

The Church and the Future Universal Religion

Back in his Twenty-sixth Lecture, Schelling had envisaged the whole world-process as a succession of three Ages, those of the Father (Creation), the Son (Redemption) and the Spirit (Consummation). Now he presents the history of Christianity as divided into three ages which, in a sense, are but more narrowly circumscribed reflections of the larger world-times. Like Joachim of Floris, Schelling interprets scriptural personages allegorically so as to identify and foretell the history of the Christian Church.

The lectures on the Church (Lectures 36 and 37), although appearing last in the Philosophy of Revelation, were actually given first, and only once.³⁰ As they now stand, however, they fittingly climax the lecture-series with their exciting ecumenical vision.

Schelling stands *beyond* both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. He sees the true catholicity and unity of the Church not just in a union of various Christian denominations, but in a simultaneous synthesis of Church and World, of Christianity and Culture. His hope is for "a truly universal Church", a religionless or churchless Christianity (as we might call it today), a "religion for all mankind" in which Jew and Gentile, Christian and Pagan, will freely unite in common worship of the God who is eternal truth. But let us begin at the beginning.

A. The History of the Christian Church

Christianity as Subject to the Laws of Natural Development

Christ knew that when his work on earth was done he would have to leave his disciples, but he assured them he would be with them "till the end of time." This period between the "departure" of Christ and "the end of history" - which will also be the final end of all surviving paganism - is the period of the present historical church. It is to be a period of growth and of continuous struggles against the surviving dark powers of Paganism. Christ's continuing presence does not alter the necessity for "a natural development of the seed which He had planted in the world." To be sure, extraordinary gifts - prophecies, ecstasies, tongues, gnosis - will persist as accompaniments of the struggle of the Christian principle against the surviving cosmic potencies. But such "spiritual gifts" are inferior and transitory - as St. Paul understood in 1 Cor 13:8ff. They are to cease when the perfect is come, i.e., when "completely free, perfectly self-conscious human knowledge" arrives (VI:686-688).

After Christ, through his life, teaching, suffering and death, had planted the seed of a life that would grow into eternity - trusting in its indestructibility and inherent strength - he wanted this seed to take root, to spread, to grow successively but irresistibly in the storms of the world, in the alternation of sunshine and cloudburst. It was not his intention to free this seed from the natural and necessary laws of development. He himself says the *enemy* will come and sow weeds among the wheat ... and they must grow together till the harvest (Mt 13:24-30; cf. Mk 4:26, Mt 24:24) ... The development of Christianity, therefore, will be subject to the same disturbances, hindrances and other calamities to which all natural development is subject (VI:688).

Christianity, then, must emerge out of its first ideal state and "advance" in the world in terms of (a) geographical expansion and (b) internal growth, especially "growth in Christian knowledge". This "knowledge" is to be truly human, universal knowledge, the "whole and perfect truth" into which the Spirit will lead us.

A structure which gradually embraces *all* that is human should, therefore, be built on the foundation laid by Christ. This structure, as

the apostle says, should grow into a holy temple, a true, spiritual house of God. Nothing, of course, must be excluded from it. Within it all human striving, wanting, thinking and knowing attains to perfect unity. The knowledge in which the Christian world was to *grow* is not knowledge of the kind which was given to the Apostles through Revelation, i.e., through special circumstances. It is knowledge which under all circumstances, at all times and in all places, will be possible for man and accessible to him - knowledge, in short, which is truly human (*allgemeinmenschliche*) and thus free, scientific knowledge ... (It was something other than free, human knowledge which spoke out of the apostles; they were still under the influence and inspiration of the process which ushered in Christianity) (VI:688).

Church History as a Succession of Times

As in all historical developments, so in the history of the Christian Church, Schelling sees an example of the "law" of three-ness. He speaks, therefore, of (a) a pre-historical, (b) a historical, and (c) a post-historical Church (VI:689f).

The "prehistorical church" is the Apostolic Church! Schelling here reflects the view that the first century church represents "an age of innocence and potentiality", "that age which is before or outside of history", a state of "merely negative unity from which the Church was bound to issue forth" (VI:689).³¹ Since this Apostolic Church is a supra-natural event, the canons of modern critical historiography cannot be applied to it.

The "historical church" begins "at the moment when Christianity becomes a world religion, when it assumes an existence in the world." This means that Schelling sees Christianity embarking on its historical existence only at the end of the first century. It is this post-Biblical period of Christianity which must witness growth, struggle and development, and therefore experience "a sequence of periods" (VI:690). Schelling identifies these periods, three in number, with those three apostles whom Christ specially selected as his "intimate friends and witnesses of the most secret events": Peter, James and John (VI:691, cf. VI:712, cf. Mk 3:14ff; Mk 5:37, Lk 8:51; Mt 17:1, Mk 9:2; Acts 1:13). James is later replaced by Paul, and the whole development of the Christian Church is seen as "pre-figured" in these men. The history of Christianity, therefore, is to be understood as the succession of three ages - those of the *Petrine*, the *Pauline* and the *Johannine* churches.³²

The primacy of Peter in the New Testament seems obvious. "He is

regarded and designated as such by Christ" (VI:692)³³ most decisively at Caesarea Philippi. After Peter's confession - "you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" - Jesus calls him blessed and declares: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church ... I will give you the keys of the Kingdom", etc. (Mt 16:17-19). These words are decisive for the primacy of Peter among the disciples, but priority is not to be confused with superiority. Thus,

the primacy, or rather principality, ascribed to Peter by these words, does not at all imply a lasting and permanent domination ... Although the foundation is laid first, it is not more important than that for which it is the foundation; rather, it presupposes something loftier by which the structure is completed (VI:693).

The one to follow Peter was James, who is always mentioned right after Peter. But James was early beheaded, and Schelling regards him as simply "the temporary deputy of the future apostle Paul."

Paul, whom the Lord has chosen to turn from a persecutor and tormentor of the first church into the man who gave it its greatest expansion and glory. When James died, the man who was to take his place was already elected. It is even possible that the Lord put such an early end to James' life because he wanted him to be replaced by the apostle Paul, a more decisive and capable tool ... Paul was added to St. Peter to supplement him. This is borne out by the fact that on the oldest lead papal seals both apostles were still to be seen next to each other, Peter to the left, as the position of priority in the Oriental manner, and Paul to the right. There is therefore no indication at first of an exclusive primacy until later when the apostle Peter is alone on the papal seal (VI:694, cf. 695n).

This New Testament "line of succession" - Peter, Paul and John - representing the three periods of the Christian Church, is paralleled by the Old Testament succession of Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist. Schelling characterizes and compares these two triads as follows:

In the Old Testament, *Moses* is the principle of permanence and stability, of what is real and substantial. *Elijah* is the fiery spirit who develops, quickens, moves and urges on toward a future which is not yet known. *John the Baptist* concludes the Old Testament and with it

the times *before* Christ. Of him Christ said: 'Among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he' (Mt 11:11). Of the three apostles, *Peter* is the parallel to Moses. He is the law-giver, the principle of *stability*, the foundation. *Paul*, to whom one can apply the words in Ecclesiasticus about Elijah: 'He broke forth like a fire and his word burned like a torch', is the Elijah of the New Testament, the principle of movement, development and freedom in the Church. Finally, the apostle *John* is the parallel to John the Baptist. Like him, he is the apostle of the future; he points to the future (VI:695).

Peter and Paul

When Peter and Paul are compared, "the personal character of Peter appears wholly substantial." In thought and style he is as solid as a rock. He represents in the New Testament the relative Old Testament principle of Law. But Paul is pre-eminently the New Testament principle of activity.

In Peter the substantial element predominates, while the person of Paul is characterized by activity. Paul embodies the active, dialectic, scientific and analytic principle. In the New Testament he is pre-eminently the New Testament principle. Each, however, presupposes the other. Peter remains the foundation, but it must be built upon if it is not to turn out unfruitful. Peter, therefore, requires Paul. But Paul also would be nothing without Peter. For what Peter has founded, Paul must develop - must free it, step by step, from its limitations and thus affect the whole future.

Through the extraordinary calling of Paul, a principle independent of Peter was established which, in its own way, was just as independent as Peter; and James had to yield his place to Paul perhaps because, by the nature of this relationship, he would not have been sufficiently free and independent of Peter. The spirit of God is not so limited in his means that he effects his work through uniformity. On the contrary, His grandest accomplishments are produced *σι εναντιων*, by way of antithesis - he who in all antitheses remains the mighty, the invincible One and Only (VI:697).

The antithesis between Peter and Paul was manifested even during their lifetime. Paul reports his opposition to Peter's Judaizing

tendencies (Gal 2:11) and the factionalism in Corinth (1 Cor 1:12), and stresses that he was entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, while Peter was entrusted with the Gospel to the circumcised (Gal 2:7f) (VI:697-700, cf. also 2 Pet 3:15ff). The struggle between the "Petrine church" and the "Pauline principle" grew through the Middle Ages and resulted finally in "the greatest change in the Church since the Apostles: the *Reformation*." This change represents the "natural" order of development: "first the body, then the spirit"; first Peter, the Rock, representing the principle of stability, then Paul, the "eccentric", i.e., "the independent, moving, driving principle which is free of the center" (VI:701).

If the Church were to persist, to consolidate, and to acquire a historical foundation and make progress, Peter *had* to rule supreme; for he is the body, the center, that which holds everything together. In Paul, the ideal, the eccentric, predominates ... Paul has always held a certain eccentric position in the Church. For whenever he was allowed to speak, whenever his words were heard and understood in all their stirring power, a commotion within the church was the result. Even in recent times, for instance, Jansenism only originated in the Catholic Church because certain pious and very sensitive men were struck to the heart by the fiery words of the Apostle Paul about the grace of God which is given freely and cannot be earned by (good) works. Just so, the writings of Paul are the main source of the spirited convictions of the most eccentric religious sect in England, the Methodists.

The Lord must know why and for what purpose it is necessary in our day and under present world circumstances still to surround Christ and veil him and wall him in with so much that is extraneous and which even conceals him - just as if the world could not bear to communicate directly just with the naked Christ. We have heard of the emotional outbursts, the ecstasies, the riotous behavior (*das wahrhaft Orgienartige*) which are a part of the large gathering of the Methodists, mainly in America, and to some extent of some smaller ones in England, where Christ pure and simple is preached and the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed purely and without any addition ... (VI:701).

All the phenomena just discussed are only the result of ... the *Reformation*. And the *Reformation*, so long in preparation and for

which even in the Middle Ages countless victims had shed their blood, was in essence nothing but the finally successful elevation of the authority of Paul over and above the unlimited authority of Peter. If being a Protestant is to maintain oneself outside the church founded on Peter's authority and independent of it, then the Apostle Paul is the first Protestant, and the oldest document Protestantism has to show on its behalf, its *magna carta*, is the second chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians (VI:702).

The Petrine Church: Roman Catholicism

In trying to understand and assess the nature and history of Roman Catholicism, Schelling does not set himself up as its accuser. "It is unworthy of a philosopher to regard the greatest and most powerful phenomenon as something base, worthless and accidental" (VI:702). At the dissolution of the Roman Empire, for example, it was "inevitable" and necessary that the Church step into the Political vacuum. And yet, "all the faults with which the Roman Church is charged are prefigured in Peter's faults" (VI:703). Christ not only calls Peter the "Rock", but also "Satan." It is Peter alone who draws the sword, and it is Peter who thrice denies his Lord.

The same man who was recognized as having insuperable faith in Christ as the Son of God, and who had been called the Rock of the Church, becomes a hindrance because of his worldly wisdom, and is called 'Satan' by the Lord. Can anything correspond more convincingly to this than the combination of stubborn and unshakeable faith and the basest worldly wisdom of which the Roman Church has so often been accused? Another word of Christ! 'If any man would come after me', (and Peter had been appointed Christ's immediate successor), 'let him deny himself ... For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?' (Mt 16:24, 26). What words, applied to the Church which 'came after him' and which had really gained the whole world! (VI:703f).

The very moment the Church became a temporal power and even a world power, it fulfilled for itself the words of Christ: 'I have not come to bring peace but the sword' (Mt 10:34). Wherever there is political power, there is also the sword. The Church too had need of the sword of Peter, the only Apostle who used his sword at the arrest of Christ.

In Peter's character, the same consuming spirit already lay hidden which subsequently destroyed all real and imagined foes of the Roman See with fire and sword; especially in the 13th Century, when wrath descended outrageously upon the so-called heretics of the Middle Ages ... (VI:702f).

Peter's three-fold denial of the Lord also foreshadows things to come ... There is a gradation in the three-fold denial. (The first time ... he only refuses to explain. The second time ... a true denial. The third time ... a denial with cursing). One can charge the Roman Church with a three-fold denial of the Lord: first, by striving for complete political power; second, having grown dependent on this power, by making it its tool, demanding bloodshed, and trying to dominate the world with its help; and third, by degrading itself to being a tool of political power (VI:704).

Clearly, the "true church" has not yet appeared in Roman Catholicism. Like Peter, it has denied its Lord. And yet, this same Church, like Peter, has been given the charge: "Feed my sheep." Perhaps, muses Schelling, the day is coming when the Roman Catholic Church - like Peter - will weep tears of remorse and return to a truer discipleship.

Just as Christ three times told him who had denied him three times, 'Feed my lambs', so the Church, in which so many worthy members lamented the repeated and continual denial of the Lord, has never ceased being the Church of Christ and preserving for all time the foundation which, without such solid support, would long since have been lost in the political storms as well as the contradictions created by the ever restless human mind. But the moment is perhaps not far when the Church too, at a look from the Lord, will remember his prediction to Peter, of whom we read: And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly (Mt 26:75) (VI:704).

The Pauline Church: Protestantism

The "true church" does not exist in Protestantism any more than in Roman Catholicism. Protestantism is a necessary but still transitional stage in the development of the true Church of the future. Schelling

stage in the development of the true Church of the future. Schelling declares:

I am not interested in expressing here a one-sided preference for any particular form in which Christianity now exists. The true Church exists in none of these forms alone. It is the Church which proceeds from the foundation laid by Peter and progresses through Paul to that end which will be the Church of St. John ... (VI:702).

In Schelling's view, everything that comes into the world needs a presupposition, a beginning. This *beginning* is never that which is to be, but in order to establish itself it must believe that it exists for its own sake. A higher potency, therefore, is always needed to challenge the claims to finality made by what is purely foundational so that development can continue. In accordance with this logic, Schelling sees the Pauline or Protestant principle as that which needs and presupposes the Petrine or Roman Church, and yet must challenge it. The Roman Catholic Church, rigidly grounded in the Petrine principle of stability, needs the challenge of the Protestant Church if the Johannine Church of the future is ever to be ushered in.

The more the Church became historically established, the more it concentrated on the exclusive authority of Peter. If something is to develop, its foundation above all must be preserved. Authority rendered, and still renders, Christianity this negative service. Paul's Church was, as it were, a hidden Church which never ceased to be included in the visible Church and to maintain itself within it, but for a long time it could not itself become a visible Church. During the Middle Ages, to be sure, the Pauline principle always made itself strongly felt, though without success. For the more inexorably the real principle shut itself in, the more decidedly it had to shut out the ideal principle. Those who recognized the true situation could have predicted early that a time would come when this principle would break through, emerge in free opposition to Peter's Church, and become a properly historical principle, the principle of a second and new era (VI:706).

The era of the Reformation was preceded by the sighs of Christendom, a general longing for improvement in head and members. Since, however, all the conflicts of former ages had so complicated the condition of the Church that it was unable to produce a crisis from

within itself, a break had to occur. The principle which the Church could not hold or shelter or receive, had to emerge independent of it, not in order to discard the Church as a foundation (Dr. Luther himself still calls the Roman Church his dear mother), but to arrest its course toward utter degeneration and later to help it attain to greater glory, to ultimate liberation (VI:707f).

Germany seems, to Schelling, the natural place for the free Church, independent of Rome, to have arisen. That "great religious transformation really emerged out of the essence of the German spirit and feeling". What suppressed it in much of Germany "is a secret to no one" (VI:713).

In Germany, the fate of Christianity shall be decided. The German people is recognized as the most universal. For a long time, it has been deemed the most truth-loving, sacrificing everything, even its political significance, to the truth ... (VI:712).

The free Church ... was to arise in Germany and spread especially among the Germanic nations. For clearly the relation of the Roman nations to Christendom is a significantly different one. Among these latter, Christianity appears almost everywhere as something which came to them from the outside. Among the Germans it appeared to be natural. Germany is the wilderness into which the woman of Revelations fled. For her Son, to whom she gave birth with great travail, the dragon, the Adversary, lay in wait. How in the land of the Hierarchy itself has another, a modern, mythology put itself forward in the place of Christianity! To the Neapolitans and Paduans, St. Anthony ... is a much closer, more present consolation than Christ (VI:708).

Schelling takes occasion to note that this kind of opposition to the Roman Church cannot be found in the Greek Church, even though the latter made similar claims, for Islam overpowered the Greek Church and prevented its further advance. Islam's success, however, had the effect of protecting the Greek Church against the Roman Church and "preserving it as a living contradiction of the pretentious *universality* of the latter."

The Greeks had held that the stone on which Christ wanted to build his Church was not the person of Peter but only his confession. In

particular, Origen and Chrysostom understood it this way ... Origen said: 'If you think that the whole Church of God is built on Peter alone, what shall you say of the son of thunder, John, and every other apostle? Shall we dare to affirm that the gates of hell can not prevail only against Peter but that they are quite capable of overcoming the others?' As against our view, which opts for the personal meaning of this word to Peter, the above argument can prove nothing of course, for when we understand Peter personally, there is no intention to exclude John and Paul; we simply give them another function ... (VI:708).³⁴

Despite his Protestant heritage, Schelling insists that he feels "no call to be the apologist of Protestantism." His concern is with "Christianity in the totality of its historical development", and within that development Protestantism must see itself as merely a transition (VI:713).

My goal is that truly universal church (if 'church' is still the right word for it) which can be built only in the Spirit and which can persist only in the perfect understanding of Christianity, in its real fusion with universal science and knowledge ... As long as a Church thinks its sole task is to show Christ from afar, as if he were locked up in a shrine to which no one has the key, so long has Protestantism not borne its fruits.

If we trace its derivation, the very word *εκκλησια* implies a limitation. The Church is the fellowship of the *εκκαλουμενων*, those summoned out of the world. This means that the Church is outside and opposite the world. Hence, Protestantism need not object if it is denied the name 'Church' by those to whom Christianity is nothing but a Church. It can apply to itself what Paul said when he was denied the name of Apostle: 'By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them' (Cor 15:10).

Protestantism also need not object to the reproach that it is a principle of destruction. For this, after all, is the effect of a mediating power which overcomes the exclusive being of the first power. In this way it has the highly positive effect of producing life which is free and

conscious of itself out of the first blind, rigid being. Protestantism must recognize that it is merely a transition, an interim stage, and that it has meaning only with reference to the still loftier stage it is to bring about. But for this reason it alone has a future, one which is cut off for the rigid Petrine Church which, in the end, can attain to a future only with the aid of Protestantism. Foolish is the hope - wherever it may be held - that the Petrine Church will force Protestantism back under its yoke (VI:713f).

So there can be no turning back of history. "The judgments of history are the judgments of God. It is as impossible to reverse them as it is to turn a mighty river back to its source" (VI:714). Roman Catholicism had "the core of the matter", but it did not have the understanding of it. Its unity, founded on Peter's authority, was a blind and external one. "Paul provided a principle by which the Church could again be freed, not from unity, but from blind unity" (VI:714, 716). The whole purpose of Protestantism, therefore, is to make possible this transition to "a unity which is comprehended and understood and therefore free." Had Christianity already attained this goal, it could, without misgiving, "dispense with the residual forms kept over from the Petrine Church, and remove the barriers with which it still has to hedge about this interim stage. Then only would the Reformation be complete" (VI:715). But this third stage is still in the future, and is predicted by the third great Apostle, John.

B. The Religion of the Future

The Johannine "Church" - the Religion of all Mankind

Schelling conceives the "Church" of the future as the consummation of the history of the Church and the world - a synthesis of the Petrine and Pauline principles, of Catholicism and Protestantism, but also of Church and world, Christianity and civilization. The ultimate unity it represents will be "free, desired with conviction, and therefore eternal and permanent" (VI:716). The nature of John, and this 'ecumenical vision' of the future, are eloquently expressed.

In comparing the three apostles, one is reminded of Elijah's vision, the prophet whom the Lord passed by. In this vision, there was first a great strong wind which broke rocks and mountains into pieces, then an earthquake and a fire, and finally a still small voice, and in the

voice was the Lord. John lacks Peter's violent aggressiveness, always a characteristic of one who begins. He lacks the earth-shaking quality of Paul whose letters resound with that thunder of genius which upheaves and at the same time makes fertile an entire territory of related concepts. John is filled with a gentle, celestial spirit. True, Christ called him the son of Thunder. And perhaps it was in this capacity that, early in his life, he wrote the book of Revelation in which one senses the new conditions and how much of Christianity still lies in the future. In the gospel and in his letters, however, he is already transfigured and taken up into Christ; he speaks to us like a departed spirit. The thunder which can still be detected even here, reverberates in heaven, but its bolts do not strike on earth. John has both the simplicity of Peter and the dialectical acumen of Paul ... (VI:717).

Just as in God there are three distinctions, so in Christianity there are three main Apostles. Just as little as God has his being in one person alone, so little does the Church exist in only one of its Apostles. *Peter* is more the Apostle of the Father; he gazes most deeply into the past. *Paul* is the true Apostle of the Son, John the Apostle of the Spirit. Only in John's Gospel do we find ... the glorious words about the Spirit which the Son will send from the Father, the Spirit which alone will lead into all truth ... (VI:718f).

If, as already mentioned, it was decided at the gathering in Jerusalem to divide Jews and Pagans between Peter and Paul, then John - whom we know as the bishop of an already established Church in Ephesus, but of whose actual apostolic work we have little or no knowledge - was apparently meant to be the Apostle of that Church in which Pagans and Jews had become one. Actually, this Church is still a Church of the future, for up to now the two elements can still be distinguished ... (VI:719).

John is the Apostle of a future, truly universal Church, of that second new Jerusalem which he himself saw descend from heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband, of that City of God from which nothing will any longer be excluded (until then there will be constant opposition). Pagans and Jews alike will enter it. Paganism and Judaism will both be contained in this Church which exerts no limiting restraint. 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. That is why John was beloved of the Lord who always kept him nearest him, for whom the Lord loves, to him he grants the office of making everything perfect.

Even if, in the enumerations of the Apostles, John did not always come third, he would still be the third Apostle because of his significance, his life as well as his writings. He is the Apostle of the... end of time when Christianity will be universally recognized. Christianity then will no longer be the old, narrow, stunted, puny Christianity of the prevailing dogmatic schools, and still less a Christianity thinly confined to miserable formulas which shun the light, nor will it be whittled down to an exclusively personal kind of Christianity. Instead, it will be a truly public religion - not as a State church or as a High Church, but as the religion of all mankind in which mankind will, at the same time, find the supreme knowledge. In no other form can Christianity belong to the Germans. After the Reformation, we must regard it as ours in this form or not at all (VI:720).

That Christ kept John for the future is attested most decisively by the story in the last chapter of the Gospel of John (VI:720, cf. John 21:22) ... John is to be the ruling potency of the Church only in the last time. His function cannot begin before the exclusiveness of Peter is completely overcome and the Church shall have attained its final unity in which there shall be one flock with one shepherd ... i.e., at the time when the Lord comes, the final time of the Church (VI:723).

"If I were to build a Church in our time," concludes Schelling, "I should dedicate it to St. John. But sooner or later a Church will be built which will unite the three princes among the Apostles, for the last authority does not annul or exclude what has gone before but transfigures and absorbs it. This Church would be the true pantheon of the history of the Christian Church" (VI:724).