to see why he would be so dismissive of any form of eschatological fulfilment and of the idea of a God who would have the ability to bring such a fulfilment about. He made this clear in *The Ecumenic Age* when he spoke of Paul's 'transformation of the mystery [of the vision in the *metaxy*] into metastatic expectations.'³⁶ Comparing Paul with Plato, he said that Plato 'preserves the balance of consciousness' by playing down 'the unbalancing reality of the theophanic event.'³⁷ Paul, in contrast, lost that balance through letting his theophanic vision tempt him to expectations of a radical transformation in the conditions of existence: 'The mythopoetic genius of Paul,' said Voegelin, 'is not controlled by the critical consciousness of a Plato.'³⁸ What Voegelin meant by Paul's 'transformation of the mystery into metastatic expectations,' is that Paul slipped into supposing that the *metaxy* itself could be somehow be transcended. Voegelin's own belief was that it could *not*, for the reason that the *metaxy* itself *is* ultimate reality.³⁹

When this is understood, I think several other questions can answer themselves fairly easily. One is that what Voegelin seems likely to have meant (if he did mean it seriously), when he spoke of himself as a pre-Nicene Christian, has to do not with Arianism but rather with the 'openness of the theophanic field' that he said had been 'substantially preserved for three centuries' (i.e., until the Council of Nicea in 325).⁴⁰ The 'theophanic field' Voegelin refers to is the *metaxy* when it involves a vivid sense of the pull from the divine pole. What Voegelin probably thought of as the historical contingency that closed that theophanic field was the gradually increasing tendency in the aftermath of that first official church council to conceive of the uniqueness of the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus in a way that raised him inherently above the *metaxy* and made it impossible for others to realize that Jesus's experience of life in that openness was something that they could fully share. This is why Voegelin says in the same place that until Nicea 'the early Patres...found one or the other subordinationist construction to be the most suitable symbolism for expressing the relation of the Son to the Father-God' and that this continued 'up to Nicea (325), when the Athanasian victory put an end to this generous openness.'⁴¹

The answer to the question of whether Voegelin's God is the same as that of traditional Christianity should now be clear. The divine pole of Voegelin's

metaxy is something more akin to the Platonic Agathon, i.e., a point of orientation toward the good. If we consider such a distinguished figure in twentieth century theology as H. Richard Niebuhr, the difference between his God and Voegelin's can illustrate this without tempting us to stumble over the question of whether the Christian God is supposed to be an individually existing entity—something that Niebuhr did not believe either.

On the one hand, Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism* explicitly makes the case for a panentheistic, non-entitative conception of the Christian God who—imaged as 'a deity'—is also our point of orientation toward the good as such. Faith in God, says Niebuhr is 'the confidence that whatever is, is good, because it exists as one thing among the many which all have their origin and their being in the One, the principle of being which is also the principle of value. In Him we live and move and have our being not only as existent but as worthy of existence and worthy in existence.'⁴²

But on the other hand, Niebuhr also made it clear that the God of the Christian tradition is not *only* the supreme principle of value. In his *The Meaning of Revelation*, he defines the belief of the community of Christian faith by saying, 'In order that any being may qualify as a deity before the bar of reason it must be good, but it must also be powerful. There may be beings we can adore for their goodness which are as powerless as the self-subsistent values and the eternal objects of modern philosophy. But what is powerless cannot have the character of deity; it cannot be counted on, trusted in; to it no prayers ascend.... Deity, whatever else it must be to be deity, must be powerful in its goodness as well as good in its power.... We meet the God of Jesus Christ with the expectations of such power.'⁴³ For Christians, that is, their God is not only the symbol and ground of supreme value but also the radically transcendent source of all being, who (to use the mythic, but useful, analogical image of a supremely personal deity) has the real power to win, and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth already has won, a decisive victory over sin and death—a God whom they can trust to bring to fulfilment the intention He has had from the beginning of creation to incarnate His life everywhere, in everyone, and in everything to the extent of their capacities. As Saint Maximus the Confessor put it: 'God the divine Logos wishes to effect the mystery of his incarnation always and in all things.'⁴⁴

At this point, then, I think we have an answer to the question of whether Voegelin was an atheist. It is clear that Poirier is not wrong when he says that Voegelin did not believe in the God of traditional

Christianity. But I hope I have made it equally clear that one can think differently from Poirier about the meaning of the word 'God' without being an atheist. Voegelin's God may not have been Niebuhr's, but his divine pole of the *metaxy* was at least a version of what Niebuhr called a 'principle of being which is also the principle of value,' even if in Voegelin's case that principle (i.e., source or 'ground') had no ultimate power except that exerted through the gentle pull of the 'golden cord' of reflective insight, to cite another of Voegelin's favourite images from Plato's *The Laws*.⁴⁵

Jacques Maritain, the leading Thomist philosopher of the twentieth century, argued, persuasively I think, that to be a real atheist is extremely difficult—he said he was not sure anyone except maybe Nietzsche had ever fully succeeded in it.⁴⁶ I think that a brief look at how Maritain distinguished between a real atheist and a 'pseudo-atheist'—i.e., someone who 'when he denies the existence of God, denies the existence of an *ens rationis*, an imaginary entity which he calls God, but which is not God'⁴⁷—will help to answer not only the question of whether Voegelin was really an atheist but also the other remaining questions about whether 'he did not believe in any form of real transcendence' or whether he was 'not a deeply spiritual person.'

In his essay, 'The Immanent Dialectic of The First Act of Freedom,' Maritain talked about the act of faith that is implicit in what he called 'a *first* or *primal* free act, any free act through which a new basic direction is imposed on my life.'⁴⁸ 'The soul,' he says, 'in this first moral choice, turns away from an evil action because it is evil. Thus the intellect is aware of the distinction between good and evil, and knows that the good ought to be done because it is good. We are confronted, here, with a formal motive which transcends the whole order of empirical convenience and desire.'⁴⁹ The true good, that is, is understood to have its ground in ultimate reality; it is determined neither by an accidental desire of the individual nor by the arbitrary decree of a supreme power (such as the God of William of Ockham, who maintained that the good is grounded only in an arbitrary act of God's will, which God could change at any time).⁵⁰ In Maritain's words, 'The notion of a good action to be done for the sake of the good necessarily implies that there is an ideal and indefectible order.... an order that depends on a reality superior to everything and which is Goodness itself—good by its very being, not by virtue of conformity with anything distinct from itself.'⁵¹

That 'Goodness itself...transcending all empirical existence,' is what Maritain, following St. Thomas, means by God. Consequently, a person in that 'first

act of freedom' in which he decides for the basic orientation of his life, even if he may not be thinking 'explicitly of God, or of his ultimate end.... knows God, without being aware of it' and 'by virtue of the internal dynamism of his choice for the good,' he is in that very act making a choice of God as 'the ultimate end of his existence.'⁵² Or as Maritain also puts it a little further on—in words that I am confident Voegelin's heart, too, would have resonated with—in that fundamental act of moral choice, the good 'appears to the intellect not only as what is in order, not only as what is right to do, but as *the good by means of which 'I shall be saved,'* the good by means of which some mysteriously precious part of me will escape misfortune and find its way home.'⁵³

If I am correct that Voegelin's heart would have resonated with those words—and I do believe it myself on the basis of my personal knowledge of him as a man and an intellectual and spiritual companion in those last years of his life—this would answer the questions not only about whether he was a 'real atheist,' in Maritain's terms, but also about whether he believed in some form of real transcendence and whether he was a 'deeply spiritual person.' Voegelin knew the *metaxy* and its experiential structure through intensive meditative practice, the beginnings of which he wrote about in the 'anamnetic experiments' described in his *Anamnesis* and which continued until the end of his life.⁵⁴ The divine pole of Voegelin's *metaxy* may not have had in his conception the ultimate power of fulfillment a Christian believes and trusts in, but its transcendent goodness was something Voegelin definitely *did* believe in and gave his absolute loyalty to in a spirit of genuine reverence.

The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington 98195-3650, USA

Notes:

1. And, I might add, my own friend and one time department chairman, the man who hired me at the University of Washington in 1966. It was at Heilman's urging that in my book *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1981), I included a glossary of Voegelin's terminology which was later expanded for inclusion in the final volume (number 34) of Voegelin's *Collected Works* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006).
2. Perhaps I should explain what I mean when I say I was not a 'disciple' of Voegelin. The key to all Voegelin's thinking was, as I will explain further below, the idea that philosophical reflection must begin with

experience and most centrally with the experience of what he called, taking the term from Plato, the '*metaxy*' (the 'between') the experience of moving and being pulled between immanent and transcendent poles. Before I had ever read anything by or about Voegelin and knew his name only as someone Bob Heilman admired, I had written a book, *The Dark Dove: The Sacred and Secular in Modern Literature* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1975), in which I discussed the phenomenology of the sacred as an experience of tension between immanent and transcendent poles and applied that as a framework to study the experience and symbolization of the sacred in a number of modern authors whom I divided into atheists, pantheists, and traditional theists but in all of whose work, I argued, some form of experience of the sacred was reflected. This amounted to my own version of what I would later find Voegelin calling the *metaxy*, but which I had come upon quite independently of Voegelin (my main sources were Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade). For this reason, when Voegelin and I met, we found that we shared a coinciding experiential starting point for our thinking.

3. This phrase is the title of Voegelin's last essay, 'Quod Deus Dicitur' (1985), in Voegelin, *The Collected Works 12 Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 376-94. This volume will subsequently be abbreviated as *CW12*.
4. Webb, *Eric Voegelin*, p. 226.
5. *ibid.*, p. 230. I cited Alan Richardson, *History: Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), pp. 133-39, on the tendency in Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann to separate 'factual history of the sort investigated by historians and a suprahistorical realm of meaning.'
6. Voegelin, *CW12*, p. 201.
7. Cf. Poirier, 'Eric Voegelin's Immanentism' Part I, *Appraisal* Vol. 7, No. 2 (October 2008), p. 22: 'Let me begin my critique of Voegelin by stating that everything that I have said about his thinking in my opening paragraphs is both true and false—depending upon how it is read—and this, I have come to believe, is an ambiguity on which Voegelin counted.'
8. Voegelin, *CW12*, p. 203.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956, p. 345.
11. *CW12*, p. 199.
12. See my discussion of 'open' vs. 'closed' existence in *Eric Voegelin*, pp. 11, 63, 147-48, 158, 160, 196, 235-36, 237, 271-73, and 278.
13. See *ibid.*, pp. 36-46.
14. 'Immortality: Experience and Symbol,' *CW12*, p. 79.
15. *CW12*, pp. 119-20.
16. *Order and History 4: The Ecumenic Age*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974, p. 270
17. *Ibid.* p. 269.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
19. See note 12 of the first part of Poirier's article in *Appraisal* Vol. 7, No. 2, October 2008. Page 29
20. 'Eric Voegelin's Theory of Revelation,' *The Thomist*,

- 42, 1 (January 1978), reprinted in *Eric Voegelin's Thought: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Ellis Sandoz. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982), pp. 174-5.
21. 'kata panta homoion hémin choris hamartias.'
 22. In case anyone might think it is a mistake (or irreverent or tendentious) here not to capitalize the word 'son,' I should point out that in the manuscripts of New Testament and other early Christian writings, there was no capitalization of any word (not even 'God') for the simple reason that lower case letters were not invented until the Middle Ages. I have the impression that some people think 'Son' should be capitalized because it has always referred to a pre-existent heavenly individual rather than to Israel itself as 'son of God.'
 23. *CW 12*, p. 280.
 24. On this question of whether Voegelin's Ground or God could be said to have any sort of existence independent of human consciousness, I might mention a conversation that seems pertinent. In 1976 when I presented my paper on his theory of revelation (which he had suggested Ellis Sandoz ask me to write for a symposium in Chicago), Voegelin invited me to dine with him and Lissy in the hotel dining room. During the course of that dinner, I asked him (rather naively I now think in retrospect) how he thought about the question of an immortal soul. What he said was that he believed the soul is immortal as long as it is immortal, and after that, it is not. I mention this because the implication is that human participation in the life of tension between the divine and human poles is finite, but this does not mean that divine pole is limited in the same way. That participating human beings may perish, will not snuff out the *metaxy* or annihilate its essential structure, and its poles therefore do exist independently of any individual human consciousness.
 25. Voegelin sometimes referred to himself as a 'radical empiricist,' alluding to the famous essay of William James.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. *CW 34*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, p. 99.
 28. I should note, in case the term is unfamiliar, that this is not the term 'pantheism' (which would mean 'all is God' or that God is simply a name for the sum total of all finite reality). To explain the history of these ideas in detail would be impossible in the space available here, but I can refer the reader to an extensive discussion of it in my book, *Worldview and Mind: Religious Thought and Psychological Development* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009). See especially chapter seven, 'The Dynamic Diversity of Religious Worldviews' and pp. 208-215.
 29. It is perhaps worth noting that in Psalm 95, the original Hebrew has no capital letters to distinguish 'God' from 'gods' (as I mentioned earlier, in note 22, majuscule and minuscule were invented in the Middle Ages).
 30. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pt. 1, question 3, article 5, 'Whether God is contained in a genus,' i.e., is God an individual entity of any type at all? His answer is that he is not.
 31. *Ibid.*, question 13, article 10.
 32. *Ibid.*, article 11.
 33. *Ibid.*, reply to objection 1.
 34. *Worldview and Mind*, p. 168.
 35. Note 24 of his first article, p. 30.
 36. *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 240.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
 39. I should note that the Christian idea of eschatological fulfillment does not necessarily imply that creaturely existence would cease in eschatological fulfillment to be *metaxy* existence. Christian writers have most often imaged it that way, but there have been some such as Gregory of Nyssa who have talked about eschatology as involving a never-ending movement into God, in the life to come just as much as in this one. Gregory developed this idea on the basis of St. Paul's image of being 'transformed from glory to glory' (2 Cor. 3:18). (It is also an idea that C. S. Lewis adopted from Gregory in his *The Great Divorce*.) In one of our conversations in the late 1970s I brought up this idea of Gregory's with Voegelin (at the time I visited him I happened to be reading Jean Daniélou's anthology of Gregory, *From Glory to Glory*), and he expressed appreciation of it.
 40. *Ibid.* p. 259.
 41. *Ibid.* On the same note, the separation of the western Catholic Church from the Orthodox Church in the east due to the west's change of the Nicene creed to say that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father and the Son' is not an issue Voegelin wrote about, but I think if he did, he probably would have said that this was a further step in the separation of Jesus from the *metaxy* and therefore from humanity (i.e., from those who receive the Spirit, i.e., the animating pull from the divine pole of the *metaxy*) by raising the Son to the level of the Father as the divine originating source of the very being of the Spirit—in contrast to the original Nicene doctrine (as formulated in 381 at the Council of Constantinople) that says, as St. John of Damascus paraphrased it, 'We likewise believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father and abides in the Son.'
 42. *Radical Monotheism and Western Civilization* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), pp. 27-28.
 43. New York: Macmillan, 1941, pp. 134-35. This is a book that Voegelin read with interest and expressed approval of in writing, and that I had also talked about with him, which is one of the reasons I was surprised when he found it shocking to learn that my own faith was essentially the same as Niebuhr's.
 44. *Patrologia Graeca* 91.1084d, quoted in Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, p. 317.
 45. *Order and History 3: Plato and Aristotle*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), pp. 231-32, and Plato, *The Laws*, 644d-645b.
 46. *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner's, 1942), p. 83.
 47. *Ibid.*
 48. *Ibid.* p. 66, emphasis in original.

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49. See Kaufmann, Op. cit., p.122.

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49. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

50. See Webb, *Worldview and Mind*, pp. 161-168.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

52. *Ibid.* pp. 69-70.

53. *Ibid.* p. 77, emphasis in original.

54. *Anamnesis: Zur Theorie der Geschichte und Politik* (Munich: Piper, 1966), pp. 61-75. Translated by Gerhart Niemeyer in *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978) and by M. J. Hanak in Voegelin, *Collected Works, 6: Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

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