HISTORY AS CONSTITUTED BY WHAT IT CANNOT CONTAIN:

*ISRAEL AND REVELATION*

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Paper presented at a Conference on “Israel und die kosmologischen Reiche des Alten Orient. Symbole der Ordnung in Eric Voegelins *Order and History, Vol. 1*”. Hochschule für Philosophie, München. 15-16, Mai, 2017

Like all great books, *Israel and Revelation* defies categorization in terms of genre. It is neither a work of biblical criticism nor an account of political ideas. At the same time, it is clearly not intended as a confessional or a theological guide to Sacred Scripture. Some element of all three genres are admittedly present but the combination eludes specific assignment. In essence, Voegelin’s volume is a rebuke to the exclusivity of conventional forms. As sui generis, *Israel and Revelation* occupies a middle ground that defies disciplinary allocation and therefore accounts for the indeterminate influence it has exercised for the past sixty years. All of this is to be expected when one considers the ambition that underlies it. It is nothing less than to overturn the conventions that prevail in the fields of historical, theological, and philosophical scholarship. The work cannot be neatly placed within such frameworks because it seeks to establish a new approach to order and history, one that places the investigator within the horizon of what is investigated. Such a hermenutical shift had of course been undertaken by others, but Voegelin was uniquely successful in carrying it out in an extended empirical study. Some measure of the challenge may be gained from the realization that, despite his many admirers, Voegelin has had few imitators. It is surely one of the hopes of the present convocation that he will at last win collaborators in the field of existential scholarship, including some who might be prepared to extend the enterprise beyond the stage at which Voegelin left it.

My modest contribution here can only be a sketch of what Voegelin accomplished in *Israel and Revelation* as well as a reflection on the limits of his achievement. Both are a prelude to suggestion of the ways in which his project might be carried forward. We will begin with a clarification he later developed, between history and historiography, that is nevertheless rooted in *Israel and Revelation*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Then we will turn to the pivotal insight that informs his study and constitutes its singular theoretical achievement. That is, the realization that history is constituted from the event of revelation that ruptures history from a beyond that can never be adequately contained within it. From this we will follow Voegelin’s distinctive understanding of revelation as a break with cosmological order and his further elaborations of that conception in the later writings. At that point we will be in a position to identify the major limitation of his account of revelation whereby the transcendent recedes from the ambit of the personal. Other commentators have noted a tone of coolness that remains in Voegelin’s acknowledgment of what must be an irrepressibly personal relationship. Could it be, not that Voegelin lacked faith, but that he failed to understand the person as central to the event of revelation? Following this suggestion, we will be in a position to explore the way in which the person as the model of revelation could overcome the tendency of historiography to eclipse the event that constitutes history. Even if Voegelin might not have welcomed such an approach, it will be offered as a means of overcoming the historicization of meaning that he regarded as the principal obstacle to the transmission of meaning in history.

History and Historiography

The first thing to recognize about *Israel and Revelation* is that it comes at the end of the most significant intellectual turn of Voegelin’s career. He had definitively abandoned his “History of Political Ideas,” a massive work on which he had labored for more than a decade and one that, if published, would have marked him as a great political theorist. All of that is evident from the incomplete eight-volume edition published posthumously. Instead Voegelin held fast to his own more exacting standard of what scholarship demanded. He had determined that there was no such thing as a history of ideas except as a series of dubious abstractions drawn from a disconnected past. To take seriously the ideas and symbols of order that had emerged from the millennial unfolding of human history would require the scholar to locate him or herself in relation to the same quest. No longer outside of the materials of investigation, the observer was included in the field of meaning they had generated. There was no objective truth of order but only the truth that had concretely been achieved in the historical unfolding itself. Science did not rest on a supposed external viewpoint but only on the internal viewpoint that had emerged and, to the extent it had emerged, within history. Historiography, for example, was bound up with and dependent on the differentiation of history as a perspective available to human beings in a particular place and time. The observer did not possess a superior advantage to the differentiation that the participants had gained. To engage therefore in the study of experiences and symbols of order within human history was to become in turn a participant in the same quest, with all of the attendant uncertainties, risks, and staggering enlargements of horizon it entailed.[[2]](#footnote-2) More than most humanists, Voegelin was able to explain why a scholar of the humanities was engaged in an inescapable self-deepening. The challenge was to explain to an increasingly professionalized world of scholarship how that existential dimension, not only was consistent with its canons of factual scrutiny, but was mandated by the demands of scientific rigor to which they had already pledged their fealty. No doubt there is more than a hint of irony in Voegelin’s frequent references during this period to his own allegiance to “science.”

In many ways the mantle of science is adopted as a defensive posture for the intellectually daring moves he undertakes in this volume. Not wishing to be accused of holding a confessional viewpoint, Voegelin also did not wish to embrace the pseudo-objective norms that had captured the field of biblical scholarship. Verifying the external veracity of historical events is never the same as accessing the interior meaning they contain. It was the latter that constituted the significance of the former. Voegelin had seen that it is this inner transformation of spirit that is the real source of the community substance that unites the social wholes that enact history. It is for this reason that the meaning of the externalities of history, their factual basis, can only be accessed from within the communal perspectives to which they have given rise. To merely report on what happened was to overlook its meaning. Indeed, an external report was scarcely possible without some provisional intuition of what its meaning was. Human society is never an external reality, although it has an external existence, for it is a cosmion, a little world born by its members as their inward self-understanding.[[3]](#footnote-3) A study of science and society, if it was to be scientific, would have to acknowledge the peculiar tensions that permeated its subject matter. Nothing was to be gained by ignoring the incapacity of observable realities to contain the meaning they carried for their participants. To confine ourselves to a knowledge of factualities was to limit ourselves to pseudo-science. Instead, Voegelin was prepared to take the full measure of the challenge that an historical inquiry faced. That is, that its meaning could only be accessed, initially, from within the communities to which it had given rise. No reading of the Hebrew Bible could overlook the meaning it held for the people of Israel and the Jewish community. Nor could it abstract from the early Christian community that joined the text with its own New Testament to form the self-understanding of the Church. Without being either Jewish or Christian, Voegelin wanted to understand their documents as constitutive of the history in which Judaism and Christianity emerged. His approach was therefore to take the meaning of the events as the guide to the historicality of the events themselves. He had become an investigator of the experiences and symbols of order that precede all other emergence.

As opposed to historiography and the extending time-line of events it recounted, Voegelin drew attention to the rupture of time that brought about the differentiation of history as such. To exist in history is not the same as to narrate it. It was the priority of the perspective of history that he saw as the crucial insight that Israelite society had gained. The structuring of history into a Before and After was the effect of the revelation of God that had occurred to Moses and the Hebrew tribes that followed the Exodus from Egypt. They could now historicize the events of their past because they lived within the horizon of history that made their recollection the purpose of their existence. As Voegelin would characterize it, they lived in history rather than in the cosmos and that break from the order of the cosmos would be of significance for humanity as such. Through Israel the advance to historical existence had occurred. But this had nothing to do with the purely historiographic enterprise. The Israelites did not discover record keeping, nor did they engage in an extensive form of annalistic preservation. Later Voegelin would discover that a particularly impressive form of historiography, one that sought to trace the present state of affairs all the way back to the beginning of the world, was a fairly widespread phenomenon. This is the pattern for which he coined the term “historiogenesis.”[[4]](#footnote-4) No doubt there were strongly historiogenetic elements in the Hebrew Bible, especially with the Genesis beginning that locates its origin in creation. But that was not the motivating center of the textual unfolding. As an interpreter of texts Voegelin already knew that the beginning is never the point from which the exposition begins. Rather, it is in the experiential breakthrough in which the source of order as a whole is encountered. This is why his approach to the Bible radiates from the Mosaic revelation by which Israel becomes the people that leaves the cosmos of Egyptian order to enter into the historical existence that reaches out to universal humanity. It is the revelatory event that opens the horizon of history that is the condition of possibility for the historiographic construction.

Revelation of the Beyond

What made it possible for Voegelin to grasp this insight was his thorough exposure to the pre-revelatory symbolisms of the Ancient Near East. He did not simply take over the negative characterizations of the surrounding peoples by those to whom the revelation of the transcendent God had been given. The polytheistic past was indeed an untruth from the perspective of those to whom a more adequate truth had been conveyed, but that did not mean that the truth had been entirely withheld from those to whom God had not revealed himself. Such a tension was embedded in the Biblical texts and certainly recognized within the Christian New Testament (1Timothy, 2:4). Indeed it was inherent in the universality of the claim that the revelatory texts sought to impart. Yet neither the ancient writers nor more contemporary scholars had found a way of accommodating the plurality of perspectives that converged on the common truth. Voegelin was, and largely remains, alone in having found a theoretical framework, the language of compactness and differentiation, by which an advance in truth can be understood without entailing a denunciation of the past as untruth.[[5]](#footnote-5) A particularly important aspect of this framework was that it enabled Voegelin to reach a clearer characterization of the nature of revelation than is commonly the case. The difference between the gods of the cosmos and the extra-cosmic divinity that addressed Moses cannot be framed in the shibboleth of “monotheism,” for the intracosmic divinities can be derived from one highest divinity or coexist in their separateness.[[6]](#footnote-6) The break from the mythic cosmos is nothing less than a qualitative shift, one that Voegelin characterized in this volume as “a leap in being.” Even though this was not a term he continued to use, he held firmly to the notion behind it. The spiritual breakthrough at the point where human beings encountered the transcendent source of all things radically altered their relationship with divinity and permanently revised the perspective within which all other reality was viewed. Few grasped as clearly as Voegelin the dramatic character of this turning point. Certainly it was not captured by the characterization of “universal humanity” that, for Karl Jaspers and others, marked the axis time of history.[[7]](#footnote-7) By contrast, Voegelin understood universality as a consequence rather than the source of the breakthrough to transcendence.

The character of the rupture could scarcely be understood apart from an understanding of what had been ruptured. The term he coined for this pre-revelatory experience of order was “cosmological.” So far as I know Voegelin is distinctive in his use of this term for the primary experience of order that occurs to all human beings as far back as the evidence of their efforts at symbolization can be accessed.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is the archaic experience of order that we live in a cosmos or ordered whole in which all that is participates. The consubstantial unity of the whole is therefore what allows the ordering influences to reach from the highest to the lowest, from the beginning to the end. It is the cosmos itself that is the model of order and human existence participates in it through attunement to its spatial hierarchy and temporal rhythm. Cosmological order could be well studied through the great literary elaborations of the high civilizations of the Ancient Near East as well as the East itself. It was because Voegelin took the mythic order of the cosmos seriously that he could appreciate the validity of the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Mesopotamian texts without dismissing their compactness as obsolete. In important respects the primary experience of order, its wholeness, is never displaced. Differentiation, when it occurs, is always from within it and therefore never reaches as far as the original unity.[[9]](#footnote-9) It may be that ancient Egypt never had a “religion” no more than a notion of “nature” or of “reason” or of “government”, but they did hold fast to the underlying unity of an order that bound all things into a whole. The necessity of retaining this sense of the whole, even after the differentiations had occurred, would mean that cosmological order retains a permanent hold on us. It would never simply be our past but, in important ways, the inelminable horizon of the present. The hold of the primordial unity of all things was what made the break with it, in the encounter with transcendence, such a shattering historical event, the event that constituted history.

It was because Voegelin had discarded the language of ideas that he could plumb so deeply the seismic shifts of experience involved. The breakthrough to the transcendent in the Mosaic revelation, and equivalently in the parallel irruptions of the pre-Socratics, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Confucius and Lao-Tze, cast a pall of unreality over all other modes of being. In light of Being everything else had slipped to the status of nonbeing. This is as evident in the I AM of Exodus as in the fragments of Parmenides. The challenge for the scholar of such ruptures is to find a way of going behind the texts to the events from which they had burst forth. Even if one had avoided the notorious misrepresentation of such symbolizations as “concepts” of the divine, there still remained the more formidable challenge of communicating something of a reality that transcends every means of its representation. Where other commentators would have been content to reference an inexpressible mystery, Voegelin worked to convey the depth that lay behind it. His fidelity to the texts had taught him that their writers had struggled with the same issue and discovered the suitable means of conveying what lies beyond language. The via negativa, by which the recipient successively negates the levels of being to arrive at that which is beyond all negation was the customary means of conveying the experience of what is beyond experience. A particularly skillful demonstration of this hermeneutic is contained in Voegelin’s analysis of “The Thornbush Episode”(Exodus 3: 1-15)[[10]](#footnote-10) He recounts how it begins with a cosmological phenomenon, the bush that burns without being consumed. This is what draws Moses to turn aside to see what it is. Only then does he hear the call that addresses him personally, before it establishes the proper distance between man and God. He must take off his shoes if he is to enter into the knowledge of God who hears the cry of his people and, in hearing them, begins the action of their deliverance. “I will be with you,” is the assurance that Moses is given. At this point the character of the divinity that addresses him has not been established. The movement into the interiority of hearing has shifted from the visibility of the cosmological hierophany, but the radically unexpected has not yet broken through. Yet somehow there is an intimation of transcendence in the question Moses asks, “who shall I say has sent me to them?” The answer, Voegelin suggests, is astonishing in its linguistic novelty but, even more, in the experiential vastness it contains and anticipates in the history of thought. I AM WHO I AM. While maintaining a certain caution about the “metaphysics of Exodus,” Voegelin recognizes it as the perfect formula to denote the transcendence of God as the boundary event that marks the limits of experience. What cannot be grasped directly can nevertheless be sensed as the culmination of an ascent that reaches its own boundary. The transcendent God who is beyond our capacity has been reached in that very acknowledgment itself.

The Beyond as Personal

In many respects Voegelin’s unfolding of the Mosaic revelation is so successful that it is easy for his readers to assume that it fits comfortably within the traditional Judaic and Christian orthodoxies. There is no doubt that Voegelin understands the call of Moses as personal and therefore the relationship to Yahweh as undeniably personal. In many ways his account moves comfortably within the orbit of Christian expectation in which the personal relationship to God becomes paramount. It is arguable that this is Voegelin’s most strongly Christian volume, as he walks an intriguing path between the Judaic self-understanding and the anticipations of Christ it contains. The disappointment of his Christian readers at his later treatment of the Christian materials is perhaps derived from a misimpression. While not many have done so, it is possible to look back at this most orthodox volume and wonder if the treatment of revelation was as satisfactory as it might have been. It is possible that we may have read into Voegelin’s exegetically powerful accounts more than was there. Could it be that the meditative ascent he discerned in “The Thornbush Episode” was really a variant of a Upanishadic meditation or one of many other impersonal models?[[11]](#footnote-11) We should also recall Voegelin’s repeated reference to St. Thomas on the tetragrammaton, the inexpressible depth in the name of God that denoted what lay beyond revelation.[[12]](#footnote-12) Again the indisputably orthodox character of such allusions may have led us to overlook the extent to which Voegelin strained in a different direction. Yes, there is a depth of the person, and especially the depth of a personal God, that lies beyond communication. But the character of persons and, preeminently of a personal God, is self-disclosure. We are not held at a distance by a depth we cannot reach but drawn into a divine presence that opens itself to us. Perhaps Voegelin was not even aware of his divergence from the traditional sense of a God who approaches his people out of care for them. But that would become apparent as he later broadened the conception of revelation beyond the limits of its conventional understanding.

In the first three volumes of *Order and History* Voegelin utilized a fairly standard taxonomy that listed the symbolic forms as myth, revelation, and philosophy. Revelation and philosophy were breaks from the world of the myth, but breaks of a distinctive nature. Revelation, both Judaic and Christian, signaled the most radical breach of the cosmos to the utterly transcendent God beyond it. Philosophy had instituted a parallel rupture but fell short of the extra-cosmic finality implied; it remained within the compactness of the Dionysian soul that is tied to the eikon of the cosmos as the embodiment of order.[[13]](#footnote-13) Contemplation of a divinity beyond the cosmos was inseparable from its formative effect within it. A significant modification of this conception occurred with Voegelin’s publication of *The Ecumenic Age*, in which he announced that philosophy too is more properly viewed as a form of revelation.[[14]](#footnote-14) There were now only two symbolic forms, myth and revelation, with the latter divided into greater or lesser degrees of apprehension of the transcendence of the divine. He adapted his own capitalized terminology to designate the two symbolic forms that expressed the irreducibly parallel experiences of the divine. The immediate presence of God could be discerned within the soul’s responsive pursuit of the God who revealed himself in inwardness as the source of right order. The mediated presence of God was manifest in the order of the cosmos that was evident both before and after the breakthrough event of revelation. These twin dimensions of participation in the divinely willed order, Voegelin designated as the Beyond (*epekeina*) and the Beginning (Genesis). In some ways this extended the logic of Voegelin’s earlier treatment of philosophy as, in Platonic terminology, a “type of theology.”[[15]](#footnote-15) It also provided him with a clearer means of addressing the bifurcation that had afflicted Western intellectual history from the time of the Patres. The twin pillars of reason and revelation had become so firmly ensconced that scarcely a thought was given to the implication that revelation is now outside of reason and vice versa.[[16]](#footnote-16) Voegelin, by contrast, had always been clear that the differentiation of reason emerges from a theophanic event. Yet the broadening of the category of revelation carried its own substantial costs, not the least of which has been a notable decline in the personal component.

The God who calls Moses by name, and who reveals his name to Moses, has now become the Beyond. One can admire and appreciate Voegelin’s enlargement of the category of transcendence to include the philosophic ascent, without overlooking the loss of intimacy embedded in this more generalized relationship. It is from this perspective that one looks back at the earlier treatment of revelation, with its continual attention to the inexpressible depths behind it, and wonders if the downplay of the personal dimensions had not been there all along. The impression is confirmed by the truncated account of Christianity in *The Ecumenic Age* that disappointed those who had expected it to unfold the Christocentric intimations of *Israel and Revelation*. Instead, the revelation of Jesus is strangely muted even when its essence is acknowledged as “the fullness of divinity” present in Jesus. Voegelin is never in doubt that the I AM is the same God whom Jesus claims to be (John 8: 58).[[17]](#footnote-17) Yet the center of attention shifts from that relationship to the problematic intrusion of transcendence into time it introduces. Whatever is good about the good news seems overshadowed by the destabilizing impact, in which Voegelin sees the advent of Christ as the great event that stimulates the panoply of gnostic speculations.[[18]](#footnote-18) At the same time the remediative effects of the personal relationship with Jesus, a relationship that lifts the believer over all of the unsatisfactory conditions of existence in the cosmos (Paul, I am content), is largely overlooked. It may indeed be the case, as Voegelin suggests, that Christ’s overcoming of the world raises the question of the purpose of the world in the first place, but this is largely a consideration that arises when it is contemplated from the outside. For those who have been embraced by the divine love the limitations of existence pale into insignificance. Jesus is the one who perfectly embodies submission to the divine will while remaining within the cosmos.

Seen in this light Voegelin’s neglect of the personal dimension seems particularly detrimental to the challenge of acosmic disorder he wished to address. It is in Jesus that the cosmos is most deeply affirmed, for the transcendent I AM has entered fully into its existential drama. The suffering and death of Christ on the cross is not an escape from existence but its redemptive transformation definitively announced in the resurrection. When the transcendent God has entered time in order to redeem it to himself, then time has entered into the life of the transcendent God. The world is no longer the world that it appears to be but has become the medium in which the revelation of transcendent love takes place. Illuminated by this eschatological flash there ceases to be any reason to search for an illumination beyond it. “Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world (John 16:33),” does indeed mean that the world has been overcome, the persistence of its unregenerate nature notwithstanding. It is true, as Voegelin insists, that this raises the problematic aspect of the world to our attention. Why should there be a world whose purpose is to transcend itself? But that is hardly the aspect that is dwelt upon by Jews or Christians who, in their different ways, live in fidelity to the good news of the redemptive divine entry into history. The world that transcends itself is justification enough for the world. Far from being rendered redundant within the economy of salvation, existence in the world is the indispensable means by which the transfigurative movement is accomplished. The world that moves beyond itself does not cease to be a world for it becomes itself even more deeply, even if those depths are scarcely accessible from the perspective of the world. This was even the case for the Hebrew prophets who, in Voegelin’s reading, suffered the irreconcilable tension between the divinely willed order and the intractability of the human reality of Israel. Temptations to despair or to metastatic transformation did touch the prophets but they did not yield to them in the aggregate. Instead, as Voegelin suggests, they turned away from the abyss by which transcendence overwhelms existence to find the interior path by which transfiguration emerges from within the human heart.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This is why the Suffering Servant could be recognized most fully in Christ. He is not only the one in whom the prophetic expectation that God would provide the means of accomplishing the reconciliation that had eluded the People of Israel, but that he exemplifies the way in which that eschatological expectation must prevail. It endures within the person who lives it most completely. Through a person, in this case the person of Christ, the tension between what is and what is not yet is most thoroughly realized. This is why the person of Christ is so important, for he opens fully the personhood of the Father who is marked by the same suffering that is shared with all through the person of the Spirit. The revelation of the inner life of God, a life of inter- relatedness between persons, is the very nature of revelation. Voegelin is right in declaring that the fact or, more correctly, the event, of revelation is its content.[[20]](#footnote-20) But he did not go deeply enough into the reason for this which arises, not so much from the transcendence of all content, as from the overwhelming of all content that is the encounter of one person with another. We do not know one another as facts, but as the beyond of all finite actualities. The revelation of God is only available to persons and is the quintessential enactment of a person. Moses did not hear the voice of God through ears that receive sounds but through the inwardness that could hear the voice of the Other. The relationship that revelation establishes is so beyond all tangible reality that it is the moment in which the discovery of the person as such conclusively occurs. There can hardly be any talk of changing the world between persons who are decisively beyond all boundaries of finitude. Neither in space or time, the converse of God and man can only take place in the eternal mutuality by which heart speaks to heart. In Jesus the relatedness of persons becomes abundantly evident, but it is displayed as the condition of possibility of the revelatory encounter from its very beginning. This is why revelation, when it occurs, opens us to the personhood of every human being. What is revelation but the gaze in which mutuality is beheld?

When nothing has been said, everything has been said. It is not that Voegelin lacks an awareness of this inescapably personal dimension of the encounter (they beheld etc), but that he allows it to recede in favor of a more generalized language of transcendence.[[21]](#footnote-21) By overlooking the extent to which transcendence derives from a person who transcends every expression, he misses the intimacy contained within the most infinitesimal gestures. Remoteness cannot be a problem for one who has given himself so completely. Thus what cannot be given has thereby been given. Words and symbols and actions are saturated with a presence that cannot be reduced to the signs of presence. Revelation in depth, as Voegelin would term it, does not become a limit to revelation but the opening through which otherness discloses itself to the other. The unknown God is only unknown from outside of the encounter in which it is precisely the longing for meeting that is the highpoint of disclosure. The fact of revelation that is its content now refers, not just to the character of transcendence as such, but to the interiority of the encounter. In the end what is revealed cannot exceed the will to self-revelation. No gift can be greater than the giver and that is what the gift serves to give. Revelation is the mutuality in which the self is given and received. God wills to give himself to us and to receive us in turn. He cannot reveal a deeper dimension of himself than this. He cannot say more than that he communicates himself to us. This is the apex of revelation succinctly captured in John’s proclamation that, “God is love.” Beside this all other considerations pale into insignificance but that does not mean that they lose their significance. Instead the manifold of finitude has become the enchanted way by which it carries a significance beyond itself. Materiality is a love letter for hearts attentive to its meaning.

Voegelin may well have hesitated to follow such a personalist account of revelation on the grounds that it tied it too closely to a Christian application. But that is to overlook the avowedly personal character of revelation, even in its most inchoate beginnings. It may be that the revelation of the sacred that occurs in the cosmological form carries no trajectory beyond the visible, but that does not mean that such a trajectory escapes the God who reveals beyond all revelation. Cosmological hierophanies may not adequately depict the divine but that does not mean that they are not, for all that, the first faint glimmerings of an invitation that draws the respondent beyond the humble means by which it is issued. A fully personalist revelation must inevitably carry the implication of a reaching-forth that is prior to the encounter in which it culminates. Voegelin’s own theoretical apparatus of compactness and differentiation that underpins the notion of equivalence moves in such an orbit and it is a notable advance on patterns of dismissal or homogenization. But what it does not do is assimilate the earlier forms to the personal character of the revelatory encounter. Instead it ranks them all on an extrinsic continuum of degrees of differentiation of transcendence. It misses therefore the more inchoately personalist intimations embedded in the solidly cosmological epiphanies. As a result, the whole drama of revelation, including its pre-revelatory promptings, slips from the center of focus to become a process whose dynamics are held at a greater distance than the intimacy of the persons it entails. It is then that the problems of a balance between transcendence and immanence assume a prominence they do not have when they are held within the dynamic of personal mutuality. A particularly acute form of the transcendent-immanent tension arises when a mundane means is employed to fix the glimpse of transcendence the revelatory events had opened. This is the problem of historiography with which Voegelin had long grappled, even though the means of its resolution were readily at hand once the irreducibly personal dimension of revelation had been fully admitted. What remained a problem in the logic of concepts was not necessarily one in the realm of mutuality. The historiographic challenge of denoting the event of revelation within the history that is constituted by it, was not a challenge to the persons whose entry into the encounter was made possible by their status as persons outside of it.

History as the Apocalypse of the Person

The historiographic problem arises from its tendency to regard the event of revelation as one of the events of history. Even with Voegelin, revelation is couched in the distancing language of “outbreaks” and “ruptures” that overlooks the person who is alone capable of revealing and receiving revelation. Only the person provides the model of disclosure. Everything else is a visualization of what cannot be visualized because disclosure cannot be disclosed. It must be glimpsed as the unique capacity of persons. This is why the “irruption of transcendence” cannot be grasped as anything other than entry into the person of the Other. The God who calls may be inchoately manifest in what is visible or audible but the hearing and seeing are inseparable from the personal. Revelation is inescapably personal. But it is so in a radically dualistic way. When heart speaks to heart, the relationship differentiates personhood on either side of the event. The encounter with the God who speaks is simultaneously the discovery of the inwardness by which he is heard. Transcendence is glimpsed not only as the reality of the divine but as the correlative capacity of the person to glimpse it. Transcendence speaks to transcendence in a way that clarifies the reality of the person as the mutuality of man and God. The full realization of personhood as participation in the divine personhood may take a long period of differentiation but its direction is irrevocably set from the first intimation. Voegelin provides a superb exposition of the development that stretches from the ancient Egyptian, whose contemplation of suicide is provoked by his diagnosis of disorder, to the figure of the Suffering Servant in whom the suffering of disorder has become the means of its redemptive transformation.[[22]](#footnote-22) The transcendence that marks the person is the underlying continuity that culminates in recognition of the representative suffering that unites man and God. The prefiguration of personhood reaches its figuration in the advent of Christ.[[23]](#footnote-23)

What Voegelin does not do is recognize that the discovery of the soul, of interiority, is also the means by which the historiographic distortion of history might be resisted. The tendency to assimilate the event of revelation to the events of history is considerably reduced when it is seen as the event that is also constitutive of every person. Far from lying in the historical past, revelation is the event that remains in the past of every person because it is what constitutes the possibility of the person as such. We do not exist in space and time but in the now that is eternally outside of them. To be a person is never to be present in what is, but to have always arrived from beyond being.[[24]](#footnote-24) Speaking and hearing are possibilities only for persons who are never simply contained in what is spoken or heard. They remain forever capable of that leap by which the other is glimpsed beyond all that is said or heard. Personhood is what distinguishes persons long before they become aware of what it means, but that differentiation is only possible only because it is the distinct mode of persons to be capable of standing outside of themselves. They are not who they are. They continually transcend themselves and carry transcendence as their mode of being. What this means therefore is that the event of revelation that opens the mutuality of persons now definitively establishes the horizon of history as one that can never be contained within the limits of historiography. It may be that we continue to relate to revelation as an historical event, but it only becomes meaningful when the event is more than historical.[[25]](#footnote-25)

There is no doubt that Voegelin is intensely aware of this dynamic and beautifully reflects on it in “Eternal Being in Time.”[[26]](#footnote-26) There he reaches beyond the historiographic convention of a flow of time to apprehend it as a series of ‘points of intersection of the timeless with time.’ Eventually it become the succession of timeless moments he designates as “a flowing presence.” That characterization, however, still seems to be conceptualized from the side of eternal being and its entry into time. Less clearly seen is the relationship that is correlative within the recipient of revelation. The transcendent can be apprehended within the timeless moment only because each of us is such a point of intersection with the timeless. Ever ready for the call that comes from beyond all that is, we discover the extent to which we are constituted by an expectation that exceeds all boundaries. How else was it possible for Moses and the Elders to behold the hidden God? History is therefore not only punctuated by those irruptions of the transcendent, but is continually borne by the persons whose absence from the events is the condition of possibility for their grasp of absence as such. Externality may be the residue of history, the indispensable material reworked within the historiographic accounts, but the persons who bear externality are not themselves external. They and we can behold the events of the past because persons are neither simply in the events nor in the past. As Collingwood insisted, the past is never in the past but always in the present.[[27]](#footnote-27) It is there that we encounter other persons who, while they are not present become present through their self-transcendence. To say it is an eternal present suggests that it is a different form of time. The truth is that history is not in the past but in the now that is the possibility of history. We can become present to one another because we have never simply been present. To view things sub specie aeternitatis is not to view them from the perspective of God but from the viewpoint from which it is possible for us to meet God and all others. This is why the search for an axis time or an absolute viewpoint is deeply mistaken.

Voegelin always had a profound intuition of this and struggled mightily to reject any suggestion that individuals may be mere stepping stones over which the historical engine rolled.[[28]](#footnote-28) Yet the historiographic quest for “configurations of history” was a habit not easily shaken. Even in the *Ecumenic Age* he proudly displayed the pattern he discerned in the triad of ecumenic empire, spiritual outburst, and historiography as a constant of history. It was only when the question of its significance was posed that the hollowness of such pronouncements became apparent. What does a pattern tell us about what we need to know most? How we are to live. Like the claim to have reached the point at which “universal humanity” is proclaimed, we are left wondering about how we are to stand in regard to it. How does the brotherhood of all men become real for me? The further we recede from the relationship to the ordering events, the more they are held within the distance of a conceptual organization, the more they cease to be worthy of the effort of remembrance ostensibly invested in them. In *Israel and Revelation* Voegelin was acutely aware of this historiographical paradox, for he constantly reflected on the comparison with Toynbee who had abandoned his own narrative enterprise once the futility of the rise and fall of empire had become apparent.[[29]](#footnote-29) Even Toynbee’s later orientation to the emergence of the world religions hardly amounted to an embrace of any one of them. Voegelin understood the problem that history was only worth remembering if it was anchored in a meaningful present of the historian. Yet even he held back from the final commitment he knew to be required. The canon of the historiographic enterprise, its claim to science, was not quite interchangeable with the canon of membership within the community that lived in continuity with history, the Church. It was only after the first three volumes that Voegelin began to abandon the historiographic narrative in which he had first begun to approach the problems.

The shift was definitively announced in *The Ecumenic Age*. The “Introduction” renounced the chronological framework in which *Order and History* had been projected. Philosophy of consciousness, with its criss-crossing lines of meaning and problems, would now replace a philosophy of history. Yet despite the renunciation of an historiographic framework it is not altogether clear the historiographic style has been superseded. Perhaps it is simply a more sophisticated cross-sectional narrative that still holds its events at a distance. Dissatisfaction with the inconclusiveness of the state of the analyses in this penultimate volume is surely a strong indication. This is not a criticism of the less than full endorsement of the Christian revelation that the work displays, but of a deeper unwillingness to follow the existential and theoretical logic of Voegelin’s own starting points. Having abandoned the history of ideas and embraced the experiential search for truth, Voegelin held back from the full consequences of his realization that the historian must locate himself within the truth emergent from history. “The order of history emerges from the history of order.” The principle of that magisterial opening of *Order and History* seems to have faltered. Historiography is a part of, not apart from, the history it recounts. What is meaningful in the past must constitute the present of the historian who investigates it. Once that principle has been enunciated there must be no holding back from the consequences that require the historian to locate himself at the point of intersection of the timeless with time. History is written from the perspective of the present that is not passing but held fast as the timeless moment. It is only because that is the vantage point of every person who stands outside of all that is said and done that historiography is possible.

The illusion of a perspective of superiority must be abandoned when we come to narrate the lives of others. We are as much part of the story as those whom we recount. The challenge that marks every narrative, the impossibility of containing the irruption of meaning that overflows it, remains ours as well. The tendency for historiography to presume mastery of all that it narrates must be resisted if the historian is to locate him- or herself within the horizon of history. When that occurs we find ourselves within the same relationship as the communities constituted by the revelatory outbursts, for they engage, not so much in an extension of the original events, as in a constant return to an ever deeper affirmation of the beginning. It is comparable to the situation of the Church that becomes aware of the development of doctrine while insisting that the emergence is merely a return to what has always been.[[30]](#footnote-30) While writing *Israel and Revelation*, Voegelin does not appear to have been sufficiently conscious of this meditative structure, for he recounts it as a trail of symbols that explore the irreconcilable tension between the revelation of God and the particularity of the people. He takes particular note of the priority of revelation to the formation of the people as a unique source for the proliferation of symbolizations that never attain a stable formulation. Yet the structure of a continual return to the beginning from which an ever deeper understanding must be extracted remains the dominant pattern. The Hebrew Bible is a continual meditation on its own foundation, as the Psalms and Prophets repeatedly attest. The historiographic enterprise can reach no more than the externals of dynastic and social organization, and perpetually runs the risk of losing what it is they are charged with securing through their fidelity. That more profoundly meditative task is where *Order and History* goes with *The Ecumenic Age* and especially the final incomplete volume, *In Search of Order*. Historiographic chronology is of largely secondary importance when it is seen as serving the contemporaneous conversation that stretches across history. Earlier and later are of less significance when all must grapple with the mystery of revelation into which they have been drawn.

In acknowledging the inexhaustibility of the opening of history we take a final stand against the incorporation of revelation into the historiographic account. The primacy of the person within this relationship cannot be overstated, for outside of the person we have no model of the possibility of revelation. Only a person can disclose him or herself as outside of all disclosure. The person is alone transcendent. Narration may habitually ignore the persons who narrate it and therefore cannot be contained within it. But this is why the validity of narration must depend on continual awareness of its unsurpassable horizon. Persons are the boundaries of narrative, just as revelation is the boundary of history. The challenge that Voegelin struggled so valiantly to surmount, how the event that constitutes history could resist inclusion within it, the problem of the historicity of the events of revelation, now becomes more manageable when it is located within the dynamic of the self-revelation of persons. That which cannot be said has been said in the meeting by which persons encounter one another as persons. It is because Yahweh is a person that he can be apprehended in the voices and signs that are not Yahweh. When the elders beheld God externally nothing happened for it was not through anything tangible or visible that he became known, but through the inwardness by which they grasped God as inwardness. Only persons can know persons as persons. For persons there is no event that adequately contains the other for each glimpses the other as beyond all saying and doing. Persons are known in themselves, not through anything that is less than the person. This is why the danger of taking the peripheral, the event of disclosure for the disclosure itself, is virtually impossible in the personal encounter. We can of course forget the One who is known in the event but only by turning away from the interior to what it is not. Idolatry is precisely the mistaking of the sign for the signifier and the discrepancy explains why it was so anathemized by the Hebrews. Voegelin’s instinct for displacement is what guided him so unerringly to understand the event of revelation as other than the means of its proclamation. To have understood the dynamic within the transcendence of persons would have given added surety to his analysis.

1. “What is History?” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 28: *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, (eds.) Thomas Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 1-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A great formulation of this insight is contained in the letter to Robert Heilman of August 22, 1956. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* Vol. 30: *Selected Correspondence*, (ed.) Thomas Hollweck (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 293-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The term first appeared in an essay of that title in *Anamnesis* (1966) that was later incorporated into *The Ecumenic Age* (1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is a theme first announced in *Israel and Revelation*. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 14: *Order and History* Vol.1: *Israel and Revelation*, (ed.) Maurice Hogan (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), especially 99-100. A later extended declaration is provided in “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History,” *Collected Works*, Vol.12: *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, (ed.) Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See for example the movement toward monotheism represented by the turn toward Aton professed by the Pharaoh, Akhenaton. *Israel and Revelation*, 141-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mircea Eliade, for example, prefers the term “archaic” for what Voegelin understands as the “primary” experience of the cosmos. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (New York: Harper, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Voegelin, *Collected Works*, Vol.17: *The Ecumenic Age*, (ed.) Michael Franz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 51-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Israel and Revelation*, 453-466. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See the remarks in “Conversations with Eric Voegelin,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 33: *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1933-1985*, (eds.) William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 303-04. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Israel and* Revelation, 460-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Voegelin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 16: *Order and History*, Vol. III: *Plato and Aristotle*, (ed.) Dante Germino (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *The Ecumenic Age*, 51-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Plato and Aristotle*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It is worth noting that Joseph Ratzinger continually stressed the significance of the Biblical contact with Greek philosophy that became manifest in the Wisdom literature as well as the Septuagint translation. Both were indicative of the interpenetration of reason and revelation to which he gave most forceful expression in the famous “Regensburg Address.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *The Ecumenic Age*, 58-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Considering the history of Gnosticism, with the great bulk of its manifestations belonging to, or deriving from, the Christian orbit, I am inclined to recognize in the epiphany of Christ the great catalyst that made eschatological consciousness a historical force, both in forming and deforming humanity.” *The Ecumenic Age*, 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Israel and Revelation*, Chapter 13, “The Prophets.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “In this sense, then, it may be said that the fact of revelation is its content.” *The New Science of Politics*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See his treatment of Exodus 24: 9-11 in which Moses and the Elders culminate the Covenant by eating the sacrificial meal in the presence of God. “And they beheld God, and ate and drank.” “That was all. And the paucity of information should cause no surprise,” Voegelin deftly observes, “for the establishment of order in the present under God is an event not in literature but in the souls of men.” *Israel and Revelation*, 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. These individual cases virtually bookend the volume. *Israel and Revelation*, 138-141 and 542-570. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “The participation of man in divine suffering has yet to encounter the participation of God in human suffering.” *Israel and Revelation*, 555. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For this notion see David Walsh, *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. On the title page of *Philosophical Fragments* Soren Kierkegaard poses the question to which the whole book is a response.” Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?” *Philosophical Fragments* (eds.) Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). For an analysis see Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 427-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Collected Works*, Vol. 6: *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, (ed.) David Walsh (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See his discussion of Jacob Burckhardt in *The Ecumenic Age*, 253-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The extended discussion of the Spengler-Toynbee lament about history is designed to demonstrate the central theoretical issue. “Neither of the two thinkers has accepted the principle that experiences of order, as well as their symbolic expressions, are not products of a civilization but its constitutive forms.” *Israel and Revelation*, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)