

The Religious Secularism of the Late Schelling

Sean J. McGRATH

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Without doubt, the piece of the late Schelling that has received the least amount of scholarly attention is the conclusion of the Philosophy of Revelation.¹ In the two concluding lectures, which take up a mere forty pages of Schelling's *Sämtliche Werke*, Schelling offers a theory of three ages of revelation, materialized in three historical forms of the Church: the Petrine, or Catholic Church, under the aegis of the Father and the apostle Peter, and determined by the first potency, which rules from the time of Christ to the end of the Middle Ages; the Pauline, or Protestant Church, under the Son, and guided by the apostle Paul and the second potency, which gives birth to modernity; and the Johannine, or the Church of the future, the Church of the Spirit, under the apostle John and the third potency, which will bring the strife between churches, states, and world religions to an end. While Schelling does not reference it, his theory echoes the traditional theological trope of the two resurrections, which are separated by the thousand years of peace prophesied in the Book of Revelation, to occur before the Parousia and the end of time.²

Each of the three forms of *ecclesia* actualise one of three historical possibilities for resolving the tension between individual freedom and community: the first, the Petrine Church (Catholicism), is an internal diversity under the coercive rule of a single external authority; the second, the Pauline Church (Protestantism), an external diversity grounded in an internal identity; and the third, the Johannine Church (philosophical religion), an external unity grounded in an internal unity. The theory is not entirely original—it is a version of the 12th century prophet Joachim of Fiore's trinitarian philosophy of history.³ But the way Schelling underwrites the schema, through a theological-political application of a speculative metaphysics (the late doctrine of potencies) to the church-world relation, is certainly unique to him. There is no question in my mind that Schelling regarded this philosophy of history as the centerpiece of his last, positive philosophy. In what follows, I wish to modestly counteract the scholarly silence on Schelling's theory of the three ages of revelation by giving

¹ F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, zweiter Theil, Vorlesungen 36-37, in *Schellings Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1858), hereafter SSW, vol. 14, 294-334. This version of Schelling's theory of the three ages of revelation was edited by Schelling's son posthumously and was, as published, never given as a lecture. The version which Schelling did give was published in the Paulus edition. See F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42 (Paulus Nachschrift)*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 314-325. The first version of the theory dates back to the 1831 *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung*, ed. Walter E. Ehrhardt (Frankfurt am Main: Meiner, 2010), 672-710.

² See Rev. 20:1-15. For the history of this idea, see Ernst Benz, *Evolution and Christian Hope: Man's Concept of the Future from the Early Fathers to Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. Heinz G. Frank (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1968).

³ See Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future: A Medieval Study in Historical Thinking* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton, 1999). Schelling references Fiore, whom he claims he only discovered after he had worked out the theory, at SW 14, 298, footnote 1.

uncensored expression to it, summarising it without editing it to suit our post-Christian sensibilities, and letting Schelling's apocalyptic gospel ring forth, if only for the sake of justice to Schelling's late work.

In Schelling's vision, modernity, under Paul, the apostle of interiority, liberates the individual from a merely external unity achieved by dogmatic imposition and the coercive power of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. This Church-State balance unravelled in the Reformation, with the result that the interior unity of the Christian with other like-minded Christians takes precedence, and an external fragmentation of the Church into competing churches ensued. Anticipating 20th century political theology, Schelling holds that the theological liberty of the Protestant grounds the political and economic liberty of the modern European. With this liberty, however, Christendom disintegrates into competing communities, which stand in opposition to the world. Modernity, according to Schelling, must not rest on its achievements but is called to move beyond them, and to restore the unity of Christendom while expanding it to the compass of the earth. Hegel and other enthusiastic moderns misjudged the times, according to Schelling, and failed to see that modernity was not the end of history but a preparatory stage.⁴ Christianity, especially the Christianity of Paul and John the evangelist, anticipates more than the negative freedom of the modern individual: it looks towards a future in which the tensions between reason and revelation, Church and State, universalism and particularism, are definitively and finally resolved, and the order of peace prophesied by Paul (1 Cor. 15:28) is inaugurated.⁵

Schelling strives to avoid the errors of immanentized eschatology and political utopianism which have dogged the Joachimite tradition, especially the hubris that would arrogate to humanity the power to bring about the perfect community. At the same time Schelling disavows any predictive certainty concerning that which is to come, and transposes idealism into a pragmatic, abductive, and fallibilist key. As he laid down in the programmatic 1815 *Ages of the World*, the future can be prophesied, but neither known nor narrated before its time.⁶ In the absence of certainty, we can at best invest our hopes in the reasonableness of what history has revealed.

For Schelling, as for Hegel, revelation speaks of a human community in which the aim of religion, identity with the divine, and through the divine, the political equality and spiritual freedom of all, is achieved in *this* world. Christianity is not the exclusive site of revelation, but the focal point of divine action in history, the self-revelation of the divinity, which is as old as the first mythologies, and universal, including the religions of the East (which Schelling recognizes as in their own way

⁴ "Perhaps the one is still coming who will sing the greatest heroic poem, grasping in spirit something for which the seers of old were famous: what was, what is, and what will be. But this time has not yet come. We must not misjudge our time. Heralds of this time, we do not want to pick its fruit before it is ripe nor do we want to misjudge ours. It is still a time of struggle. The goal of this investigation has still not been reached. We cannot be narrators, only explorers, weighing the pros and cons of all views until the right one has been established, indubitably rooted forever" (SSW 8, 206).

⁵ In the Book of Revelation, this is figured as one thousand years of peace, when the martyrs are resurrected and seated on thrones, and Satan is enchained. The millennia signals the end of the State and the sanctification of the world, even as the transcendent term of religion, the divine, is restored to its place, as the ineffable sovereign, unfathomably beyond creation, and yet incarnate in the unity of the human community. See Rev. 1:20: 1-6.

⁶ See SSW 8, 199.

revealed). But Christianity takes the lead and self-secularizes in modernity, disassembling its medieval institutional mediators, and indeed, deconstructing religion as such, and in doing so, opening itself to the innermost truth of every other religious tradition.⁷ The Church of St. John, the community to come, in which all worship “in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:24), and which overcomes the need for both State and Church, will bring about the *eschaton* prophesied by Paul in 1 Corinthians 28, the free, spiritual unity of humanity, a community which “will exist because everyone will come to it by his own volition and belong to it through his own conviction, for in it each spirit will have found a home.”⁸ This emergence of human unity from below, from a free and unrepressed diversity, is the true end of history, the moment when Paul prophesizes that “God may be all in all”⁹—a passage which for Schelling sums up the whole of his own late philosophy.¹⁰ But its achievement will not be a political act, nor the fulfillment of the *telos* of human desire and agency; while it may be the deepest longing of our hearts, our minds and wills are inadequate to genuine community, and it will need to be given to us from beyond as “undeserved blessedness.”¹¹

This end must remain a matter of prophesy for Schelling, a future that is intimated (*geahndet*), not cognized (*erkannt*) like the present, or known (*gewußt*) like the past, because the relationships between the major epochs of history are thoroughly contingent: no conceptual necessity drove the Petrine Church into Reformation, and no necessity will usher in the Third Age of Revelation.¹² Rather, real unforeseeable historical events, the products of freedom, drive the transformations. These historical events are not therefore random; they reveal, *a posteriori*, a certain rationality, which could not have been deduced but can be narrated, and could to some degree, and under certain conditions, be anticipated (prophesied not predicted). The Pauline Church does not cancel and preserve the Petrine Church, but literally succeeds it, rendering it *the past*, and adding content to traditional Christianity that is not merely implicitly contained in the Petrine Church. After the Reformation, the Petrine Church persists as the past, not the past that is gone, but the past that abides as ground. Even if Christianity in its historical forms is rendered non-actual by the transition to philosophical, that is, universal religion, Christ, conceived as the unique incarnation of God in a single, historical human being, Jesus, remains the means of the unification.¹³ The contingency of history is a metaphysical principle for Schelling. The *eschaton*, like all historical events, is grounded in the

⁷ In this regard, the late Schelling anticipated Gauchet’s thesis concerning the self-secularizing *telos* of Christianity. This places Schelling in the Weberian lineage of the sociology of religion. Secularism, according to Schelling, is not the abolition of religion but the perfection of a certain form of it. See SSW 11: 260: “Through an unstoppable progress, to which Christianity itself contributed, after consciousness had become independent from the Church, it also had to become independent from revelation itself. Consciousness had to be brought out of an unfree knowledge in which it still remained regarding revelation, to the situation of a thought that is completely free against revelation, a thought that is at first clearly free of knowledge.” Cf. Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁸ SSW 14, 328.

⁹ *Theos ta panta en pasin*. 1 Cor 15:28.

¹⁰ See SSW 7, 484.

¹¹ SSW 13, 567.

¹² See SSW 8, 199.

¹³ See Tyler Tritten, “Christ as Copula: On the Incarnation and the Possibility of Religious Exclusivism,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* Vol. 6 (2014).

abyssal, meontic nothingness of the ground, by distinction from the determinacy of the beings which it grounds. By virtue of this grounding in the groundless, the triumph of the Cross at the end history is rendered radically contingent and precarious. In short, the anticipated *eschaton* of peace need not be, and no *telos* of history guarantees its arrival.

Schelling's principle of the contingency of history has profound political implications. Even if humanity as such remains inadequate as a means to the desired end, we are each rendered radically responsible for the flourishing of all in this situation of eschatological precarity. The anticipation of the end can guide our judgments and actions *now*, and may, by some incomprehensible co-inherence of divine and human willing, help to bring it about, even if the achievement of unity eludes our abilities. We need to work towards unity, but resist the temptation to presume it to be a merely human end, along with the related temptation to impose it on the unwilling (who have each their own inscrutable path to follow toward it). Herein lies the whole of Schelling's so-called conservatism. Even if the values and desires of the revolutionaries, equality and freedom for all, are to be affirmed as nothing short of what is promised us, and necessary to us if we are to have peace on earth, revolutionary politics are to be avoided, Schelling argues, for every revolution presumes of humanity that which eludes its capacity, namely, the intelligence and purity of heart needed to create utopia.¹⁴ With early modern conservatives such as Edmund Burke, the late Schelling's critique of the progressives of his time hinges upon a deep conviction that moderns underestimate the inherently flawed nature of human beings. To give a revolutionary vanguard absolute power over society is to invite tyranny, abuse, and injustice.

But we might yet hope that the Kingdom of God will come, and in this regard, there is nothing cynical or resigned about Schelling's conservatism. Just as the Pauline Church brought the Petrine Church to a close, rendered it non-actual and the past of the present, so too will the final Church, the Church of St. John, render the Pauline Church, and its fragmentation, the past. This final form of Christianity, according to Schelling, will be one in which Christianity ceases to be church in any historical and institutional sense, with a dogma safeguarded and promulgated by an ordained priesthood. Theology, promulgated on the authority of scripture and tradition, will be displaced (but not negated) by philosophical religion, wherein revealed truths become truths of reason, without for that ceasing to be revealed. Philosophical religion will remain ecclesial in the primordial sense of *ecclesia*, community, the one human community, which will restore unity to the fallen world, but this will be a Church without walls; it will no longer have an other against which it defines itself, either other denominations, other religions, or the world itself. The world will become Church. The end of Christianity is universal secularism, but without negation of transcendence; or more accurately, the end will be brought about by means of the abolition of the distinction between secular and sacred, which will bring about the restoration of the divine as the only principle of genuine human unity.

A proper interpretation of Schelling's theory hinges upon a clear distinction between teleological time and eschatological time, which I can only sketch here.¹⁵ While teleology appears to be causality

¹⁴ See SSW 11: 516-573 (lectures 22-24 of Schelling's last work, the posthumous *Darstellung der reinrationalen Philosophie*).

¹⁵ To be clear, Schelling does not explicitly draw this distinction, but it is nonetheless essential to understanding the eschatological nature of his politics, and the nature of eschatology in general. On the distinction between

by what is to come, teleological time is not genuinely determined by the future, for the end, which summons the essence forward, in fact comes to it from out of its past. The end in teleological time is the form of what is coming to pass, the actualization of essence (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, literally meaning ‘the what it was to be’ as Aristotle puts it [*Metaphysics* vii, 4]), that towards which the nascent being was always headed. Teleology is the time of the ripening seed; it is determination by the origin. Eschatology, by contrast, is the undoing of determination by possibility, not actuality, the possibility which is genuinely futural, new and irreducible to what has come before. Eschatology is the time of disruption, the time of the event which is not explicable in terms of what has preceded it, but which occurs without direct causal relation to anything already underway, indeed which brings all prior processes to a halt, not by fulfilling them, but by de-actualizing them, rendering them potency for the new real. Here, the distinction between possibility and potency is crucial. Potency does not metaphysically precede actuality, for potencies are determined by the acts which fulfill them. Possibility, by contrast, is metaphysically prior to actuality, rooted in the meontic origin of all determinacy, the groundless ground, which is neither indeterminate nor determinate but determinable.¹⁶

Schelling’s theory of the Church is closely bound up with his conception of the State. The State, as the postlapsarian, historical ground of human freedom, the political means to enable the positive freedom of the individual, can neither be removed nor improved before its time is done. It must exist until its reasons to exist have disappeared. Schelling insists that the State is transitory.¹⁷ It is always only a sign of the true community to come, never the thing itself, a sign that the *eschaton* is not yet, that humankind remains fallen and outside the absolute. The State is a means, never an end, a stop-gap in the history of redemption, which is always subject to critique and must never be permitted to absolutize itself. Christianity gives us reasons to hope that the State will not always be needed. In this regard the late Schelling returns to the idealism of his youth, when he, or Hegel, or Hölderlin, or perhaps all three, wrote, in *The Oldest System of German Idealism*: “We must therefore go beyond the State!—Because every state must treat free human beings like mechanical works; and it should not do that; therefore it should *cease*.”¹⁸ But with the sobriety of old age, Schelling realizes that this revolutionary imperative, however genuinely motivated in a desire for justice and a true relation to God, cannot be realized until the redemption is complete, the redemption already begun in the incarnation and carried forward in history through the first two ages of the Church, but only to be fully accomplished with the emergence of the Johannine Church. What is anticipated, the perfect community, will not only displace the State, it will render politics unnecessary. The rule of law will no longer be required, for as Augustine declared, there is no external law for the holy will.¹⁹ Schelling

teleological and eschatological time, see Jacob Taubes (1947), *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009); and in a Heideggerian context, John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 161f.

¹⁶ Determinability is my translation of Schelling’s first potency (*das Seynkönnende*). See SSW 12: 35.

¹⁷ See SSW 11: 534-552.

¹⁸ “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism,” trans. Diana I. Behler, in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 161-2, at 161.

¹⁹ “Love and do what you will.” Augustine, *Sermon on 1 John 4:4-12*, abridged, modernized and introduced by Stephen Tomkins, edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves, para. 8. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/augustine>.

envisions the end of history as the dawning of a divine and planetary consciousness, in which each genuinely loves God, and so can be left free to do what they will, for what they will to do will be internally ordered to what others wish to do. Under such a condition of transformed consciousness, the good is no longer abstract, no longer common; it will be concrete and individualized. Religion will become public, an ethos that unites all without compromising the diversity of human origins or the historicity of individual perspectives. Christ has indeed prepared the way for this age of the Spirit. But his death on the Cross is not the negation of God, as in Hegel; for Schelling, the death of Christ is the negation of sin. Transcendence remains, even at the end, for the good is infinitely disproportionate to evil. Evil is not something that needs to occur so that the good can be achieved, even if the good is achieved in spite of evil. What dies on the Cross is sin, the necessity that ought not to be, and in this death, the love intended for creation by the Triune God is actualized.²⁰

It should be clear that Schelling's religious secularism is not secular religion. Secular religion, or secularism as a religion, typifies the present moment of stagnation at the end of the Pauline age, where we are now, clumsily endeavouring to sustain political institutions on the basis of floating theologoumenon ('the dignity of the individual,' 'inalienable rights and freedoms,' etc.). Deracinated, these contingent ideals, drawn from a disavowed Christian heritage, cannot maintain the liberal politics erected on them, and so are everywhere in peril in the post-Christendom era.²¹ Where Hegel's position could justify both the neo-Liberalism of Fukuyama and the cynical post-Marxism of Žižek (different positions which share a common assumption: the irreversibility of modern atheist, materialist politics), Schelling's position demands something more of the secular age that would succeed the Pauline age. As the inheritor of the revelation, the final form of the Church, the secular world is called to repeat the gesture by which Christ redeems humanity, that is, the secular is called to empty itself, to renounce its claim to sovereignty, its pretense of atheist self-sufficiency (a claim which is its right to make), and to "take the form of a slave" (Phil. 3:7), to adopt the posture of one who possesses nothing and receives whatever he or she enjoys from the transcendent source of being.

Modernity must reinstate the transcendent, after the 'death of God,' and in such a way as to push forward into the new form of dawning divine-consciousness (there is no place in Schelling for a conservative retreat to the comforting fictions of a previous era of spirit).²² When it does so, the secular will be raised up "above all others" as the culture that has authentically incarnated divinity. It will then be glorified with genuine autonomy, genuine power, and create a science and a technology the likes of which have never before been seen: universal, ecological, and reverential. This secularism to come will be the reign of justice, spreading true liberty, as opposed to the pseudo freedom to

²⁰ I develop the contrast between Schelling's 1841 *Philosophy of Revelation* and Hegel's 1827 *Philosophy of Religion* in my forthcoming book. See Sean J. McGrath, *The Turn to the Positive: The Philosophical Foundations of Schelling's Philosophy of Revelation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

²¹ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000).

²² The death of God is here in scare quotes because Schelling is not in fact a death of God theologian at all, as I argue in my forthcoming book (see note 20), it is Hegel, not Schelling, who declares a "speculative Good Friday" and the abolition of transcendence through the death of Christ. Schelling announces, rather, the death of *the gods* in the Christ event, and the restoration of a genuine, non-idolatrous sense of transcendence through the sacrifice on the Cross.

choose on a flattened plane of ontologically identical consumer goods; true equality, as opposed to the pseudo equality of the right to compete for dwindling resources in the zero-sum game of global capitalism; true fraternity, where historically diverse cultures retain their right to their own distinct histories, as the ground of their proper modes of existence. Schelling's philosophical religion, which I call religious secularism, comes out of the West but is not confined by Western categories and no longer needs to impose those categories upon others. The non-Western world will come to the same position via their own religious and ethical traditions. Such is Schelling's belief, and he dares to suggest that it is reasonable to believe it.