
The Role of Faith and Love in Voegelin's Mystical Epistemology

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This essay explores Eric Voegelin's recovery of pre-modern experiences as the basis of his own theory of knowledge. It divides roughly into five parts: the first distinguishes between Voegelin's "mystical" epistemology and the intentionalist epistemological theories of modernity; the second finds his mystical epistemology to be rooted in experience of faith and love as symbolized by the Christian mystics; the third develops the second by contrasting the traditional Christian mystical understanding with its antithesis—Martin Luther's doctrine of *sola fide*; the fourth explores the modern consequences of the disparity in Luther between faith and love; and the fifth, in conclusion, assesses Voegelin's ostensible rejection of Christian thought, and concomitantly of faith and love, in his later writings. We hope to show that Voegelin's theory of knowledge depends upon a certain understanding of faith and love and that it agrees essentially with the equivalent insights found in the greatest of the Classical and medieval Christian philosophers.

Aristotle once said that "all men desire to know." In modern philosophy, however, this "desire" has been ignored, and concern for this fundamental human experience has been replaced by a concern for epistemological consistency. Following Descartes, the moderns began with the assumption of a knower separated from the thing known, a consciousness external to its object. How, they asked, can

this thing (the human mind) “know” the reality outside of it? They searched for the rational ground of knowledge in order to provide their propositions with logical necessity and certainty. Descartes doubted everything of which he could not have demonstrable knowledge. This “universal doubt” would make no sense were Descartes not on his quest for apodictic certainty, which, as he says, “will put science upon a foundation of knowledge.” From Locke to Hegel, all the great modern epistemologists, while searching for the foundation of knowledge, in effect question the very possibility of that knowledge. The quest for certainty ends with two extreme epistemological positions: the quagmire of skepticism (Hume) or the “moral holiday” of absolutism (Hegel). Each position reduces the Socratic paradox—of knowing that one does not know—to an epistemological fallacy. As a consequence, in the course of modern epistemological speculation, knowledge as power (Bacon) becomes knowledge as the pawn of the powerful (Nietzsche).

Classical philosophers rejected both skepticism and absolutism.

Ancient thinkers like Aristotle and Socrates, however, rejected both skepticism and absolutism; for they felt drawn to search for the truth by a force beyond their control. They were *philosophoi*, lovers of wisdom; and knowledge (*episteme*), even though it lacked a foundation in apodictic certainty, was better than opinion (*doxa*). These philosophers believed that at its root all knowledge was as paradoxical and mysterious as the Delphic Oracle’s pronouncement to the young Socrates—that he in his ignorance was the most knowledgeable soul alive.

It is with this view of knowledge in mind that Eric Voegelin set out on his search for meaning and knowledge in philosophical and religious history. Based on his recovery of meaning from this history, he concludes that the paradoxical reply to the human search for the ground is insoluble by rationalizations which enlist purely human means. He finds, instead, that the experience of knowledge is an experience of divine-human communion, a mystical experience. It is a movement of desire or love, a pull in the soul drawing the knower toward the light of truth that beckons him. The recognition of this pull requires faith, but the pull itself is a manifestation of love. This love has two senses: on the one hand, it is a love in the knower for the object loved; and, on the other, it is a recognition that the knower himself is an object of love. The experiences of faith and love form the core of pre-modern experiences of knowledge.

For Voegelin, philosophical knowledge emerges from a contem-

plative, erotic awareness of God found only in the depth of the human soul. Therefore, before beginning a study of Voegelin's theory of knowledge, we must distinguish between intentional and luminal consciousness, between perception and apperception, between the thing-reality and the It-reality. These distinctions are often made in contemporary thought by the disciplinary designations of science and philosophy. However, because Voegelin claims to be recovering a truly "philosophical science,"¹ he discards the contemporary distinction between science and philosophy in favor of a distinction between intentional and luminal consciousness. Intentional consciousness corresponds to propositional knowledge of thing-reality—the world of objects and events perceptible by sensation; luminal consciousness corresponds to noetic knowledge of the It-reality—the apperception of the "ground," that which makes all rational thought possible.²

Intentional consciousness explores objective reality—the world of things. In its intentional mode, consciousness is aware of itself as a subject "intending," or directing its attention toward, an object external to it. The position of the subject in this mode is outside the thing studied. This external position allows the subject to explore the object without being under the object's sphere of influence; it allows for the disinterestedness necessary to make reasoned judgments. Intentionality also allows the subject to comprehend the object, to know its phenomenal characteristics from all angles. The intentional subject is a knower, and everything is something to be known.

Without denying the usefulness of intentional consciousness, Voegelin rejects the major claim of the dogmatic intentionalist, who claims that reality may only be explored through the mode of intentionality. "Reality, it is true, can move into the position of an object-of-thought intended by a subject-of-cognition, but before this can happen there must be a reality in which human beings with a consciousness can occur."³ He argues that much of the greatest philosophical thought of the past, the essence of which originated in noetic, apperceptive insights, has been perverted by the intentional-

¹ See Ellis Sandoz, "The Philosophical Science of Politics Beyond Behavioralism," in *The Post-Behavioral Era: Perspectives on Political Science*, ed. George Graham and George W. Carey (New York: David Makay and Company, 1972), 285-305.

² See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*.

³ Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 311.

istic prejudices of modern philosophy. In short, it has been “reread” through modern spectacles.

Man knows through his “participation” in the divine.

Voegelin’s symbol of luminal apperception is equivalent to Saint Augustine’s symbol of “divine illumination.” Man knows through his “participation” in the divine light. This is beautifully expressed in Saint Bonaventure’s interpretation of and agreement with Augustine’s *illuminatio*: “Strange, then, is the blindness of the intellect which does not consider that which it sees before all others and without which it can recognize nothing.”⁴ Luminal consciousness recognizes itself to be an integral part of the reality it explores. It is in concrete knowledge of participation that a person’s desire for knowledge is experienced as a movement toward the ground that is being moved by the ground. In this movement the divine ground of being is illuminated as the ground of man and world.⁵ Luminal participation in the ground of knowledge is an experience of theophany, a manifestation of divine presence. Noetic knowledge requires a recognition of God. Because it originates in luminal consciousness, Voegelin’s epistemology cannot be properly judged according to the standard of intentional consciousness, such as that exemplified in Cartesian dualism of subject and object or the Kantian dichotomy of things-in-the-mind and things-in-themselves. Modern thought has imposed its intentionalist framework on luminal symbols which were intended to communicate noetic truth, and for that reason we have misinterpreted and deformed the true meaning of classical philosophy. Voegelin demonstrates that knowledge of the ultimate truths, which are unveiled in theophanic experiences, are not thinkable (much less communicable) using the model of a subject-object dichotomy. Man cannot experience or know reality from outside of that reality, from some Archimedean point; his epistemological status cannot be divorced from the whole of which he is but a part. “The truth of the quest,” says Voegelin, “is not a true doctrine resulting from an intentionalist investigation of objects, but a balanced state of existence, formed in reflective distance to the process of meditative wandering through the paradoxical manifold of tensions.”⁶ This is primarily a recognition that thought and symbolization—which include myth, revelation, and philoso-

⁴ Saint Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M., ed. Stephen F. Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 29.

⁵ Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 183.

⁶ Voegelin, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1987), 100.

phy—articulate reality, for only through being named, and therefore being distinguished from an otherwise amorphous web of experience, can reality become meaningful to man. Hence, the epistemological and ontological dimensions of reality, the “knowing subject” and “objective being,” arise simultaneously and cannot be sundered except for analytical reasons. Voegelin demonstrates that experience is not inherently bifurcated into reality and knowledge of reality but presents itself primarily as an unfractured Whole.⁷

The idea of a pre-analytical Whole as the basis of all meaningful experience is difficult to express adequately, however, because words themselves represent this dichotomized view of reality: language severs experience into categorical pieces, into subject and predicate.⁸ Voegelin seeks to overcome this linguistic and philosophical bias in order to reestablish the proper place of the Whole.⁹ In order to express the presence of non-objective reality in objective terms we are forced to speak in paradoxical language, or (as Voegelin does in his later writings) in the language of “complexes.” Voegelin says, “there is no nonparadoxical language, ready to be used by man as a system of signs when he wants to refer to the paradoxical structures of reality and consciousness.”¹⁰ By speaking of the “complexes” of “consciousness-reality-language” or “experience-symbolization,” Voegelin can express his sense of the Whole using normal language. The language of paradox preserves the mystery of the Whole.

Pre-analytical Whole is basis of all meaningful experience.

Luminal consciousness, then, is characterized by an acute awareness of human limitation. But this fact does not discourage a philosopher like Voegelin. His is a sacred quest for more light, with the

⁷ On this point, note Voegelin’s agreement with William James. In his essay “The World of Pure Experience,” James calls this experience of the unfractured whole “pure experience,” and in his essay “Does Consciousness Exist?” he describes “pure experience” as “the instant field of the present.” Both essays can be found in William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism, The Collected Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

⁸ See Immanuel Kant’s *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1950), esp. section 2. His discussion of “analytical” and “synthetical” judgments turns upon this problem. All synthetical judgments have the character of this bifurcation, and a principle of synthesis (a ground) must be found in order to explain the meaning of the judgment.

⁹ In this respect, Voegelin and Hegel start from the same problem. See Hegel’s “Preface” to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1977), esp. 94.

¹⁰ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 17.

knowledge that, at least in this life, one can hope only to see as through a glass darkly. And yet, seeing as through a glass darkly, and recognizing the fact that full understanding is not our lot in this world, Voegelin nevertheless experiences the restless, erotic yearning in his soul for that which is higher and more pure. He seeks the luminous ground which is the realm of the mystical, the realm of the true. And each person is, by nature, a seeker of truth and its source; each person is, by nature, on a quest for meaning.

The “structure” of this quest is, moreover, communicable. With his symbol “metaxy,” Plato describes the In-between¹¹ character of existence—that between life and death, good and evil, happiness and despair—in which the quest takes place.

Man experiences himself as tending beyond his human imperfection toward the perfection of the divine ground that moves him. . . . [T]he In-between—the metaxy—is not an empty space between the poles of the tension but the “realm of the spiritual”; it is the reality of “man’s converse with the gods” . . . , the mutual participation (*methexis, metalepsis*) of human in divine, and divine in human, reality. The metaxy symbolizes the experience of the noetic quest as a transition of the psyche from mortality to immortality.¹²

The tension of the noetic quest is the field of attraction and repulsion in which the person senses mysterious forces ultimately beyond his control. Sensing his mortality, man both desires and is pulled toward immortality: the former emphasizes the human pole of the tension, the latter the divine pole. The mystical nature of Voegelin’s theory of knowledge is, like Plato’s, founded in the experiences of transcendent divine Being, which are articulated within tension of noesis in the metaxy.

But noesis itself becomes articulate only through symbolization, and these symbols can be created only through imagination. What, then, is the source of this imagination? Is it man or is it God? It is both:

There is no truth symbolized without man’s imaginative power to find the symbols that will express his response to the appeal of reality; but there is no truth to be symbolized without the comprehend-

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¹¹ For a thorough analysis of Voegelin’s understanding of the In-between, see Dante Germino, “Eric Voegelin: The In-Between of Human Life,” in *Contemporary Philosophies*, ed. A. de Crespigny and K. Minogue (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1975), 100-119. Also see Greg Russell, “Eric Voegelin on the Truth of In-Between Life: A Meditation on Existential Unrest,” in *Interpretation* 16:3 (1989), 415-25.

¹² Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in *Anamnesis*, 103.

ing It-reality in which such structures as man with his participatory consciousness, experiences of appeal and response, language, and imagination occur. Through the imaginative power of man the It-reality moves imaginatively toward its truth.¹³

Man participates in the truth in so far as he recognizes his own symbols as communicating the story told by the It-reality, that is, in so far as he recognizes its revelational content.¹⁴ The storyteller must remember that he is a partner with the reality that comprehends him in the community of being. He must abstain from the temptation to view himself as the sole creator of truth, in order not to pervert and deform the symbols which he creates. In short, he must be open to the revealed structure of apperceptive reality.¹⁵

How, then, is this receptive attitude cultivated? Here Voegelin turns to the symbols of faith and love, exemplified in the philosophies of such thinkers as Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm, and Saint Thomas. Faith and love, when properly directed, create a heightened nature of man,¹⁶ which is exemplified in the Thomasic symbol of the *fides caritate formata* (faith formed by love).¹⁷ The possibility of this faith is contained within given theological and philosophical symbols, and its realization requires the individual's desire to penetrate the symbols to the experiences from whence they derive. This is exemplified in Saint Augustine's understanding of the relations between faith and reason, which gives "formal expression to a moral experience and for that reason refuses to separate illumination of the mind from purification of the heart."¹⁸ Both faith and love must exist before the revelation can be recognized as such.

¹³ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 38.

¹⁴ See Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 78, where he says, "the fact of revelation is its content."

¹⁵ For a comprehensive discussion and analysis of Voegelin's theory of revelation, see Eugene Webb, "Eric Voegelin's Theory of Revelation," in *Eric Voegelin's Thought: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982), 157-78. For a critical analysis of Voegelin's theory of revelation and his interpretation of Christianity, see 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), 139-55.

¹⁶ For a more complete discussion of the mystically heightened consciousness, see David Granfield, *Heightened Consciousness: The Mystical Difference* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 29-55.

¹⁷ For another analysis of Voegelin's understanding of *fides caritate formata*, see Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 189, 212, 219-20, 262-64, 281-82.

¹⁸ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1960), 31.

Faith is the cornerstone of Christian epistemology. Ever conscious of human limitation and fallibility, Christian thinkers continually express the supernatural source of human knowledge. Saint Anselm expressed this understanding in the form of a prayer in which he says, "Lord I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe in order that I may understand."¹⁹ Prayer is an outward sign of faith; only the humble appeal for grace through faithful prayer can bring about revelation of truth to man. Prayer in this sense is, says Plotinus, a non-Christian mystic, "stretching ourselves out with our soul [to the One]."²⁰ The mystical experience, the presence of divine reality to human consciousness, is the experiential effect of human prayer answering the call in the soul initiated by the divine ground. Voegelin illustrates how Anselm's symbol *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) depends upon a prior formation through divine grace:

He [i.e., Anselm] prays to God: "Speak to my desirous soul what you are, other than what it has seen, that it may clearly see what it desires." . . . The noetic quest of Anselm thus assumes the form of a prayer for an understanding of the symbols of faith through the human intellect. Behind the quest, and behind the *fides* the quest is supposed to understand, there now becomes visible the true source of the Anselmian effort in the living desire of the soul to move toward the divine light.²¹

Faith in the Anselmian sense is directed by "desire," by the love which pulls the soul toward the truth. Faith is formed by the human love for the divine.

But all the credit cannot go to man. For how does man love God unless God is recognized by man as something worthy of love? Man loves God because God first loves man. Saint John expresses this sense when he says, "Who does not love, does not know God; for God is love We love him because he first loved us."²² God draws man into the loving relationship through His own love. In Saint Thomas's formulation, Christian faith and love coalesce into the *fides caritate formata* (faith formed by love). Voegelin says that

St. Thomas puts the essence of faith in the *amicitia*, the friendship between God and man. True faith has an intellectual component in-

¹⁹ Saint Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. S. N. Deane (Lasalle: Open Court, 1962), 53.

²⁰ Voegelin, "Quod Deus Dicitur," 393. Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.1.6, trans. H. A. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, Vol. V, Loeb's Classics, 1984.

²¹ Voegelin, "Quod Deus Dicitur," 383.

²² I John 4, as quoted in Voegelin, *Studies in the History of Political Ideas*, MS p. 1144.

sofar as the loving, voluntary adherence to God is impossible without intellectual apprehension of the beatific vision as the *summum bonum*, as the end toward which the life of man is oriented; intellectual apprehension, however, needs completion through the volitional adherence of love “for by means of his will man as-it-were rests in what he has apprehended by intellect” (St. Thomas, *Contra Gentiles*, Ch. 116).²³

The relationship between man and God is grounded in *amicitia* (love, friendship), which, by definition, is mutual. It is not and cannot be forced through a unilateral act on either side. “Faith formed by love, thus, is the reality of loving orientation of existence toward God.”²⁴ In this relationship founded by God, man becomes an equal partner. The formation of faith through love (*fides caritate formata*), then, depends upon a two-way communion of the human and divine. This mutual love, or friendship (*amicitia*), is the experiential source of the *fides* that seeks understanding.

Love in man can, however, become misdirected. This occurs when the individual turns his love toward himself rather than toward God. The man who turns his love toward God will experience a theophany, and the man who turns his love toward himself will experience an egophany. Egophanies are based in hubris (pride or the love of self) rather than the love of God. The pseudo-philosopher has a vision or an insight and takes full credit for it. The experience pierces his intellect but not his heart, for his heart is hardened to the divine call in which the vision is grounded.

Voegelin’s interpretation of the effects of the egophanic events and the intellectual derailments of modernity would become clear through an overview of his writings on such thinkers as Hegel, Comte, and Marx, but the most significant contribution to its spiritual birth is found in Martin Luther’s doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone).²⁵ Voegelin first assigns philosophico-historical status to the relationship that culminates in the *fides caritate formata* and the

²³ Voegelin, *Studies in the History of Political Ideas*, MS p. 1142. See also *The New Science of Politics*, 78.

²⁴ Voegelin, *Studies in the History of Political Ideas*, MS p. 1143.

²⁵ We do not mean to imply in what follows that Luther, or Protestantism generally, caused the main line of modern civilizational destruction. The causes are manifold, and Luther’s role, though fundamental, was not as important as some others’. We concentrate on Luther here for one reason: his doctrine of *sola fide* reflects a primary opposition to Voegelin and the Christian mystical tradition on the point of philosophical anthropology and the epistemology that derives therefrom.

amicitia between man and God, and he then describes how this relationship has been lost. "The development," says Voegelin,

of these experiences of Johannine Christianity (which, it is my impression, were closest to St. Thomas) into the doctrine of *fides caritate formata*, and the amplification of this doctrinal nucleus into a grandiose, systematic philosophy of man and society, are the medieval climax of the interpretation of Christianity with the body of a historical civilization. Here perhaps we touch the historical *raison d'être* of the West, and certainly we touch the empirical standard by which the further course of Western intellectual history must be measured.²⁶

Employing this "standard," Voegelin then points out:

there is no work of the law, no love. . . . Luther, it appears, considered the love of God a work of the law; his attack on the good works thus, would be at bottom a circuitous attack on the *fides caritate formata*. [For] if our faith is formed by love, then God would take into consideration our works. . . . The conclusion of *Von Der Freiheit* was the doctrine: Faith is for God, love for the neighbor.²⁷

Luther's conclusion leads to a radical reconstitution of the notion of human-divine communion. "The doctrine of *sola fide*," says Voegelin, "is the first deliberate attack on the doctrine of *amicitia*. It has become socially effective, with revolutionary consequences for the whole of Western civilization, insofar as it started the process of spiritual disintegration of which, in our time, we witness the consequences on an eschatological scale."²⁸ The meaning of Christian love has been distorted and the modern path toward spiritual and intellectual disintegration paved. A philosophical anthropology that rejects this love also rejects the experience that is the basis of faith. In making faith alone important, Luther erases the experiential justification for salvation.

Voegelin argues that Luther's theological formulations and teachings have come to determine much of Western civilization's crisis in three ways: first, by discarding the nucleus of Christian spiritual culture, by making faith "a unilateral act of trust in an externalized revelation codified in Scripture"; second, by reducing faith to "an empirical consciousness of justification through faith, that did not affect the substance of man"; and third, by "destroying

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²⁶ Voegelin, *Studies in the History of Political Ideas*, MS p. 1167.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1152-53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1145

Western intellectual culture through his attack on Aristotelian scholasticism and the devil's work of learning in general."²⁹ Faith is determined by the "law of God" rather than the "love of God." Grace has been reduced to divine philanthropy. Man becomes a purely natural being with nothing of the divine left in his soul with which to respond in love to God; he has no substantial part to play in his salvation. And the human intellect is denigrated with the attack on the "harlot reason." With a simple stroke of his pen, Luther disposes of two thousand years of Classical and Christian cultural achievement.

The political effects of Luther's doctrine of *sola fide* and its companion doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" deserve comment. The substance of sacred tradition and sacred institutions is destroyed, because the experiences embodied in their symbols are abandoned along with the symbols. The hierarchical structure of society is destroyed now that every man is his own priest and interpreter of religious truth. The bond securing community is destroyed as man becomes radically individual, and we descend to the level of the war of all against all, which finds its ultimate manifestation in the war of man against God.

"Priesthood of all believers" undermines society's hierarchical structure.

This further course . . . has as its main theme the disintegration of the doctrinal nucleus of the *amicitia* between God and man. In the nineteenth century, in Comte and Marx, this process of disintegration reaches its formal end in the doctrinal counter-formulation of the revolt against God as the basis for the world-immanent order of society; the dogma of human self-salvation, in hermetical closure against transcendental reality, marks an end of Western civilizational history beyond which, at the moment, nothing is visible but the bleakness of imprisonment in human nature without Grace. . . .³⁰

The movement in modernity to the radical dichotomizations of faith and reason, theology and metaphysics, religion and philosophy, is only a small step from the conclusion that the world and man are merely natural and, hence, irredeemable. God, if he exists at all, is something outside the earthly realm. The sciences, both natural and social (ethics, law, politics), change accordingly. Rationalism, the belief in unaided human reason as the only valid path to knowledge, reigns. From a purely rationalistic perspective, God has little or no place in either ethics or law, and political order becomes an agglom-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1167.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1144.

eration of arbitrary creations of human will. Even worse, the spirit of human commonality and dignity as a basis for ethics, law, and politics is lost. The spiritual derailment in modernity both derives from and aggravates this distorted view of human nature.

Further, Voegelin's analysis of mysticism, his affirmation of the divine-human *amicitia*, and his conclusion that both are destroyed by misunderstandings of human-divine love lead us to the problem of the "Dark Ages" and the "Enlightenment." Which is which? The terms become misnomers in their traditional denotations. The spiritual light which shines between the divine and the human in medieval thought is dimmed by the eclipse which occurs with the worldly reason and the other-worldly faith of the Enlightenment. The mystery of man's relationship with God and the mystical meaning of the symbols of Christianity are discarded in favor of doctrines about God and covenants with God. Friendship between God and man is replaced with doctrines of *sola fide* and the priesthood of all believers. Redemption becomes a contract in which man agrees or disagrees. The world is de-mystified and, therefore, disenchanting.

Recognizing this disenchantment, Voegelin returns to the meditative and prayer-like philosophies of Plato, Plotinus, Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm, and Saint Thomas in order to recover the symbols which have been lost in the modern era. The rationalistic conception of man is flawed. Our capacity to know reality and communicate it to one another involves more than a set of propositional statements. Voegelin does not pretend that his symbols convey an absolute and final system of knowledge. His theory depends upon symbols which attempt to articulate essentially ineffable experiences, and is, therefore, easily attacked by those who demand propositional precision.

In recognizing an ineffable element in human experience and knowledge, Voegelin further recognizes that there is, ultimately, a limit beyond which no human can go. The Question, which is the source of the pull on men and women to seek and find illumination, is ultimately answerable only by the Mystery, which becomes transparent for the meaning of human existence but provides no non-objective language with which to communicate that meaning. With the *fides quaerens intellectum* humans can catch glimpses of the truth; they can create symbols in an attempt to communicate the Mystery that is before us. These symbols, however, beckon us not to the symbols themselves but to the experiences which inspire them. Humans

must live in the faithful tension between symbol and experience. This is the insight of the great philosophers and theologians of Western civilization. As Gilson aptly points out in his analysis of Saint Augustine: "Let us remember first of all that Augustine's metaphors, however expressive they may be, are still metaphors. If we examine his language carefully, we shall see that he has a sense of mystery and that he is consciously trying to find words for the ineffable. . . . Fundamentally, we say that there is direct contact between God and the mind and that we have no means of representing it adequately."³¹

Voegelin contends that truth—by definition—is discovered through the divine light which is constantly before us and beckons us through faith. It does not come about through unaided human or "natural" reason. There is no such thing. The very structure of the human psyche, the *nous*, can function only within a comprehending reality, and that reality is permeated by the divine *Nous*. This is why the distinction between faith and reason makes no sense to Voegelin. Human thought is grounded in divinity. It is possible only within that context, whether we recognize it or not. If we do recognize it, we can move closer to truth. If we do not recognize it, we are condemned to distortions of reality and deformations of our own knowledge. Voegelin can only "point out" to the listener and admonish: Look and see, is it not the case? If the listener is open to the possibility, then he may experience a *fides caritate formata*. ". . . It is well to note that divine illumination, far from relieving man of the necessity of having an intellect of his own, rather takes it for granted. . . . [A] light which illumines is one thing, the thing which that light illumines is another: the eyes are not the sun."³² The person must examine his experiences in order to determine whether the symbols are credible. The effort of looking, however, must always be undertaken in the context of faith. Faith allows the lids to rise from the eyes so that the light may shine through unhampered.

*Human
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Although the tension of faith toward God is a traditionally Christian symbol, it is not a Christian privilege. Faith, rather, is a trait of human nature. All authentic philosophy is built upon the recognition that understanding requires faith. This was true of Plato and Aristotle in whom, Voegelin argues,

³¹ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 81.

³² *Ibid.*, 79.

the *cognitio Dei* through faith is not a cognitive act in which an object is given, but a cognitive, spiritual passion of the soul. In the passion of faith the ground of being is experienced, and that means the ground of all being, including immanent form.³³

The real difference between Hellenic philosophy and Christian philosophy, says Voegelin, is that Hellenic philosophy did not have the symbols of *fides caritate formata* and *amicitia* between man and God. In addition, "The Aristotelian position does not allow for a *forma supernaturalis*, for the heightening of the immanent nature of man through supernaturally forming love of God."³⁴ Voegelin argues that only with Christianity does the mutual love between human and divine, shown to be the experiential root of faith, become prevalent.

But Voegelin later appears to qualify this assessment of Christian philosophy. For instance, in *Anamnesis*, where Plato and Aristotle are used as the models of noetic exegesis, he says, "In the Christian phase, [noesis] enters into an amalgamate with the Hebrew and Christian truth of revelation. . . . This combination with revelation has had unfortunate results for noesis."³⁵ And in "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," he says that

. . . [t]he Platonic Vision is so comprehensive, and its articulation so thorough, that its reality not only is luminous to itself but illuminates the structure and modality of visionary truth in general. By confronting the Platonic with the Christian symbols it will be possible to discern more clearly the noetic structure in the noetically less differentiated Christian visions. . . .³⁶

Statements like these (and there are many others like them spread throughout Voegelin's late writings) seem to suggest that the argument of this article—that Voegelin's theory of knowledge essentially agrees with the insights of the great Christian philosophers—may be based upon old and unpublished material and that it may have little support in Voegelin's later writings. This view would be mistaken on two counts. First, the quotations just above, like all of Voegelin's remarks, must not be lifted out of context. In the first quote Voegelin specifically has in mind the very real problem of the medieval distinction between "revelatory faith" and "natural rea-

³³ Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 275.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 364.

³⁵ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 186.

³⁶ Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," 365.

son," a distinction which Voegelin criticized in his letter to Leo Strauss in April 1951.³⁷ This criticism did not then, nor should it now, touch his analysis of Christian *amicitia*, on which this article relies. And the second quote above refers not to Christian philosophers but only to New Testament Christian writers such as Saint Paul in whom a sometimes excessive pneumatic enthusiasm obscures the truth of the original experience of differentiation. Other remarks criticizing Christianity are similarly focused and should be read accordingly.

Yet how are we to treat Voegelin's silence in his later writings regarding the Thomasic doctrines of *amicitia* and *fides caritate formata*? Is this silence a tacit denunciation of his earlier praise of Christian philosophical symbols? There is an answer to this question that supports the argument of this article. In his later work Voegelin is motivated more by a desire to recover the truth about Plato and Aristotle than to reject Christian symbols like those analyzed herein. Such a redirection of attention is no reason to suspect a philosophical reversal. For, as Voegelin describes them, the Platonic *methexis* and the Aristotelian *metalepsis* are essentially equivalent to the Christian symbol of *amicitia*. Does this then mean that the Christians should be seen as plagiarizers of their pagan forerunners? Of course not. Rather than inculcate the tradition of Christian mysticism, the discovery of equivalent symbols in Hellenic philosophy bolsters the Christians' claim to truth. The Christians did not simply copy earlier symbols; they had experiences similar to Plato's and Aristotle's and, so, expressed them similarly. In fact, it could be argued that understanding the experiences expressed in the Christian symbols prepared Voegelin to recognize the same in Plato and Aristotle.³⁸ The Christian symbols leave little to chance; they are quite clear regarding the importance of love and the mutual participation of human

Christian philosophers' experience of truth similar to Plato's and Aristotle's.

³⁷ See *Faith and Political Philosophy*, trans. and eds. Barry Cooper and Peter Emberley (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 79-87. This letter was written before publication of both *The New Science of Politics* and *Plato and Aristotle*, each of which includes references to the superiority of Christian *amicitia*.

³⁸ Voegelin's intellectual development would appear to support this claim. In his earlier years, however, Voegelin found it difficult to break away from traditional doctrinally oriented interpretations of Classical and Christian "ideas." Only later, when he clarified the distinction between experience and symbol, was Voegelin able to see fundamental equivalences between the Hellenic and Christian mystic-philosophers.

and divine in the ascent to knowledge. Armed with this clarity, the study of earlier thinkers, with their more equivocal symbols, becomes easier.

Not even the expansion of the *fides* to all of the experiences of divine reality in which history constitutes itself can be said to go beyond Christianity.³⁹ Voegelin is attempting to recover the mystery of faith which he believes has been lost in the dichotomization of faith and reason and the ensuing movement toward rationalistic, dogmatic theology. He is arguing that the Classical and Christian symbols of the human experience of divine reality better portray the mysterious and mystical nature of human-divine participation than most of the thought after Saint Thomas.

Dichotomization of faith and reason has furthered rationalistic, dogmatic theology.

Hence, we can see from this brief overview that, while Voegelin does have some interesting, yet minor, agreements with the modern philosophers, his epistemology is clearly more in line with the ancients and medieval Christians. Truth is not found in the assent to a given set of doctrines, dogmas, propositions or myths. Truth is an experience of faith, moved by love, in which the symbols evoked by that experience lead men and women toward an acknowledgment of divine presence. This truth manifests itself primarily in the tradition of philosophic or religious meditation, especially in the tradition of Christian mysticism. The hallmarks of the Christian experience are the symbols of faith and love. By penetrating to the meaning behind the symbols, says Voegelin, we can experience a change of the heart which opens us to God and, hence, to truth.

It is even problematic to speak of Voegelin's having an "epistemology," for this sounds as if he had constructed something. It is more appropriate to speak of a recovery and renewal of the Hellenic and Christian experience-symbols of the ways in which knowledge occurs. Voegelin's "theory of knowledge" is a critical synthesis of various insights by great intellectual and spiritual figures of the past. This synthesis is much of his point and his evidence. The fact that he has shown his own theory to be historically widespread is evidence of a strong propensity in human thought. That, in this sense, his thought lacks originality and that it has affinity with the insights and knowledge of thousands of years of philosophical inquiry lend credibility to it. Voegelin's synthesis attempts to analyze

³⁹ Voegelin, "Response to Professor Altizer's 'A New History and a New but Ancient God?'" in *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 294.

and digest the many forms that the symbolizations of faith in search of understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) take. He presents us with a theory of knowledge and a path to understanding that we too can follow, even though we live in what Voegelin considers a “derailed” and distorted era. The ethical, spiritual, and religious implications of Voegelin’s synthesis are far-reaching, for they open the door, not only to a rediscovery of lost knowledge and meaning, but to a recovery from “the sickness unto death” from which we are suffering.