

Populism and the Late Schelling on Mythology, Ideology, and Revelation

Sean McGrath

Preview

Revelation according to Schelling is not the possession of any institutional form of Christianity; it is not even bound to faith or confession. Rather, revelation disseminates itself freely and universally throughout history. It now inextricably permeates modernity. Schelling's *Philosophy of Revelation* does not look backwards to an event in the first century of the common era, it looks forward to the genuine singularity, the moment when humanity will become adequate to the divine subjectivity which lives in it, that is, the penultimate eschaton proclaimed by Paul and the author of the Book of Revelation, the age of righteousness prior to the general resurrection.¹ By bringing mythological consciousness to an end and drawing real limits to rationalism (idealism), revelation first establishes a free relation of the human being to the divine. At the same time, revelation liberates philosophy and culture from religion and inaugurates secular consciousness. History, according to the late Schelling, which he undeniably reads Eurocentrically, is moving toward this third age of revelation (after Catholicism and Protestantism), in which all of humanity will pass over into absolute or true monotheism (Trinitarianism). With the universalization of the revelation, the free and philosophical appropriation of its content (what Schelling somewhat misleadingly calls "philosophical religion"), all historical forms of religion will be overcome, including, it should be added, all historical forms of institutional Christianity. The complete secularization of the world will be achieved, and the sundered human community unified, without expense of historical or cultural diversity.

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Revelation according to Schelling is not the possession of any institutional form of Christianity; it is not even bound to faith or confession. Rather, revelation disseminates itself freely and universally throughout history. It now inextricably permeates modernity. Schelling's philosophy of revelation does not look backwards to an event in the first century of the common era, it looks forward to the genuine singularity, the moment when humanity will become adequate to the divine subjectivity which lives in it. The event will inaugurate the final form of human community, "the Church of St. John," a community of genuine freedom and equality, which will succeed all previous forms of the Church, and indeed, the State. The establishment of this community of the future is the penultimate *eschaton* proclaimed by Paul and the author of the Book of Revelation, the age of righteousness prior to the general resurrection.¹ By bringing mythological consciousness to an end and drawing real limits to rationalism (idealism), revelation first establishes a free relation of the human being to the divine. At the same time, revelation liberates philosophy and culture from religion and inaugurates secular consciousness. History, according to the late Schelling, which he undeniably reads Eurocentrically, is moving toward this third age of revelation (after Catholicism and Protestantism), in which all of humanity will pass over into absolute or true monotheism (Trinitarianism). With the universalization of the revelation, the free and philosophical appropriation of its content (what Schelling somewhat misleadingly calls "philosophical religion"), all historical forms of religion will be overcome, including, it should be added, all historical forms of institutional Christianity. The complete secularization of the world will be

¹ See 1 Cor 15: 20-28; Rev 20:1-6. The end of history described in these New Testament texts predicts an age of righteousness, in which the Church will rule the world—the millennium prior to the Last Judgment and thematized by millenarians, such as Joachim of Fiore. In this age of the Church to come, the world will be united "in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23) and a political transformation of *this earth* will ensue. In carrying this line of Biblical interpretation forward into a secular key, Schelling is a major figure in utopian thought and has had a significant influence on Ernst Bloch and Franz Rosenzweig, among others. On millenarianism, see Ernst Benz, *Evolution and Christian Hope: Man's Concept of the Future from the Early Fathers to Teilhard de Chardin* (Garden City: New York: Doubleday, 1966), 10ff.

achieved, and the sundered human community unified, without expense of historical or cultural diversity.

This is Schelling's final philosophy of religion, one that he argued for and developed over the course of two decades of lecturing on positive philosophy.² In this paper I will assume that this position is a plausible interpretation of what Schelling refers to as the fact of Christianity, the world-historical event of the Christ, an event which includes not only the history of the Church but above all the emergence of modernity from the interaction of Greek, Catholic, and Protestant thought.³ I have commented upon Schelling's vision of the secular end of Christianity in other contexts and will not repeat myself here.⁴ My intention in this paper is to deploy Schelling's philosophy of religion as a tool of contemporary cultural critique.

Given his commitment to global secular religion and the ultimate succession of the liberal nation-state by the final form of human community, the Church of St. John,⁵ what would Schelling say about the related political

² Schelling's positive philosophy refers to the cycle of lectures on mythology and revelation which occupied him from 1831 until his death in 1854. The positive philosophy was never officially published in his lifetime, although an unofficial version, the so-called "Paulus Nachschrift," was published against Schelling's wishes in 1843. See F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42 (Paulus Nachschrift)*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977). Schelling's positive philosophy is slowly emerging as a subject of interest among English speaking researchers of German Idealism. Although most of the seven books which comprise it remain untranslated (over 2000 pages of systematic and historical argumentation), a few parts of it have been translated into English. See F.W.J. Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberger (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2007); idem, *The Grounding of the Positive Philosophy. The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). For studies in English, see Satya Brata Das, *The Political Theology of Schelling* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Tyler Tritten, *Beyond Presence: The Late F.W.J. Schelling's Criticism of Metaphysics* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012); idem, "Christ as Copula: On the Incarnation and the Possibility of Religious Exclusivism," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 6 (2014); Emil Fackenheim, "Schelling's Philosophy of Religion," in *The God Within: Kant, Schelling, and Historicity* (University of Toronto Press, 1996), 92-108; idem, "Schelling's Concept of Positive Philosophy," in *The God Within*, 109-121; Victor C. Hayes, *Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation. Three of Seven Books Translated and Reduced with General Introduction* (Armidale, Australia: The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1995); Edward Allen Beach, *The Potencies of God (s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994). For the standard edition of the lectures, see F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1856-61), hereafter SSW, vols. 11, 12, 13, and 14. I have also made extensive use of Schelling's 1831 *Urfassung der Philosophie der Offenbarung*, ed. Walter E. Ehrhardt (Frankfurt am Main: Meiner, 2010).

³ Schelling, *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 186.

⁴ See Sean J. McGrath, "The Late Schelling and the End of Christianity," *Schelling Studien* 2 (2014): 63-77; idem, "The Tyranny of Consumerism and the Third Age of Revelation," *Analecta Hermeneutica* 5 (2013).

⁵ Schelling's neglected political theology has an important contribution to make to the contemporary discussion concerning the end of liberalism. The key texts from Schelling in this regard are the concluding lectures of the philosophy of revelation. See Schelling, *Urfassung*, 672-710. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford University Press, 2005); Giorgio Agamben, *The*

phenomena of the Trump election, Brexit, and the resurgence of various forms of right-wing extremism sweeping across Europe? Such a question brings the political relevance of Schelling's philosophy of religion into sharp focus. For Schelling, contemporary populism could only be a retreat from the radical political challenges associated with the secularization process unleashed by revelation, *sensus stricto*, the break in history effected by the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of the *Logos*; populism on this view is a retreat from the demands of history to the more familiar theo-political terrain of *mythology*, that is, religious ideology.

It is crucial to understand that Schelling's evaluation of the authenticity of any mythology or religion is always historically nuanced. Where mythology in a pre-Christian or non-Christian context is the spontaneous expression of natural religious consciousness, in a situation determined by revelation, such as the modern global situation, myth can only be ideology in the strongest sense of the word, that is, a disavowal of the truth of history, deliberate self-deception, or false consciousness. This argument directly engages the conservative defense of populism and roundly condemns the contemporary return of *mythos* as reactionary and deceitful. To draw on one conservative defender of populism, I will consider the argument formulated by R.R. Reno, the editor of the right wing Catholic journal, *First Things*. Twenty-first century populism, R.R. Reno writes, is a response to irreligious secularism and the demise of public moral authority in the West.⁶ As such it is fed by an agenda of re-mythologization, a return of what Reno calls "the strong gods" to public life. From a Schellingian perspective a return to mythological consciousness at this stage in human history, when two thousand years of internalizing the revelation has produced a society founded upon the ideal of individual freedom, can only be an ideological regression.⁷ Thus where Reno celebrates the return of the strong gods, Schelling would condemn populism as obstructing the needed transformation our secular society must undergo if it is to pass through the current crisis, where consumerism and capitalism threaten not only our religious and ethnic traditions but human freedom itself. The transformation, should it occur, will not be a return to old forms of mythological consciousness but a transition to an unprecedented form of secular society, a genuinely religious form of secularism, which Schelling roughs out in outline as philosophical religion.

Coming Community (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁶ R. R. Reno, "The Return of the Strong Gods," *First Things*, May 2017. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/05/return-of-the-strong-gods>.

⁷ There is no Biblical endorsement of liberal individualism here. Freedom for Schelling is certainly "individual," since a person is in some fundamental way the author of his or her own self, yet this self-determination is not unrelational or atomistic, nor is it merely negative or a justification of the neo-liberal politics of self-maximization.

Schelling on Mythology

Mythology for Schelling is not divine revelation: this is crucial to remember. This is not to say that mythology does not concern truth. Schelling rejects deflationary and deconstructive accounts of mythology, such as the widespread view that mythology is allegorical, systems of symbols representative of something other than what they appear to be about. Myths on the allegorical account are tales of historical personages or natural phenomenon symbolized by the gods. For Schelling, myths are “tautegorical,” not allegorical: they say what they mean and they mean what they say.⁸ Mythology is religious at its core, if still not divine revelation. Myths recount the ways in which the divine becomes determinate for various people at various periods of history: they reflect the religious psychologies of the peoples who recount them. Revelation, on the other hand, is a genuinely divine disclosure. It is more than merely natural knowledge or mythic experience. Since this point is bound to be unpopular, even among Schellingians, it is worth being completely explicit about it. Revelation in the late Schelling never means the general unveiling of being, *aletheia*, or the experience of the absolute disclosed in nature, such as the young Schelling elaborated in his early philosophy; rather it refers to what theologians from Aquinas to Calvin call “special revelation” (by distinction from the “general revelation” of God in creation spoken of by Paul in Romans 1:20 and developed into a natural theology in Scholasticism). Specifically, revelation means the Jewish-Christian encounter with the God of history, which begins with the call of Abraham and culminates in the crucifixion and resurrection of the *Logos* at Jerusalem.

History, then, can be divided into two eras, prior to and posterior to revelation in this strict sense. That does not mean, however, that the line between the two eras of history is easily drawn. While the appearance of the Christ in history is localizable at a precise point in space and time, prior to the birth of Jesus, the *Logos* accompanies humanity, unknown and generally unacknowledged, on its long sojourn through the mythological age.⁹ Nor does revelation for Schelling come to an end at Pentecost, as it does for some Catholic thinkers; rather, these historical events, two thousand years ago in Jerusalem, point toward the singularity to come, when revelation becomes knowledge. Schelling believes these things in a rather traditional (Patristic) sense: the historical Christ actually redeems the fallen world by emptying himself of his divinity (Phil. 2:6-8); history will end as Paul says it will in 1 Corinthians 15:28, with God, through the sovereignty of Christ, disestablishing every form of worldly sovereignty and becoming “all in all.”¹⁰

⁸ The term was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an early disciple of Schelling’s. See Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 136.

⁹ See Schelling, SSW 14:163; Sean J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2012), 161-163.

¹⁰ One need not be a believer to acknowledge the irreversible historical impact of the Christ-event, for it is first of all the *conviction* of Christendom, that the divine is now fully human (hypostatically united with human nature), which effects the decisive transformations in the basic social, political, and ontological assumptions of medieval Europe and the near-East, a metamorphoses of values

It is only in contrast to Schelling's notion of revelation that his theory of mythology becomes clear. If revelation is a disclosure initiated by the divine, mythology is a construction of consciousness determined as it is by certain innate ideas of divinity. The innateness of our ideas of the divine (which are representations of the potencies) does not render them subjective; they are nevertheless *ideas* of divinity, not divinity itself, which finds expression in mythology. At the heart of the philosophy of religion of the late Schelling is the claim that the unconscious is religious, possessed by a primordial, pre-reflective and immediate monotheism (*ein Monotheismus des Urbewußtseyns*).¹¹ Note that this claim does not entail the affirmation of a natural knowledge of God; it is rather a psychological claim: human consciousness is constituted by a sense for a divine and infinite origin of all that is, a unity that by means of an internal dynamic pluralizes and disseminates itself throughout human cultures. In light of Schelling's distinction between mythological and revealed religion, Schelling's claim of primordial and natural religiosity should be put into alignment with Kant and Lacan rather than Augustine and Aquinas on this point: we do not by nature *know* a true divinity, but we are constitutively oriented to the idea of God. For the late Schelling, as for Kant and Lacan, the ideal and the real do not necessarily converge: this natural idea of God (Kant's ideal of reason, Lacan's Big Other) may in fact correspond to nothing real; it may be purely ideological, but it is nonetheless

a psychological fact. Human being is in essence the God-positing-being, and is never without a religious consciousness, but religious *consciousness* is not the same as religious *knowledge*.

Schelling's history of religion passes from an earliest stage in which the human being is unreflectively directed toward the idea of God (which Schelling calls "relative monotheism"), into a mythological stage, in which a plurality of diverse forms of the divine determine consciousness, which Schelling identifies with ancient polytheism and the sundering of the original human community into diverse nations. The age of mythology ends with the Jewish-Christian revelation, in which a part of the human community come to *know* that neither relative monotheism nor polytheism are true. The one God is internally multiple; the mythic plurality of gods of the pre-Christian world is in truth the multiplicity within unity that defines the Trinity. In short, revelation modifies the idea of God constitutive of human consciousness: for the God revealed is not one but three. This revealed knowledge of the Trinity is not a deduction or a conclusion from a survey of empirical facts: it is strictly speaking revealed by God himself. Without the revelation we would know the three potencies of being, either as mythological

without which, as many have argued (including some outstanding atheist thinkers such as Nietzsche, Weber, and Gauchet), modernity as such would never have occurred. On Schelling's understanding of revelation, see Sean J. McGrath, "Is the Late Schelling Still Doing Nature-Philosophy?" *Angelaki* 21, n. 4 (2016): 121-141. For an early glimmer of Schelling's growing sense that revelation is more than simply the manifestation of the absolute in nature, see F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, SUNY, 2006), 72 (SSW 7, 411-412): 72-73.

¹¹ Schelling, SSW 11, 187.

entities or as principles of logic, but we would not know that God is a Trinity, nor we would be in a position to recognize the logical or ideal basis of mythology, and would remain, without choice, *in* the mythological.

Each of the stages of religious consciousness—pre-Christian (mythic), medieval (Catholic), and modern (Protestant), corresponds to a different stage of social and political life. In the earliest stage of mythological consciousness, the diversity of peoples and language has not yet emerged, and the human community is one by virtue of being undifferentiated. Only with the splintering of the divine into competing polytheisms does national consciousness emerge: the experience of national gods pluralizes religious experience and fragments the original human community into warring factions. In Schelling's reading, the essence of polytheistic mythology is the logical succession of gods, each of whom makes up for what is lacking in the other. Mythology is in essence theogony, a system of the gods coming into being out of each other. In the final age of revelation, the religiously secular age to come, the sundered peoples will be gathered together under a common experience of true divinity, which does not exclude multiplicity (and therefore does not exclude social and political diversity), but includes it within itself as the condition of its possibility.

However much we would like to read Schelling as merely a secular syncretist, Schelling undeniably privileges Trinitarian Christianity in his ordering of the successive stages of religious consciousness.¹² While in religious secularism, the reception of revelation is free (by distinction, for example, from the situation in medieval Christendom)—all people will come to the revelation through their own traditions—the revelation is nonetheless the unveiling of the triune God first explicitly articulated by Christianity. In the form of the three potencies, the Trinity was active in disguised forms in polytheism; it is now revealed as the three divine personalities of the one true divinity. The universalization of the revelation of the Trinity, its emancipation from the faith tradition that once mediated it, will be the end of history proper. The process is well underway, beginning with the Pentecost experience of the Christian apostles, and passing through the various eras of Church history. In the end, Schelling's philosophy of mythology and revelation is an eschatology, looking forward to a moment in the future when God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15: 28), and humanity will be united once again under a common experience of the Christ.¹³

¹² See for example Bruce Matthews' account of Schelling's philosophical religion, which goes to some lengths to underplay the primacy of Christianity in Schelling's account of the history of religions. Bruce Matthews, "Translator's introduction," to Schelling, *Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, 1-85 at 83. This non-committal reading is no doubt more palatable to our post-Christian ears, but it is not in fact true to the text. For a more accurate rendering of Schelling's position, see Tritten, "Christ as Copula."

¹³ The degree to which Schelling's philosophy of religion is a careful elaboration of the world-historical significance of three New Testament texts, Paul's Letter to the Philippians (especially the kenosis hymn at Phil 2:7), Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (especially 1 Cor 15: 28), and the prologue to the Gospel of John, has not been sufficiently recognized, either by theologians, who tend to regard the whole Schellingian enterprise as an arbitrary flight of philosophical speculation, or by Schellingian philosophers, who treat the New Testament references in Schelling's philosophy of

The earliest state of human consciousness, prior to the Fall and the emergence of mythology and polytheism, consists in an all absorbing, grounding, non-reflective grasp of the idea of God. Before humanity is conscious of itself— before it has a self to be conscious of—it is conscious of the possibility of the real God. “He [the first man] does not possess this consciousness, he is it, and it is precisely in his non-act, his immobility, that he is the one who posits the true God.”¹⁴ The psychological point here, which foreshadows Freud’s notion of the birth of the ego from the resolution of the Oedipus complex, is that self-consciousness only comes about through dissociation from God-consciousness, as in the Genesis account of the expulsion from Eden: humankind cannot both possess God in immediate and impersonal consciousness and have consciousness of itself; the one excludes the other.

The primitive presence of God to the unconscious is not a personal relationship to God; for such a relationship, humankind must first be dissociated from the idea of God, that is, it must *have* an idea of God and not simply be it, and to that extent it must become in some way *Godforsaken*.¹⁵ One who has an idea of God can also conceive the possibility of there being no God. With this dissociation, subjectivity comes into its own: it knows itself as not-God and thus knows itself truly for the first time. This loss of the immediate presence of God lifts consciousness out of the unconscious and inaugurates time. For with the dissociation arises the sense of having come into being, and hence a sense of the present and an anticipation of the fullness of being lacking to it. Consciousness in its primitive unitive state is not only pre-personal; it is also un-historical—time literally does not exist for it—because primitive humankind has not yet separated itself from God or from itself and so constituted itself as one with a past. If humanity is to exist not only *in* itself but also *for* itself, it must defect from the primordial bliss of undifferentiated unity with the absolute: it must transcend the religious idealism which is its native possession and enter into a difficult and historically incomplete revelational realism.

The first movement toward self-consciousness, therefore, is the Fall, exile from God, which in one way is the greatest calamity, but in another way the “happy fault” that gives birth to personal consciousness, and the departure from “blind monotheism.”¹⁶ The descent into polytheism and the diverse myths of those who possess consciousness of themselves as distinct historical peoples is both a growing alienation from the origin and an increase in consciousness. The divine does not abandon us completely in the mythological age but accompanies us through history until consciousness has achieved sufficient freedom to be able to

revelation as tangential to the argument. They are not. The philosophy of revelation could also be called the Philosophy of the New Testament.

¹⁴ Schelling, SSW 11, 187; Hayes, *Schelling’s Philosophy*, 109.

¹⁵ To be *Godforsaken* is not the same thing as being Godless. On this distinction, see my *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the Godforsaken* (Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 11.

¹⁶ The “happy fault” refers to the “necessary sin of Adam,” spoken of in the Easter *Exultet*, one of the oldest prayers in the Christian liturgy. Schelling, SSW 11, 187.

receive a revelation of the true God. Schelling's Christocentric philosophy of religion can hardly be accused of denigrating paganism and non-Christian religion in the fashion of Neo-Orthodoxy: mythology is not a lie, nor is it, in its historically era, irreligious or a false consciousness; it is rather the necessary, and we might say, natural propaedeutic to revelation.

A basic principle governing Schelling's philosophy of mythology and revelation is the tension between a religious consciousness compelled by an internal necessity to acknowledge the divine under a certain determinate form—mythological consciousness—and a genuinely religious consciousness, that *decides* for the divine, and dispenses with all external forms of divinity, a consciousness that is the product of freedom, which Schelling anticipates evolving beyond dogmatic and institutional religion into “philosophical religion,” the last form of revelation, which is still to come. The more consciousness is dominated by gods, the less free it is.

On this line, the development of religious consciousness moves from that which is compelled by an interior necessity to worship, to that which is free not to worship, which we can call secular consciousness. But the freedom not to worship is also the freedom to freely believe. The irreligious consciousness is the freest of all, free to receive a revelation of a free God. Mythology, then, is the earliest form of religious consciousness but for that very reason, a lower form (although not the lowest form, that would be pre-mythic pantheism): mythology is “diverged monotheism.”¹⁷ It is determined by the disclosure of the gods (which is not a revelation so much as a projection of consciousness), and at the same time beset by a sense of decline and loss, haunted by “an original whole, of a body of an unprethinkable human knowledge, which gradually declined or was struck by a sudden devastation, a knowledge that with its debris—which no one single people but only all together completely possess.”¹⁸

The first man, Adam, the original Anthropos, loses God and enters history at the same moment; he becomes conscious of himself at the same time that he loses the immediate consciousness of God. God-positing consciousness remains, but without immediate experience of divinity, and also without the clear knowledge of divinity, which is yet to come. The fallen Anthropos worships what it does not know, not the true one of absolute monotheism but the relative one of pre-mythological monotheism. As the God image becomes more determinate in a variety of forms and the sundering of peoples, a descent into deeper unconsciousness follows, a forgetting of the one divinity, causing one community to splinter into multiple competing communities.

Perhaps the most striking claim in Schelling's philosophy of mythology is his argument, against revisionists and historical critics, that human consciousness once genuinely experienced the universe as peopled by gods. Myths do not look back to experiences of the gods, which they represent in story form; they are themselves this experience of gods. The myth maker is responding authentically to

¹⁷ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 66.

¹⁸ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 65.

a real collective determination of consciousness by the divine. “Both peoples and individuals are mere instruments in this process; they cannot transcend it. . . . The representations do not come to them from outside; they are in them without them knowing how or why, for they come out of the depths of consciousness itself, and present themselves to consciousness with a necessity which leaves no doubt as to their truth.”¹⁹ The collectivity of the mythological determination is crucial: Schelling has not retreated on his intense distrust of subjectivism: the collective determination of consciousness by gods is not in any one person’s head; it is, rather, the substance of the myth maker’s identity, for it constitutes his or her language and culture. “In the mythological process, man is not dealing with things at all, but with powers that rise up in the depths of consciousness—powers by which consciousness is moved.”²⁰ An analogy with Jung’s theory of archetypes has often enough been drawn, and with good reason: Jung’s notion of autonomous psychic images, representations of the “objective psyche,” which constellate around a monotheistic center (“the Self”), dovetails nicely with Schelling’s understanding of the gods as real, though psychic, determinants of ancient consciousness by the idea of God.²¹

What is most interesting for our purposes is Schelling’s description of the earliest mythological consciousness as lacking freedom, dominated by divinity, repressed in development by a spiritual power “which prevented every divergently striving development” and “kept humanity . . . at the level of complete, absolute uniformity.”²² In this state “there is not actual time” for it is a “period in which nothing happens.”²³ The tradition calls this paradise but Schelling describes it as tyranny. Love is not possible in this situation. Love is only possible where two exist free from each other, and therefore free for each other. We could say that love both presupposes time and temporalizes being.²⁴ The beginning of religious history, then, is the repression of the diversity of time—totalitarian unity, unity by means of the exclusion of multiplicity. The end of religious history, as we shall see, will be the production of free unity, not at the expense of but by means of diversity. The mythological process is the beginning, as such the lowest and most primitive

¹⁹ Schelling, SSW 11, 194; trans. Hayes, *Schelling’s Philosophy of Mythology*, 112.

²⁰ Schelling, SSW 11, 207; trans. Hayes, *Schelling’s Philosophy of Mythology*, 115.

²¹ Beach, *Potencies*, 11, 184, 253. From a vast and uneven literature, see Jung’s own account of his experience of the objective or collective unconscious in C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). We know from the scored copy of it that exists in Jung’s personal library that Jung read Schelling’s *Philosophy of Mythology*, among other Schellingian texts. See Sean J. McGrath, “The Question Concerning Metaphysics: A Schellingian Intervention into Analytical Psychology,” *International Journal of Jung Studies* 6, n. 1 (2014): 23-51.

²² Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 75.

²³ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 75.

²⁴ See the oft-cited passage from Schelling’s celebrated Freedom essay: “For love is neither in indifference nor where opposites are linked which require linkage for [their] Being, but rather (to repeat a phrase which has already been said) this is the secret of love, that it links such things of which each could exist for itself, yet does not and cannot exist without the other.” Schelling, *Freedom*, 70.

moment in our religious development, but also the most potent; its essence is the estrangement of the human from the divine, an estrangement necessary for the birth of free self-consciousness, which makes humankind capable of genuine encounter, with the real God, and with one another.

When is Mythology Ideological?

Because mythology creates the social and political consciousness of a people, it can be called ideological in a weak sense of the term: mythology, in Schelling's understanding of it, expresses a system of beliefs constitutive of a community's historical identity, a system that is not necessarily thematized but more than often runs in the background of ordinary life, serving as the substance of a people, governing their language, values and religious aspirations. In another sense of the term 'ideology,' the strong sense of the term, which we could trace back to Marx, mythology in Schelling's account is sometimes ideological, sometimes not. Mythology does not always deploy the collective imagination of a people for the sake of preserving a certain set of power relations, while disguising that it is doing so; mythology is not always an expression of false consciousness, but sometimes, I will argue, it is. Mythology becomes ideological in the strong sense of the term when it is no longer the *spontaneous* expression of a differentiation of collective consciousness but is, rather, *used as means to retreat from consciousness*, and to defect from the universal ascent of human beings into more loving relations with one another and freer relations with the divine. The rise of populism and the re-mythologization of the nation-state in our times is, I will argue, just such an ideological deployment of mythology, and should not be mistaken for a genuine experience of the sacred.

In order to make this argument, we cannot remain simply in the philosophy of mythology but must look towards its successor, the philosophy of revelation. The philosophy of mythology may be the textual presupposition of the philosophy of revelation, but the philosophy of revelation is the speculative presupposition of the philosophy of mythology. Everything Schelling has to say about mythology is foregrounded in his conviction that true (absolute) monotheism is Trinitarian. Schelling is careful to distinguish mythology from revelation: they are qualitatively different. Where mythology is a necessary determination of consciousness by the potencies, revelation is a free relation of God to the human being. "Revelation . . . is expressly conceived as something which presupposes an *Actus* outside of consciousness, and a relation which the most free cause, God, grants or has granted to the human consciousness not out of necessity but in complete freedom."²⁵ The negativity of mythology, its lack of a personal relation to the real God, only becomes manifest after the fact, once revelation has occurred, just as a dream will generally go unrecognized as a dream to the dreamer until the dreamer awakens. Prior to the revelation mythology does not and cannot know itself as such. It takes itself for the whole truth and in this it is less than a real

²⁵ Schelling, SSW 14, 3.

relation to divinity. With revelation, the revelation of the divine Anthropos, the future human, the Christ, which is the common potency of all, humankind awakens from myth, as the one who traverses the Lacanian fantasy in the course of analysis awakens from the ideology constitutive of his or her psychic identity. This does not mean that revelation “sublates” (cancels and preserves) mythology. Nothing is ever cancelled and preserved in Schelling. Rather, revelation *displaces* mythology, renders it the past, where it continues to function as ground of the present and the future.

What does a free relation to divinity entail? It entails the possibility of rational un-belief. It is not often enough recognized that Schelling’s philosophy of revelation is, in a back-handed way, a defense of the rationality, the plausibility, of atheism, against dogmatic monotheism. Because it is a free act received by freedom, revelation may be rationally rejected. It does not *determine* conscious; rather it confronts it and demands of it a decision. A necessary process such as mythological experience lacks the freedom requisite for decision, which, for Schelling the voluntarist, is essential to the experience of truth. Myth makers in some basic sense do not know what they are saying, even if they unwittingly say true things about the structure of the divine potencies.²⁶ But even this does not make mythology ideological in the strong sense; my thesis is that mythology becomes ideological in the strong sense of the term when it is *untimely*; that is, when it is no longer a *necessary* expression of the state of the religious imaginary in a certain age of the world, but is rather a *decision* taken in bad faith to distort the real situation in which we find ourselves.

Whether in the weak or strong sense of the term, ideology is not chosen. You do not choose ideology, as though shopping for a world-view; rather ideology chooses you. This is the reason ideology is so difficult to eradicate: it constitutes the very essence of the self of the one who believes it. Ideology in the strong sense is marked by constitutive and yet culpable ignorance, for the ideologue is actively involved in its perpetuation. As Žižek puts it, what Jesus said of those who crucified him can legitimately be said of all who succumb to ideology: “They know not what they do”—where the “know” should be understood in an active and voluntaristic sense—they refuse to know what they are doing.²⁷

The rise of populism in our era represents just such a flight from the historical situation of consciousness into an ideological retrieval of mythology. Populism is mythological because it seeks to assert the mythic identities of a people over and against other peoples in a time of accelerating ethical, cultural and

²⁶ We cannot go into Schelling’s potencies in any detail here. Briefly, Schelling’s theory is that the triadic relations revealed in God in the Christ-event are foreshadowed in the logical doctrine of the three basic categories of being (indeterminacy or pure possibility, determinacy or pure actuality, self-determination or the fusion of possibility and actuality, which correspond to the three laws of thought, identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle). The potencies are at work in all judgments and can be demonstrated, according to Schelling, to be determinative of every system of the gods in the ancient world. Thus mythology is continuous with revelation, even if the latter is different in kind from the former.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991).

technological unification. If it does not speak of gods, it nonetheless speaks of ‘the spirit’ of the people, of ‘the greatness’ of the people—the social cohesion of a particular community bound together not only by common ethnic heritage and shared traditions, but also by opposition to other peoples. As mythological, contemporary Western populism is ideological in the strong sense of the term because it is not driven by necessity but by the free decision of a democracy to stay with comforting and familiar fictions rather than accepting disturbing new realities. It is what I have described elsewhere as a destructive dissociation, by distinction from the productive dissociation which is the font of life: a dissociation from the dissociation life is demanding of us.²⁸

In the article referenced in the first part of this essay, R.R. Reno defends populism as an ultimately laudable if politically clumsy effort to re-sacralize public life after the vacuity of post-modernist relativism. “In our present circumstances,” Reno writes, “we should support the populist call for the return of something worth loving and serving—and we should tutor it as best we can.”²⁹ After running through the demise of liberalism from Weber’s disenchantment thesis to the institutionalization of post-modern relativism, Reno describes the populism transforming Western democracies as a return of “the strong gods” to public life. Reno’s argument in some ways confirms Schelling’s thesis concerning the political function of mythology: a people’s identity is constituted by its experience of gods, that is, by a specific determination of religious consciousness. And yet where Schelling sees the determination of consciousness by national gods as the *past* of human civilization, a determination by the potencies prior to the emancipation of the human being by virtue of revelation, the conservative Catholic Reno assumes that we are still largely determined by *mythos*, not *logos*. The mythic consciousness of the human being cannot stand its constant humiliation before the levelling forces of relativism and secularism, Reno argues. It yearns for a return of the limiting bonds of a legitimate moral authority to cleanse public life of the deterioration wrought by a century of relativism, skepticism, and cynicism. Reno singles out Vattimo as the chief culprit in this “end of history” consensus. Vattimo sees progress in the “destiny of weakening.” When we move away from an ontology of “substance,” Reno paraphrases Vattimo, to one of “event,” we ostensibly move away from authoritarian modes of thinking toward freedom. Reno describes this as Vattimo’s thesis of “the happy unburdening of the West”: “Weakening promotes tolerance, peace, and freedom. If there are no strong truths, nobody will judge others or limit their freedom.”³⁰

Like most conservatives, Reno regards “secular” as a pejorative term. More than merely the emancipation of democracy from religion, the secular age is a quasi Nietzschean transvaluation of values. “In the place of the strong gods of traditional culture, the globalized future will be governed by the hearth gods of health, wealth, and pleasure. Our high priests will be medical experts, central

²⁸ See Sean J. McGrath, “The Psychology of Productive Dissociation, or What Would a Schellingian Psychotherapy Look Like?” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 6, n. 1 (2014): 35-48.

²⁹ Reno, “Return of the Strong Gods.”

³⁰ Reno, “Return of the Strong Gods.”

bankers, and celebrity chefs.”³¹ He notes how the populism manifest in the Trump election or in the Brexit vote perplexes political analysis for it does not conform to tradition models of left vs right. Trump’s victory was the product of a fusion of left and right, united by a common enemy: “the pattern of weakening” eviscerating our families, churches, workforces and societies. The backlash from the secular liberals only confirms in his mind the moral force of the critique: “The postwar consensus marshals cultural and political power to condemn the return of the strong gods in the strongest possible terms—racist, xenophobic, fascist, bigoted. Political correctness has many forms, but they are united in a shared repudiation of anything solid and substantial in public life, whether in the form of nationalism or strong affirmations of constraints that human nature places on any healthy society, constraints that get articulated by all forms of traditional morality.” In the end, Reno argues, populism is to be cautiously commended for desiring to re-install the sacred at the center of public life: the sacredness of family, of civil society, especially the covenants expressed in fidelity to heterosexual marriage, to local organizations, to schools, to volunteer organizations, and to schools.

Trump’s rhetoric of building walls and shredding free-trade deals evokes a trajectory of consolidating and strengthening the body politic after a long season of disenchantment and weakening. . . . It is a sign of health that our societies wish to reclaim, however haltingly, the nation, which is an important form of solidarity. Populism rebels against the fluidity and weightlessness of life. This impulse, however disruptive it becomes for our political institutions, reflects a sane desire for metaphysical density. Our goal should be to educate this desire in the proper order of love rather than allowing ourselves to be conscripted into the increasingly frantic efforts to sustain the postwar era by administering yet another round of the chemotherapy of disenchantment.³²

Before we critique Reno’s apologia for conservatism from a Schellingian perspective, it is worth remembering that the late Schelling too can rightly pass for a conservative; he too laments the flattening of the traditional forms of society in the homogenization of the liberal marketplace, and he defends a theory of a strong and morally authoritative State as a product of spirit, something that in the best of circumstances ought not to be necessary, but given the degenerate state of the human being, is destined to last until the full emancipation of the human being.³³ And yet, for Schelling, secularization is the future of Christian society; mythic consciousness, determination by strong gods in Reno’s language, is the consciousness of the past. The disenchantment of the world is the natural if not logical trajectory of Christendom passing from the legalism of the Petrine Church

³¹ Reno, “Return of the Strong Gods.”

³² Reno, “Return of the Strong Gods.”

³³ Schelling’s late political philosophy is the subject of the concluding three lectures of his last major lectures series, which were written out but never in fact given, the *Darstellung der rein rationale Philosophie*. See Schelling, SSW 11, 253-572.

(Roman Catholicism), through the ecstatic interiority of the Pauline Church (Protestantism), until it frees itself from all need for an external or internal regulator of the spiritual life in the Church to come, the Church of St. John, which is the Church become indistinguishable from the world.³⁴ The Church of St. John is for those for whom the revelation has become both an interior experience and a form of life: no one needs a priest or cult because everyone believes it spontaneously and freely, and finds their faith in harmony with the beliefs of others.

It is important to note that in Schelling's theory of history, the past is never cancelled and replaced with a better version of what was one-sidedly coming forward in it, as in Hegel's logic of *Aufhebung*. Schelling's dialectic is one of production, not sublation, an *Erzeugungsdialektik*, not an *Aufhebungsdialektik*.³⁵ When the new is produced, that which preceded it and made it possible recedes from actuality but nonetheless meontically persists as the ground. This subtle difference from Hegel has dramatic implications for the philosophy of culture. In a Hegelian doctrine of secularization, our historical traditions are rendered null by the advent of the new and more adequate forms of spirit, which have cancelled and preserved them. To persist in maintaining these traditions on their own terms is to resist the times and become a reactionary or romantic. For Schelling, something of the past is never entirely replaced by the present, hence preservation and cultural memory are healthy and even necessary measures against the onslaught of time. Most importantly, the cultural differences distinguishing the various forms of the human community called to the Church of St. John remain the ground of revelation, even at the end of history. The one who preserves the memory of a past tradition is not to mistake preservation with re-actualization; it is one thing to know where we come from, quite another to resist history.

Schelling's vision is one of a pluralistically grounded and fully secular appropriation of the revelation which brings the human community together, even as it fulfills and so validates the varieties of religious traditions which led there. To resist the move into the new, for Schelling, to insist on the actuality of that which is and ought to remain in potency, where it can serve as the ground of something new, is to dissociate from the dissociation life is demanding of us. The return of mythical identities in Western populism is ideological for this reason, a flight from the real situation of consciousness, in which the unification of the human community under a set of shared if banal and even vulgar ideals, is the historical outcome of the evolution of liberal democracies. Reno speaks of the weak "hearth gods of health, wealth, and pleasure," but he distorts the situation: these are not gods so much a base common denominator of goods we can all agree are genuinely good and should be in principle equitably and universally distributed among all, even if the factual situation remains scandalously otherwise. Disenchantment—the retreat of the gods—is irreversible, and according to Schelling, the destiny of

³⁴ See Schelling, *Urfassung*, 672ff.

³⁵ Beach, *Potencies*, 84-91.

modernity; it desacralizes the public sphere, no doubt, but for the sake of the emancipation of the person for genuine post-mythological religious life.

Schelling on Revelation³⁶

Crucial to my argument, then, is Schelling's thesis that mythology is the past; revelation has displaced it. Mythology in the contemporary age is not actual but neither has it disappeared entirely. Mythology is now potency for the new actuality of religious secularism (philosophical religion), which will be the *eschaton*, the end of history. Revelation is not finished but has thrust us on a trajectory toward the future perfection of human community. The late Schelling's philosophy of history is not teleological, like Hegel's, but eschatological. The *eschaton* is not a *telos*, not a natural and predictable fulfillment of the beginning, but a free and incalculable resurgence of the beginning into a form that cannot be precisely anticipated, even if it can be vaguely prophesied. Where teleology actualizes a potential implicit within the beginning, eschatology tears the fabric of time in two by inaugurating a new beginning. Teleology returns us to the old; eschatology thrust us into the fundamentally new.³⁷

The essence of revelation consists in the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ, the divine Anthropos, but we must not misunderstand Schelling's Christology or force it into a narrowly dogmatic mold. The divinization of Christ for Schelling signifies what Marcel Gauchet, in a strikingly similar reading of Chalcedonian theology, describes as the autonomization of the human, the freedom of the human from determination by the divine, even if this emancipation has taken two thousand years and is far from finished.³⁸ Paradoxically, the hypostatic union of human and divine natures in Christ is the moment at which the two orders (temporal and eternal, finite and infinite, human and divine) are most clearly distinguished from one another, and therefore, the moment at which the secular is set free from determination by the divine. As Marcel Gauchet argues, Chalcedonian Christology amounts to an abolition of the hierarchical principle that governed mythological consciousness from Greece to India: the sovereign God maintains sovereignty by subordinating beneath him, in

³⁶ An earlier version of this section appears in McGrath, "Schelling and the End of Christianity."

³⁷ The distinction between teleology and eschatology is crucial and deserves much more careful treatment than I have given it here, which it will receive in my forthcoming *Schelling and the End of Christianity* (Edinburgh University Press). Jack Caputo is articulate on the distinction (which he draws in the context of interpreting the late Heidegger, himself a close reader of Christian eschatological literature): "In eschatology, the earliest is not a seed that slowly ripens into the last, but rather a flash that, having been all but extinguished by the last, is capable of flashing again and turning darkness into light, the evening-land into a new morning. In teleology the last always comes after the first, after a long period of maturation; but in eschatology the first can overtake (*überholen*) the last, and with a suddenness that could not be anticipated. Teleology reaches fulfillment, satisfaction, peace, rest when it reaches the *telos*. But in eschatology, the *eschaton* is the transition point to a new beginning, a new flash of lightning." Jack Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indiana University Press, 1987), 161-163.

³⁸ Schelling, *Urfassung*, 527ff; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton University Press, 1999), 115-144.

descending rungs of power, a monarch, a priestly class, citizens, and slaves. When the human is rendered equal to the divine in the hypostatic union (fully human, fully divine, two natures, without confusion or mixture, as defined at Chalcedon), the hierarchical order, what Schelling describes in his last work, *Die reinrationale Philosophie*, as the politics of pure reason or the idealism of the state,³⁹ is displaced by a new order of freedom, equality and the possibility of non-hierarchical human community.

In Schelling's extraordinarily original reading of the Chalcedonian formula defining the hypostatic union, it is not that Christ combines in himself two pre-existing natures; rather, the two natures are first rendered distinct in the union. Prior to the incarnation, they are confused with one another, which leads to the determination of the human by the divine under mythology; there is neither a distinctly human nor a distinctly divine nature in the mythological age: the two orders are only distinguished in the very event of their conjunction. One distinct, they can become united. The hypostatic union is therefore not only the divinization of the human, it is above all the *humanization* of the divine; it humanizes God, and paradoxically, in this same moment of indescribable identity, removes him from the orbit of human experience. God ceases to be *object* in revelation, he becomes exclusively *subject*, that is, He who will be who He will be, as one translation of Exodus 3:14 puts it. We no longer *have* God or gods under revelation; the infinite God is present only in his objective absence.⁴⁰ The age of revelation is paradoxically the withdrawal of God from objective availability. But lest we mistake this for Godlessness (the error of irreligious secularism), Schelling reminds us that even human persons are only ever present to one another in a state of objective absence. The gods that were objectively available in the mythological age were not genuinely, that is, personally divine. Persons are only known to the degree that they freely reveal themselves, and their self-revelation is always objectively oblique, driving us to interpret their actions and commit ourselves to an ethical attitude toward them.⁴¹ The Jews knew God as divine subject and saw expressions of him in natural signs. Since the incarnation, there are no more natural signs of God to be deciphered: as divine subject, God now inhabits the form of the human, even if this form has still to be fully actualized. Schelling reads Paul

³⁹ See SSW 11, 516-532.

⁴⁰ Cf. Luther's *theologia crucis* outlined in his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. The absence of any gap between the human and the divine in the hypostatic union not only destroys the object of onto-theology; it renders possible a non-dual expression of the divine, which should be distinguished from the non-duality of pantheism. Meister Eckhart's German sermons become interesting in this regard. It is not entirely clear that they are simply regressions to a perennial negative theology, in which the One absorbs the all; they might be expressions of a genuinely Trinitarian non-duality.

⁴¹ See Schelling, *The Grounding*, 113: "For no one knows what exists within a person until that person expresses himself. His intellectual and moral character exists only a posteriori, which is to say that it is discernible only through his statements and actions. Now suppose that the discussion was about an intelligence in the world assumed to have a free will for action, then this intelligence would likewise not be knowable a priori, but only through its deeds that occur in experience. Although a supersensible being, it will nonetheless be something that can only be known commensurate with experience [*Erfahrungsmässigkeit*]. Empiricism as such, therefore, hardly excludes all knowledge of the supersensible as one customarily assumes, and even Hegel presupposes."

literally on this point: “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”⁴² To know Christ, for Paul, is not merely to have objective knowledge of his divinity; it is rather to be completely identified with him; to see things as he sees them; to live and die as he lived and died. “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Mythology prepares the way for the historical appearance of the *Logos* and is replete with prefigurations of him and the unity he will bring. Although the sundered peoples in the mythological age speak different languages and worship different gods, no one people believe themselves to be the whole, and no external impulse drives them apart; rather, they are sundered by “the impulse of inner agitation.” Even under mythology, a sense of the loss of the whole haunts the peoples of the earth. “The feeling not to be the entire humanity, but rather only a part of it; and no longer to belong to the ultimate one, but rather to have fallen prey to a particular god or particular gods: it is this feeling that drove them from land to land, from coast to coast, until each saw itself alone and separated from all the foreign peoples and had found the place proper and destined for them.”⁴³ Fear in the face of total fragmentation binds each of the sundered communities together: “Horror before the loss of consciousness of unity, held together those who remained united and drove them to maintain at least a partial unity, in order to persist, if not as humanity, then at least as a people.”⁴⁴ Civic institutions—above all the State—first arise as a means to stave off the forces of disintegration, to save what could be saved of unity against further disintegration.⁴⁵

The same divine power which caused the dispersion into polytheism raised one elect group toward true religion, the ancient Jews, who were distinct by virtue of their homelessness and lack of national identity.⁴⁶ The Jews stand out in history as the only ancient people who did not participate in the work of nation building because they were uniquely possessed by the sense of both the personality and singularity of the divine. Only polytheists, Schelling argues, build nations; without a sense of a diversity of gods, without a sense of oneself as a people with one’s own proper gods, standing over and against other peoples with their respective gods, one cannot construct a national identity. The Jews are called not only by the God of Israel but above all by the God of the universe, “the maker of heaven and earth,” that is, the true God of all peoples. The history of mythology reaches its end with the revelation of the one God to the Jews. In ancient Jewish Messianism and prophetism the history of revelation proper begins, the end of which will be nothing less than the unification of the human race—not the restoration of the primordial unity from which we emerged, but rather the inception of a new unity, an at-oneness. Schelling sees a foretaste of this unity in the Pentecost event, when all present heard the apostles preaching the Gospel in their own tongue.⁴⁷ Where

⁴² Col 1: 15.

⁴³ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 80.

⁴⁴ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 82.

⁴⁵ Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, 82.

⁴⁶ Schelling, SSW 11, 166; Hayes, *Schelling’s Philosophy of Mythology*, 103.

⁴⁷ See Acts 2:1-4.

the first unity was undifferentiated and at the expense of diversity, the new unity will be by *means* of diversity. To use Jürgen Moltmann's language, the human race will not so much be *unified* in the perfect community to come as *united*, at one with one another in "an open union," the unity of "fellowship," not "the identity of a single subject."⁴⁸

By displacing mythology (the natural objectification of the divine), Schelling in effect argues, revelation has made possible modernity itself.⁴⁹ Schelling is therefore a thinker of the death of God and the disenchantment of the world, and belongs in this regard alongside the early Hegel, Nietzsche, and Weber. The results of disenchantment have been admittedly mixed: not only the emancipation of the individual and the freeing of the sciences from their tutelage to theology, but also colonization, globalization, and ecological violence, as humanity becomes inflated with a sense of autonomy out of proportion to its possibilities. But if we follow Schelling's argument, we must conclude that the *eschaton* of the revealed age is not reached in consumer capitalism; this is a momentary struggle with recalcitrant evil. The *eschaton* of revelation will be the universal emancipation of human beings from all forms of slavery, be they external or internal. Everything about the history of revelation points forward, not backwards, towards a fullness yet to come. Yahweh is the proper name of the God who is to come, who *will be* revealed.⁵⁰ Even the prophets and Christian apostles who experience something of the true God, stand in anticipation of the knowledge to come. Early Christian religious experience is still imperfect; it is a purely external and thus alienated form of knowledge of God, the positive experience of God intervening in history. Hence the dogmatism and authoritarianism which every religion of the book suffers from is a sign of the transitory nature of this moment of the reception of revelation. The future Anthropos, by contrast to the subject of Christendom (or Judaism or Islam for that matter), will know God in spirit and truth, that is in an entirely free relation.

Between our time and the genuinely mythological era stand two millennia of Church-based Christianity. This too has come to an end in the 19th century. It is to be succeeded by what Schelling calls, in a somewhat unfortunate phrase, "philosophical religion."⁵¹ Schelling anticipates the restoration of the unity of the human race by means of this new form of secularism, a unity that allows to each and all the dignity and freedom of their own ethnic and religious origins, even as it restores to humanity the unity it lost with the advent of religious consciousness (polytheism). But this is in truth not so much a restoration as the advent of an entirely new order of being. Where the original unity of the human race was by

⁴⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 95.

⁴⁹ See Schelling, *Grounding of the Positive Philosophy*, 184.

⁵⁰ Schelling, *Urfassung*, 89.

⁵¹ "Philosophical religion" sounds like a new form of rational theology or rationalized religion. Hence my preference for the admittedly un-Schellingian term, "religious secularism." But the two terms mean the same thing, an internalized revelation, which is never presumed to be a native possession of reason, but which nonetheless offers humanity a ground upon which it can liberate itself from external forms of religiosity.

virtue of a lack of distinction, the unity to come will be *by means* of ethnic, national, and historical diversity. Philosophical religion, which does not yet exist (“we must not misjudge our times”⁵²) will be fully secular and pluralist. “Having no external authority, this Church 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.”⁵³

Philosophical religion will not be Christian in any narrow or dogmatic sense, nor will it presume the theological virtue of faith. It will be rational, but not rationalist, having so inhabited human reason as to become virtually indistinguishable from it. As such, philosophical religion will not exclude other traditions or demand of them conversion but fulfill them in the same way it will fulfill Christianity, by transcending their historical and dogmatic forms of expression, while at the same time, confirming their deepest trajectories, the perennial and ubiquitous hope of all people for emancipation, enlightenment and freedom. The end of the Christian revelation will be the self-cancellation of the Church as an institution, a “confession,” a community set apart, existing either on the margin of the Roman Empire, as in the First Century, or in confrontation with the world, as in radical Protestantism; the Church will become identical with the human community. This means that nothing authentically human will remain outside the Church of St. John: all cultural and scientific activity will find a place within it.⁵⁴ “Insofar as Christendom has entered the world, it must in a certain way recognize the world as its own pre-condition (*Bedingung für sich*). Insofar as it must recognize the world as its own pre-condition, it must also take upon itself the universal conditions for every worldly development. . . . No one can lay any other ground than Christ; however, on this ground a building that encompasses all that is human must be erected, or this ground should, as the Apostle says, grow into a holy temple, from which nothing should be excluded. Every human striving, thinking, knowing, and doing should be comprehended as unified in this knowledge.”⁵⁵

The end of Christianity, indeed the end of human history for Schelling, is the total assimilation of science and culture by the gospel of freedom, or alternatively, the total assimilation of the gospel by free science and culture. There is no question that in such an immanentized Christendom, the sciences, above all philosophy, will remain free. Schelling is not speaking of a neo-Orthodox vision of the arts and sciences subordinated to theology. The Schellingian future of Christianity is a Christianity without theology, insofar as every science now becomes the content of theology, or a religion without religion, insofar as everything becomes religious, or a world without Church insofar as world becomes Church. Only in this way will the special knowledge of revelation become the

⁵² The phrase is from Schelling’s 1815 draft of *The Ages of the World* and summarizes in six words Schelling’s critique of Hegel’s philosophy of religion. See F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason Wirth (Albany, SUNY, 2000), 206.

⁵³ Schelling, SSW 14, 720, 723; Hayes, *Schelling’s Philosophy of Mythology*, 334.

⁵⁴ Schelling, *Urfassung*, 673.

⁵⁵ Schelling, *Urfassung*, 673-4.

general knowledge of all humanity.⁵⁶ The method of the positive philosophy has already prepared the way for this transmutation of an *a posteriori* revelation into an *a priori* knowledge: what was received as alien and other than reason now becomes reason's very own. The final ecstasy of reason will occur when reason fully and universally takes over as its own ground a truth which does not originate in it, a truth that is initially foreign to it, but which has become so intimate to it over the course of its history as to function as a virtual *a priori*. The final form of Christianity, according to Schelling, is one in which it ceases to be Church in any historical and institutional sense, with a dogma safeguarded and promulgated by an ordained priesthood. Future Christianity is Church in the primordial sense of *ecclesia*, community, the one human community, which unites without homogenizing the splintered human race.

Conclusion

No one was more affirmative of mythology as the beginnings of genuine religious consciousness, that is, free and secular consciousness, than Schelling. In the register of spirit, mythology is first philosophy but the first is not the highest; rather it is the lowest. The point is to free oneself from mythology. He who does not emerge from mythology and set it behind himself as past does not have a mythology. Reno is surely right, there is something mythical about 21st century populism, but he mistakenly thinks this to be a good thing, as though thereby something of the sense of the sacred imperiled by 20th century atomistic liberalism has been restored to the political scene. The return of “the strong gods” at this stage in human history can only be a pathological regression and retreat from that towards which we are truly called: not more nationalism, but universalism; not more sectarianism and protectionism, but greater trust and respect. No doubt, the neo-Liberal regime has eroded our communities, and alienated us from our livelihoods and traditions, but the healing cannot be by means of turning our backs on the world to look after our own. It was one thing to be under the *mythos* in Ancient Greece or Rome; it is something altogether different to be under the *mythos* on an interconnected globe, where we can no longer, and truly ought no longer, avoid each other.

⁵⁶ Schelling, *Urfassung*, 674.