God Fettered in Jail?
Heschel, Rilke, and the “Vollendung”

Meins G. S. Coetsier

There was never a time in which individual expression was so much in evidence. Over the past decade, mass media and the Internet have played a major role in world politics: MSN, Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and the wide-ranging blogosphere have not only altered election campaigns but also pushed the integration of technology into the process of field organizing, affecting Western politics significantly. As the first American president with a Facebook page and a YouTube channel, Barack Obama has, according to some, successfully integrated technology with a revamped model of political organization that stresses volunteer participation and feedback on a substantial scale. Moreover, that part of ethics that had to do with the regulation and government of a particular nation or state has now become an online stage, a political arena, for worldwide interaction. The preservation of our civilization, its safety, peace, and prosperity, the defense of its existence and rights, has become not only dependent on but also susceptible to the matrix of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Yet despite ongoing developments of communication technology, there was never a time in which true personal expression was so rarely achieved, in which there was so much pressure to adjust oneself to convention, to media clichés, and to the latest trends, opinions, and similar news flashes. The irony is that in an age of excessive communication, or rather information, we are losing the power for relationship. Since genuine relationship (Martin Buber’s “I-Thou”—in German, “Ich-Du”) and individual expression provide an answer to an ultimate question, we face an additional predicament in our modern age: we do not hear the ultimate question anymore. There is too much “noise pollution”—a surplus of unwanted data devoid of meaning, an overload of headlines, images, and emotions.

Conversely, the soul or “consciousness”—the “something” in our humanity that is the site and sensorium of the divine presence—has been “silenced.” Words are recurrently empty, opaque—that is, literalized to the point of losing their original meaning—or even dead. Consequently the inner life of man is a deserted landscape, a forgotten language waiting to be

Meins G. S. Coetsier is the director of the Centre of Eric Voegelin Studies (www.evs.ugent.be) and the author of *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*. He wrote “Between Realities: Dawkins vs. Voegelin” for the Summer/Fall 2009 issue of *Modern Age*. 
rediscovered. In addition, if words or symbols are just “artificial signs”; if meaning is but a “contraption,” a “piece of equipment”; if there is no echo of experience, of the torment of a fear-ridden world; if man is alone and unaided; and if the world moves in a vacuum, of what ultimate worth is technology and (political) expression? 3

Modern man is in danger of becoming a forgotten “thing” among things (of dwelling exclusively in Buber’s realm of “I-It”—in German, “Ich-Es”), a lost object in space and time. Man’s deep-seated spiritual condition of insecurity and despair—i.e., “anxiétas” (Cicero), “dread” (Kierkegaard), “fear of death” (Hobbes), or “Angst” (Heidegger)—shows how a shift has taken place from the classical experience of joyful participation in a theophany to the hostile alienation from a reality perceived as hiding rather than revealing itself.

Today we might know our desires and feel our whims and our failings, but we do not know our ultimate commitment. We may be conscious of the effect of our actions, but we do not understand what they mean. We stand in awe of many things, yet deep down we do not know what we stand for. God is exiled in the human heart: “fettered in jail.” We have lost any appreciation of what could be our highest concern, in Eric Voegelin’s terminology—that is, of our ultimate fulfillment in the “divine ground”—because such fulfillment is found not merely through psychological “self-inspection” but also through our rational and spiritual attunement to the One who is concerned with man.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) are perhaps unlikely figures to associate with the philosophy of Eric Voegelin, but they also seek to find the divine ground. Voegelin’s own divine-human search was inspired by ancient philosophy, chiefly by Plato and Aristotle. Both Plato’s eros of the search and Aristotle’s intellectually more aggressive aporein recognize in “man the questioner” the man moved by God to ask the questions that will lead him toward the cause of being. Hence, the searches of Heschel and Rilke are such evidence of existential unrest. In the act of questioning, their experiences of the tension toward the divine ground break forth in the word of inquiry seeking the Word of the answer. Their struggles to experience and understand “authentic relationship” connect them. Each in his way searches to revive the encounter with the divine presence in an empty “I-It” world that has been lost in translation.

God in Search of Man

A Jew born in Warsaw, Abraham Joshua Heschel was reared in a Hasidic community. Spending his student years in secular Jewish Vilna (now Vilnius) and cosmopolitan Berlin, he escaped Nazism and immigrated to the United States in 1940. Heschel lived and worked in America where through his politics and personality he came to influence not only the Jewish debate but also wider religious and cultural debates in the postwar decades.

As a rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians of his time, Heschel challenged spiritual and religious complacency. His poetry announces themes of awe and wonder before nature, a passion for truth, and acute loneliness, dismay, and indignation at God’s distance. Moreover, Heschel discusses ways that man can seek God’s presence, and the sweeping wonder that man receives in return. A recurring theme in his work is a radical amazement that man...
experiences when confronting the presence of the divine. He offers the profound insight that we can consider God to be in search of man despite human problems of doubts and faith.6

Heschel points out how the modern world consists of instruments and tools whereby supreme ideas are symbols only. “God” is a name, an image (nowadays even a website), but no reality. For many people in today’s world, God is dead, non-existent, or even a delusion.7 The standard of action is expediency, and God too, even when acknowledged, is for the sake of our satisfaction, as Heschel observes:

Now, this seems to be a fact: God is of no concern to us. But there is another startling fact. His being of no concern to us has become a profound concern. We are concerned with our lack of concern. God may be of no concern to man, but man is of much concern to God.8

How do we know that man is of “concern to God”? The only way to discover this according to Heschel is “the ultimate way,” in Voegelin’s philosophy, a life of “open existence.” The terms “closure,” “breakthrough,” and “openness” are used by Voegelin to symbolize the different experiences one can have in relation to the surrounding reality of God and man, world and society. In Henri Bergson’s Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion, Voegelin found two competing (truth-) symbols, a “closed” and an “open” society, for the purpose of characterizing two social states in the development of mankind that were created by the historical epoch of spiritual breakthroughs.9

In the same way, the political life for Heschel is a manner of interacting with the world in the light of the divine Presence, in openness. Our politics can rise to that higher level of open existence only when we discover that the ultimate way is not to have a symbol but to be a symbol, to stand for the divine. The notion of “symbol” is used here differently from Voegelin’s use, as the only vehicle that for Heschel literally embodies the divine is a human being. Heschel interprets the human person as an image of God: “The symbol of God is man, every man.”10 Thus, living an “open existence” is to “sanctify thoughts, to sanctify time, to consecrate words, to hallow deeds.”11 Heschel realizes, however, that we easily lose our inner strength and power when we have lost the sense of the divine reality:

All we do is done through symbols. We live for tools, we think in signs. What we do is for the sake of something else. It is therefore important that we pay attention to the role and meaning of symbols. God is of no importance unless He is of supreme importance. . . . But to remember that the love of God is for all men, for all creatures; to remember His love and His claim to love in making a decision—this is the way He wants us to live. To worship God is to forget the self. It is in such instants of worship that man acts as a symbol of Him. . . . We live through one of the great hours of history. The false gods are crumbling, and the hearts are hungry for the voice of God. But the voice has been stifled. To recapture the echo, we must be honest in our willingness to listen, we must be unprejudiced in our readiness to understand. What goes on in the depth of our lives has a profound effect upon the international situation. Others may suffer from degradation by poverty; we are threatened by degradation through power. Power corrupts, and it is only the acceptance of the spirit of God that

28

MODERN AGE Summer 2011
saves, that prevents disaster, that ennobles both body and soul.¹²

At present, there are many and variable modes of political life in the West, driven by reason as well as by passions from the heart such as love and anger, grief and joy, mercy and wrath. Yet man is not always guided by the good, by reason; there are moments when human attachment turns to political detachment, when compassion and concern are overshadowed by partisan anger and narrow-mindedness. These instants mark the difference between opinionated outbursts and authentic political experience.

A healthy political life, however, reveals the extreme sociability of man, his world-directness, attentiveness, and concern about the common good. God may “look at” the world and perhaps is “affected” by what happens in it; man nonetheless is the active agent who is invited to participate in the “divine care” to represent God’s compassionate concern for human affairs. The central feature of society and the primary content of political consciousness are in its best possible form, following Heschel’s musings in The Prophets, both a “divine attentiveness” and a “concern” for the dignity of human life. Whatever political message we appropriate, it must reflect that awareness. Having achieved an open existence, man can share and try to convey the divine attentiveness to humanity—that “metaxic involvement” in history on which Voegelin elaborated in his writings. Heschel believes that it is possible for man to acquire a divine-human vision of the world in which God’s concern for humanity is the origin of all our human efforts to safeguard the common good for future generations.¹³ Heschel believes that “sympathy” opens man to the common Good, to “the living God.” The essence of “spiritual living,” according to him, is aspiring to the utmost in everything, including our politics:

As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself. Without the holy, the good turns chaotic; without the good, beauty becomes accidental. It is the pattern of the impeccable which makes the average possible. It is the attachment to what is spiritually superior: loyalty to a sacred person or idea, devotion to a noble friend or teacher, love for a people or for mankind, which holds our inner life together. But any ideal, human, social, or artistic, if it forms a roof over all of life, shuts us off from the light. Even the palm of one hand may bar the light of the entire sun. Indeed, we must be open to the remote in order to perceive the near. Unless we aspire to the utmost, we shrink to inferiority.¹⁴

In Plato’s days there was a difference between experiencing opinions and experiencing a deep concern for reality or truth. For Heschel this desire for truth becomes “the most precious insight” when man turns to his awareness of God: “It is living in the perpetual awareness of being perceived, apprehended, noted by God, of being an object of the divine Subject. This is the most precious insight: to sense God’s participation in existence; to experience oneself as a divine secret.”¹⁵ Yet even here we must not think that by speaking of “God” we reach the essence of the political life. “Transcendent attentiveness,” as Heschel puts it, merely defines the limits of our understanding of God. God in Himself, His Being “is”!

The theme and claim of “prophetic” or perhaps “political theology” is God’s
concern for man, and man’s significance to God. According to Heschel, only one aspect of His Being, His directedness to man, is known to man. Hence, the ultimate feature of our political life can be involvement, attentiveness, and concern. Politics may be defined not as what man does with his concerns but rather as what man does with the concerns of the common Good, of God. The mystic and/or conservative thinker whose thought is guided by metaxic-faith might say: God’s presence is my experience; His “unity” and “transcendence,” my attempt at symbolization; political concern and involvement (justice and compassion), my activity. Upon deeper reflection, he will realize that all three dimensions are one. For Heschel: “God’s presence in the world is, in essence, His concern for the world. One word stands for both. And both are expressions of His unity. Divine unity implies concern. For unity means love.”

Artists, poets, and writers reveal and remember the great “secret,” namely that God’s hidden pathos—the emotional appeal of “love”—is written on the human heart. Heschel spoke of how “a divine attachment concealed from the eye, a divine concern unnoticed or forgotten, hovers over the history of mankind.”

Heschel reminds us that our politics must not “shrink to inferiority” but must take into account our human attachment to the utmost. Moreover, he points to an experience whereby God is in search of man. Without God in sight, Heschel believes, “we are like the scattered rungs of a broken ladder.” He suggests that we shift the center of living and move from a preoccupation with ourselves to an awareness of the divine Presence. God, he is convinced, is the center toward which all forces tend. In Voegelinian terms, “the divine ground” is the source, and we are the flowing of this force, the ebb and flow of His tides. Politics in its truest sense takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest and enables us to see and engage with the world in the “mirror of the holy.” Heschel argues that when we betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of narrow-mindedness, we can behold a situation from the aspect of God. The political life can, if we allow for it, create opportunities to be honest, in saying what we believe and to stand for what we say. For the accord of assertion and conviction, of thought and conscience, is the basis of all human aspiration under the Presence.

**Bringing God to Fulfillment (“Die Vollendung Gottes”)**

Born in Prague in 1875, Rainer Maria Rilke was reared in a rigidly traditional fashion, the only child of an unhappy marriage that was eventually dissolved. At the age of eleven he was sent to military school, but, being a highly sensitive boy, he was unfit for a military career. After an illness he left the military academy and focused on his studies. By the time he entered Charles University in Prague in 1895, he had already published his first volume of poetry; he went on to produce a significant body of poetry and other writings in a relatively short life.

Although Rilke had grown up in a pious Catholic family, his relationship with religion was ambivalent. He felt closer to the “God” of the Jews than to the Christian God as displayed by the Catholic piety of his youth. According to Annemarie S. Kidder, his mother was fanatically Catholic and outwardly pious; both had a negative effect on Rilke, who rejected such displays as “grotesque and meaningless.” Instead, Rilke cultivated an “inward piety” that in his poetry explored the problems and
possibilities of religious faith in an age of unbelief and personal anxiety. “A frequent theme,” Kidder remarks, “is the human heart’s insatiable longing for the transcendent, the divine,” which for Rilke expressed itself in religious tendencies that were decidedly unorthodox. He tried to touch the root of language and of speech by inner silence:

Being-silent. Who keeps innerly silent, touches the roots of speech. Once for him becomes then each growing syllable victory: over what in silence keeps not silent, over the insulting evil to dissolve itself to nil, was the word to him made evident.

January, 1924

Rilke traveled throughout Europe and Russia. In his journeys he discovered the power of Art as spiritual source. Religion and Art according to Rilke belong together, and so he wrote his Book of Hours (Das Stundenbuch). These poems “came to him” in a highly inspirational way and were sacred and intimate to him and not intended for the public. They were the result of his visit to a monastery in Russia, where he was deeply moved by the practice of praying several times daily, following a “book of hours.” He was touched by the spiritual life of the monks and the “presence” he had encountered there. Inspired, Rilke returned to Germany and put down on paper what he felt were spontaneously received prayers. Rilke’s Book of Hours is said to be “the invigorating vision of spiritual practice for the secular world, and a work that seems remarkably prescient today, one hundred years after it was written.”

Rilke believed in an intuitive experience of God. The Book of Hours reflects this deep religious dimension of his work. He discovered a repeating/eternal sequence (“wiederkehrenden Zyklus”) of three generations within religion: the first generation finds God; the second generation builds a temple around Him, imprisoning the divine by rules and regulations; the third generation “suffers spiritual impoverishment” (“verarmt”) and is forced to break down those “walls” (“Gottesbau”), using the stones to build “little shelters” (“notdürftig kärgliche Hütten”). After that comes the generation that has to “search again” (“wieder suchen”) for God.

Rilke has exerted considerable influence on European writers. He shares with his readers a new kind of intimacy with God—a reciprocal relationship between the divine and the ordinary in which God “needs” us as much as we need God. His Letters to a Young Poet and his Book of Hours, among others, show modern man a way to rescue God in exile, namely by pointing out our role in the world, our responsibility to love it and thereby love God into being. It is the artist’s task, so he believed, to bring God to fulfillment (“Die Vollendung Gottes”).

Rilke both experienced and articulated the “Vollendung” in terms of a “oneness” with what comes to pass in this world—that is, “life” and “death.” According to him we must not leave one thing out for the sake of another:

Life and death: they are one, at core entwined.
Who understands himself from his own strain
presses himself into a drop of wine
and throws himself into the purest flame.

Christmas, 1922

While life and death “are one” for Rilke, “at core entwined,” in his poem “Die...
“Entführung” he writes the unusual phrase: “and strangely I heard a stranger say: I-am-with-you.” Arguably, for Rilke, the creative experience of “Vollendung” given by poetry or an artistic expression is as “real” and “with you” as the latest natural disaster or economic crisis. For this reason he is still captivating today; the experience of “Vollendung” brings us to what Voegelin calls the “anamnetic” quality of his poetry. Along with the Bible, such poetry as Rilke’s—that is, with themes such as “helping God,” of “listening” to His needs—may give us the strength and inspiration to resist the brutal attempt of modern-day ideologies, of radical atheism, to make history without God and to found it on the strength of man alone. Poets and mystics in particular remind us of our human frailty and the vulnerability of God—that is, the “vulnerability” of our consciousness of God, which can suffer from “eclipse”—in a broken world. For any of us who like to attune to “the flow of presence” and resonate with the divine ordering of human life, such writers as Rilke and Heschel could be an inspiration, perhaps even a “transformation”:

...Transformation
Hymns in innerness, dance before the ark,
uproar and parade in the ripening vine.  

December, 1923

To read a poet like Rilke may help modern man to express his spiritual quest more accurately. To find such “inner security” and to develop this, Voegelin would encourage us to go back to the experiences that engendered the poet’s symbols. Through a meditative reading of Rilke’s letters and poems we may become aware of a timeless quality that enables us to regain some humanity, realizing that we are human beings (“Menschen”) living side by side in God’s presence. Rilke spoke of a “Weltinnenraum,” an “inner universe” or “outer space within.” He guides his readers to the indestructible part of the human soul, to “God.” Of course, one could wonder if any inner security can be developed under the inspiration of poetry. It should, however, be borne in mind that, as with most questions posed concerning “God” and “poetry” (or in Heschel’s case “theology”), the answer is: “It depends whom you ask.” For some such inner security cannot be developed; for others, poetry may indeed give an experience of “Vollendung”—that is to say, the courage and strength to be there for other people, to bring God to fulfillment.

God’s Need for Partners

Between the poet’s whispers of love and the world he lives in there is consciousness. In the works of Rilke we may discover such consciousness in the concrete—that is, the artist’s dreams of spiritual and sensuous intimacy with the divine Presence. The haunting images focus on the difficulty of communion with the ineffable in an age of disbelief, solitude (that is, alienation), and profound anxiety. Rilke’s themes tend to position him as a transitional figure between traditional and modernist thinkers, while his writing became a form of sharpening vision and inner transformation, altering lives. By encouraging ourselves to listen to our deepest desires the way Rilke and Heschel did, we are one step closer to God, to the meaning of our existence. Heschel spoke with vital moral authority; his “theology” in effect became “politics”—emancipating words that illuminated the world’s fullness, with all its
challenges, opportunities, and social relations, involving authority and power to action. For Rilke the highest concern was to harmonize poetry and art with the divine to fulfill God’s presence in this world.

Heschel and Rilke attempted to “rescue” God in the human heart, where He is “fettered in jail,” in exile. As poets they speak for and to people afflicted with (atheistic) doubts, as they exclaim their longings for the Good. The unrest of our age personifies God’s exile and God’s need for partners. And as God has limits in the twenty-first century, human beings must seize the initiative to reaffirm the basic human task of rescuing the Transcendent from the demolition of contemporary atheism and idolatry. Humankind could demand no fuller commitment than Die Vollendung Gottes.

3 For parts of this reflection, I meditated on Heschel’s words on the longing of the soul for the Great Connection.
8 Heschel, Man’s Quest for God, 67.
11 Heschel, Man’s Quest for God, xii–xiii.
12 Ibid., xiii.
14 Heschel, Man’s Quest for God, 6–7.
15 Ibid., 619 (see also, Psalm 139:7–18).
16 Ibid., 619.
17 Ibid., 618–19.
18 Ibid., 7.
19 Günter Schiwy, Rilke und die Religion (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 2006).
21 “Schweigen. Wer inniger schwieg, rührt an die Wurzeln der Rede. Einmal wird ihm dann jede erwachsene Silbe zum Sieg: über das, was im Schweigen nich schweigt, über das höhnische Böse; dass es sich spurlos löse, ward ihm das Wort gezeigt.” John J. L. Mood, Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 84–85.
22 See Anita Barrows and Joanna Marie Macy, Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God (New York: Riverhead Trade, 2005).
24 Schiwy, Rilke und die Religion, 83–96.