
Govert Buijs has written a remarkable book, thoroughly assessing the philosophy of Eric Voegelin. Voegelin (1901-1985), born in Cologne, Germany, was among the many European intellectual émigrés who came to the United States just before or during World War II. Voegelin was a scholar of astounding breadth and depth who taught for years at Louisiana State University and composed most of his corpus in English. Known in American circles as a political philosopher and often mentioned in the same breath with Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, Voegelin ranged far beyond political thought into biblical studies, ontology, the history of science and philosophy, and the subject matter of most of the social sciences.

Buijs derives the title of his book from Voegelin’s response to a remark by Max Weber. Weber sought to develop a value-free science, and in keeping with the fact/value distinction concluded that there are no scientific criteria for distinguishing between God and the devil. Voegelin saw this as a sign and fruit of modernity. He became convinced that this reductionist view of science had helped make room for the rise of irrational totalitarian ideologies such as National Socialism and Communism. Voegelin set out to understand how this could have happened and what it meant. According to Buijs, Voegelin’s life work can be summed up as a resistance to ideology by means of *anamnesis* — critical reflection on the depths and history of consciousness, leading to a philosophy of order and history.

The following quotation from Voegelin’s 1952 book, *The New Science of Politics*, offers a glimpse of this project:

[Max] Weber . . . still conceived history as an increase of rationalism in the positivistic sense. From the position of a science of order, however, the exclusion of the *scientia prima* from the realm of reason is not an increase but a decrease of rationalism. What Weber, in the wake of Comte, understood as modern rationalism would have to be reinterpreted [by Voegelin] as modern irrationalism. This inversion of the socially accepted meaning of terms would arouse certain hostility. But a reinterpretation could not stop at this point. The rejection of sciences that were already developed and the return to a lower level of rationality obviously must have experientially deep-seated motivations. A closer inquiry would reveal certain religious experiences at the bottom of the unwillingness to recognize the *ratio* of ontology and philosophical anthropology; and, as a matter of fact, in the 1890’s began the exploration of socialism as a religious movement, an exploration which later developed into the extensive study of totalitarian movements as a new “myth” or religion. The inquiry would, furthermore, lead to the general problem of a connection between types of rationality and types of religious experience.

Buijs intends in his book to show that Voegelin’s achievement is the development of a “substitution theory” — an account of how modern ideological myths arose as substitutes for religion. Voegelin’s substitution theory, says Buijs, is really four things: 1) a critical method for exposing political theories that deny transcendence; 2) a means of reopening consciousness to its transcendent depth by means of *anamnesis*; 3) an analysis of the spirituality of political evil; and 4) a wider cultural-historical account of the development of modernity. The depth and breadth of Buijs’s study cannot be captured in a brief review. A few of his insights — including critical insights — into Voegelin’s thought will have to suffice.
In Voegelin’s in-depth exploration of ancient cosmological myths, of Judaism and Christianity, and of the emergence of philosophy in Greece, he offers an account of the increasing differentiation of experience. The experience Voegelin chiefly has in mind is that of the deepening of human consciousness of the transcendent. This in turn deepens the understanding of human life as *metaxy* — living in the in-between. Human experience, according to Voegelin, can be interpreted *noetically* only from the inside — from the standpoint of participation in a partnership in being, lived out between a transcendent “beginning” and a transcendent “beyond,” between the “origin” and the “eschaton.” In fact, as Buijs explains, for Voegelin the revelation of God in Christ is a continuation of the millennial process of revelation (which includes other equivalent experiences) through which human experience of the God-man relationship has been further deepened and differentiated. What we learn from Jesus is the meaning of life as suffering and death. The one who is willing to lose himself for God’s sake finds true life. The one who seeks to save his life — to hold on to immanent existence — dies even in living. The “devil” for Voegelin represents the permanent temptation to want to escape suffering and death. The devil, in Voegelin’s view, according to Buijs, is not so much an anti-God as one who promises to do better than God. The greatest failure for humans is to turn away from the truth of *metaxic* existence and to follow a devil who promises to transfigure this world and release humans from death and suffering. This is the gnostic temptation, which, as Voegelin argues, leads in modernity to ideological attempts to “immanentize the eschaton.”

Although on one hand, according to Voegelin, the apostle Paul articulated most profoundly the truth of *metaxic* existence, he nonetheless came to believe that the resurrection ultimately would lead to the transfiguration of reality. There would come a day, in other words, when the human condition of being born and passing away would disappear — when Christ would triumph over death itself. To the degree that Paul believed this, he had become, in Voegelin’s view, *noetically* unbalanced, and subsequently his vision of the resurrected Christ would fuel the gnostic temptation, leading eventually to modern ideologies. Modern ideologies represent a revolt against the human condition, leading to the alienation of the soul because of its growing desire to escape from, or to transfigure, this world. For Voegelin, then, as Buijs shows, totalitarian ideologies are not simply secularized heirs of Christian faith. Nor are they merely a revival of paganism. They are a secularized, activist variant of Gnosticism, which is a deforming parasite on Christian faith.

Buijs’s thorough and penetrating reading of all the Voegelin texts shows that, for Voegelin, political order is impossible without openness to its transcendent ground. When, through gnostic pride, humans open themselves to devilish desires, they close themselves off to the truth of existence. Their souls become alienated from reality. Only by means of humble, self-critical *anamnesis* is it possible to reopen the soul to divine transcendence and the truth of living in the *metaxy*. If one follows this philosophical path — the way to wisdom — one can then grasp the meaning of the spiritual and political evil of modern ideologies. The evil of National Socialism or Marxism was not, first of all, what could be seen on the surface — the unbridled power of Hitler and Stalin, the destruction of freedom and of human life. The root of these evils was the disfigured souls of all who lusted for a transfigured world, believing that modern science and technology, or Hitler, or Stalin could immanentize the eschaton. The external world is the arena of the enactment — the externalization — of the souls that shape it. And the modern world has been shaped much too much by alienated souls.

*Tussen God en duivel* is the most comprehensive, critical assessment of Voegelin that I have seen. It is the only in-depth, Christian evaluation of Voegelin’s work of which I am aware. Buijs’s careful, thorough volume (505 pp.) especially illumines Voegelin’s ambivalence toward Christianity, which Voegelin interprets as both the