

RELIGION WITHOUT ESCHATOLOGY: A RESPONSE TO J. L. SCHELLENBERG'S RELIGION AFTER SCIENCE

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I. APPRECIATING SCHELLENBERG'S RELIGION AFTER SCIENCE

J.L. Schellenberg's *Religion After Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity* argues that of the four large areas of human enquiry (politics, science, philosophy, and religion), religious enquiry has both the largest ambition and has made the least progress.¹ Religious inquiry is, Schellenberg argues, in the state of double-immaturity; immature in the standard sense of early-on in its development (like a child), and immature in the pejorative or relative sense of not being as developed as it should be (like an adult who behaves like a child).² In large part, Schellenberg believes that this pejorative immaturity is caused by the widespread and erroneous perception of religion as mature, seen in the overblown confidence with which atheists and evangelicals (of any faith) alike make claims about God or transcendent realities.

But, what about the 'standard immaturity,' which like that of a child carries no pejorative tone of rapprochement? Here we find the reason behind the title of this slim volume, *Religion After Science*. Whereas many have predicted that the development of science would herald the end of wide-spread religious belief (a prediction already proved to be largely false), Schellenberg argues that the discoveries of science give us positive reason to invest more time, money, and intellectual effort into religious questions. The main discovery that Schellenberg points to is that of deep time, because the 50,000 years of religious inquiry is a drop in the ocean when considered in the perspective of deep time. More important and less often appreciated, however, is the amount of future time we have, which Schellenberg estimates to be about 1 billion years. That is, twenty thousand *times* the 50,000 years of religious activity we have already had. For this reason, Schellenberg suggests that humanity is developmentally immature, and it is simply too early to write off religion.

Instead, he argues we should adopt a boldly agnostic religion or a new religious humanism that (probably rules out belief in God but) searches for new kinds of religious truth, suspends judgement when it thinks it has found such truth, embraces the imagination, and allows for a bottom-up moral framework. Who knows, Schellenberg suggests, in 10,000 years *homo sapiens* may have developed into a new kind of species, with new cognitive capacities that can reliably detect transcendent phenomena. In this we might point to the overlap between *Religion After Science* and the quasi-religious hope in post-humanism of salvation after technology.

The first thing to say in response to this punchy and provocative treatise is that, as a Christian theologian at a public University, I am not its intended audience. It is my daily task to rigorously question, open-mindedly debate and re-imagine theological ideas, and to teach my students to do the same. I do this because I

1 J. L. Schellenberg, *Religion after Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), 2–3.

2 *Ibid.*, 50–61.

believe there are new insights yet to be discovered, past distortions that sorely need correcting, and that theological questions are often the most important and difficult questions that human beings ask. So perhaps I can be forgiven for finding Schellenberg's central claim that theological and religious inquiry has unilaterally failed to show any intellectual humility and every religious thinker claims to hold all the answers, incredulous if not marginally insulting.

I am also not Schellenberg's intended audience because, I already agree with many of his hopes and aspirations for the future of religious inquiry. As a Christian, I also agree with just about everything Schellenberg has to say against naturalism as an over-confident and hopefully short-lived *zeitgeist*, and the failure of arguments that pitch the natural sciences and religious faith against one another. I acknowledge that much of what Schellenberg critiques as religious immaturity is correct far more often than it should be; there are some who do see their religious views as the final word, although it is somewhat lazy to paint all members of established religions with this one brush. I agree that many components of human religiosity are, like all aspects of human cognition, evolved and still evolving.

Instead of a Christian academic, Schellenberg's intended audience is a generation of young-people who self-identify as "Nones," or as 'spiritual, but not religious' because whilst they have given up on organised religion and claim to hold no strong religious opinions of their own, they wonder about the 'something more' that may or may not exist. To this audience, I anticipate that Schellenberg's argument and concluding plea to not give up on religion will be largely successful. For this, I am grateful to Schellenberg.

What I want to argue in the remainder of this response is that Schellenberg's critiques and desires for a better religious future can already be found in the critiques and proposals of Christian theology. Indeed, I want to suggest that Christianity offers a more radical critique and alternative to the problems of 'immature religion' than Schellenberg. This is because, I suggest, that Schellenberg's stance towards religious inquiry is an extension of the general posture characteristic of modernity, with its three waves of humanism, rationalism, and romanticism. This modern stance is what limits Schellenberg from fully embracing the logic of his own concerns and following them to a more radical end, namely, surrender.

This, primarily historical, interpretation of what Schellenberg is doing in *Religion After Science*, allows me to highlight the contingency of Schellenberg's approach, which as a meta-perspective on 'the human religion project' from evolutionary origins into the distant future, has the tendency to position itself outside of the rough-and-tumble of intellectual history. This then allows me to question many of the arguments Schellenberg makes against traditional organised religion and their truth-seeking activities, at least in the case of Christianity (although I make no competitive claim here over and against other theological traditions), whilst still leaving intact our points of shared agreement. I will then conclude with some reflections on why and how Christianity offers better resources for the 'Nones' than the new agnosticism and new humanism that Schellenberg promotes.

II. THREADS OF MODERNITY: HUMANISM, ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTICISM

Schellenberg tells us he picked the title, *Religion After Science*, because of the effect of the scientific discovery of deep time upon our understanding of religious development and immaturity. However, if we let 'science' stand as a symbol of the project of modernity, then a deeper logic of Schellenberg's title emerges. Schellenberg argues that, contrary to common belief, the progress of modernity has not made religion obsolete. Instead, this book can be understood as yet another attempt to fully incorporate the search for transcendence into modern life by offering readers "a more perfect union of rational, humanistic and religious impulse than the world has yet seen."³ Louis Dupré describes modernity as "an *event* that has transformed the relation between cosmos, its transcendent sources, and its human interpreter."⁴

3 Ibid., 126.

4 Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay on the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 249.

This transformation consists in three intellectual threads, which hold together within the platted logic of modernity and can be found interwoven throughout *Religion After Science*.

The first thread is humanism, which precipitates the twins of enlightenment and romanticism. As Renaissance thinkers returned to ancient sources, they placed an emphasis on human creativity and so established the possibility of a second, non-transcendent, source of power, value and knowledge.⁵ This is what I mean by ‘humanism,’ the placing of the human subject as the centre and source of rational inquiry, ethical deliberation and all other activity. Whilst Schellenberg never uses the term ‘supernatural,’ the triple-transcendence lies beyond the realm of nature as an object for the human mind to search after. According to Schellenberg, the projects of politics, science and philosophy, which all concern knowledge of the natural world, can and must progress quite happily without knowledge of this triple-transcendence who remains (and may remain for quite some time yet) nebulous and ineffable. Since this triple-transcendence does not fill the cosmos with meaning and value, it is left to humanity to define value and search for meaning. In accepting this “bottom-up” approach to value, such that the triple-transcendence (if it exists) is valuable but not the source of values, humanism (religious or secular) commits the precise sin that Schellenberg cites as his reason for abandoning established religion; an over-confidence in one’s own position of knowledge.

Thus, *Religion After Science* stands in a long line of thinkers seeking to critique the problems of modernity, whilst still being trapped by its basic assumption that the scientific, natural, or political world is a given that can be adequately interpreted apart from transcendence. Indeed, these naturalistic pursuits are not merely independent but, as is clear from Schellenberg’s title, must precede any mature search for transcendence. It is the human subject that stands as the ultimate knower and judge, such that we remain locked in a tension between constructivist and realist notions of reality.

Schellenberg’s vision of religious knowledge and humility is modelled after the natural sciences, and so characterised by control and creativity. Or in the words of Francis Bacon humility should serve only “to extend more widely the limits of the power and greatness of man.”⁶ Instead of searching to discover that upon which all our knowing and striving depends, we are (like toddlers) to seek the petty gods that suit our needs. It is this humanistic priority that allows Schellenberg to conclude that “Religion might yet be made to work for us and for the world.”⁷

Schellenberg brings humanism full circle as *Religion After Science* culminates in a proposal for a “new religious humanism, capable of displacing secular humanism”⁸ Like its Renaissance ancestor this ‘new’ humanism is theologically and religiously engaged and motivated. Schellenberg’s proposal is, therefore, not very ‘new’ at all, but rather the more traditional (Christian) humanist vision. Although, unlike his intellectual forebears, Schellenberg rejects the Church or other established places and paradigms of theological reflection. The combination of humanism and religion does not, as Schellenberg intends, offer religion a new way forward to “re-enter cultural evolution”, but merely offers a previously trod intellectual path. As such, he is vulnerable to repeating the circle of modernity; namely, the pendulum swing between enlightenment and romanticism.

III. ENLIGHTENMENT, RATIONALITY, AND COMMITMENT

The second thread of modernity is ‘enlightenment,’ by which I mean the self-conscious goal of emancipating reason from “self-imposed tutelage” under religious traditions. In describing the world’s various religious traditions as “immature,” Schellenberg is echoing Immanuel Kant’s famous essay “What is Enlightenment?,” which described the submission to religious authorities as “*Unmündigkeit*” (immature).⁹

5 Ibid., 3, 249–50.

6 Quoted in Ibid., 71.

7 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 124.

8 Ibid., 116.

9 Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”. In *Kant on History*, ed. White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 3. I am aware that using Kant’s essay to define the complicated and multifaceted period of intellectual history that we now refer to

Schellenberg's hope for a more mature approach follows the Enlightenment's dream of a "view from nowhere" (to borrow a phrase from Thomas Nagel) and of rational neutrality, marketed by Schellenberg as a "new agnosticism".¹⁰ What is Schellenberg's "10,000-year test" if not a God's-eye-view, to whom like natural science "10,000 years are but a day"?¹¹

As with many depictions of divine scrutiny, Schellenberg's judgement upon theology as immature is cast in terms of epistemic virtue and vices. Although Schellenberg remains an atheist, he does not directly argue that traditional theological claims (of whatever faith) are wrong in this book, but that religious inquiry has been thus far characterised by self-importance, dogmatism, greed, hostility, emotion, and — in particular — loyalty.¹² It is these characteristics which mark religious inquiry as immature, and therefore likely erroneous, for Schellenberg. Certainly, far too much human inquiry has been and continues to be marked by epistemic vice, a claim affirmed within the Christian tradition's doctrine of sin and sin's epistemic consequences. However, I want to question Schellenberg's claim that emotion and loyalty should be included on a list of epistemic vices that inhibit the search for truth, and in particular truth about transcendence.

Defining the norms of rational enquiry is a notoriously difficult task. Moreover, when taken in a bottom-up fashion, the norms of rationality seem to be culturally specific: "What men find reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods, men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa."¹³ Schellenberg is alert to the malleability of reason as a function of our embodiment. The optimism which characterises *Religion After Science* is based on biological and cognitive evolution, and the possibility that a future human species could evolve to have more reliable transcendence-detection capacities. Although Schellenberg offers no real argument for his assumption that a process like biological evolution is truth-directed, rather than merely a combination of randomness and survival.¹⁴ That this natural process (even with the possibility of top-down cultural evolution¹⁵) could be truth-directed towards knowledge of something *beyond* nature, without the prior belief that this process is guided or designed for such a purpose, seems even more unfounded and incredible.¹⁶

Rationality is not only dependent upon our neurological hardware. It is also dependent upon social practice, affect, and indeed faith or commitment. Schellenberg writes that agnostic religion is at least as rationally satisfying as secular humanism, because "the old problem of faith and reason here simply goes away since it is through philosophical discernment and scientific awareness that agnostic religion becomes a possibility in the first place".¹⁷ This, then, is a form of religious engagement, as Kant would say, within the bounds of reason alone. Yet, contemporary psychology of epistemology and social anthropology suggest that faith must come before reason. Human cognition is always reason within the bounds of faith. By faith here I mean a kind of basic trust that enables us to act and live in the world, and a set of tacit presuppositions that constrains rational inquiry. This faith manifests in what Charles Taylor has called

as 'the enlightenment' is passé, and I do not mean to imply that all thinkers of this period had this goal in mind.

¹⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 67–89; Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 81–90. Schellenberg characterises 'old agnosticism' as a timid indecision between two well-defined options, personal monotheism ('God') and new atheism. In contrast, 'new agnosticism' is a position of threefold doubt (1) that religion will never be successful, (2) that all religious ideas are false, and (3) that there is no triple-transcendent reality. Since all these three (atheistic) propositions are doubted, the new agnostic is open to new possibility of religious discovery, whilst still being able to affirm 'old atheism' — the rejection of belief in any thus far conceived God or gods.

¹¹ Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 127.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39–49.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Blackwell, 1974), 336.

¹⁴ For a state of the art discussion of this problem see, James K. Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 67.

¹⁶ For a discussion of limits of cognitive science of religion for debates between theism and atheism see, Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh, and Aku Visala, "Born Idolaters: The Limits of the Philosophical Implications of the Cognitive Science of Religion", *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 57, no. 2 (2015).

¹⁷ Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 122.

our “social imaginaries”.¹⁸ The metanarratives with which we mould our imaginations constrain what is ‘rational’, what appears as common sense, and what evidence appears affectively salient to our inquiry. One way of reading *Religion After Science* is as a new metanarrative of developmental religion, which is intended to make agnosticism and a religiously engaged humanism the most rational/mature stance one can take towards religion.¹⁹

Schellenberg is worried that religiously directed emotions and commitments make people “blinkered’ no longer open to any great diversity of experience and imagination.”²⁰ And there is a great deal of psychological literature on confirmation bias to back this up. As such, Schellenberg argues for “faith without belief” and with imagination instead.²¹ In so doing, he is not offering some alternative to Christianity, but pointing out (for example) the too-often woefully impoverished interpretation of Hebrews 11:1, which is packed with ideas not only of belief and conviction, but also hope, imagination, and trust: “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Commitment, loyalty, and emotion are the foundations upon which rational inquiry and imaginative openness can proceed, not the marks of closed-minded immaturity.

The role of emotion, commitment, and faith in human cognition is as central for scientific enquiry as it is for religious investigation. As such, Schellenberg’s rejection of the prevailing myths/commitments of recent decades (naturalism and secularism) will have at least as significant ramifications for the future of science, philosophy, and politics, which Schellenberg believes have flourished into maturity under these cultural conditions, as for religion, which has been neglected. I would be interested to know what implications Schellenberg thinks his argument about religion might have for these other areas of enquiry.

Since Schellenberg denies that we, as of yet, hold any such revelation of transcendence from which our reasoning might begin and follow, he instead adopts a concept of universal or lowest-common-denominator religion; a “shudderingly deep inherent significance” that lies “beyond nature.”²² Schellenberg’s conceptualisation of a universal and timeless religion — “the human religion project” — mimics the invention of ‘religion’ by the modern enlightenment in the time of European crisis and colonial encounter to order and control multiple rationalities.²³ Instead of a pluralistic account, exemplified in John Hick and other ‘perennial philosophers of religion’ (to whom Schellenberg otherwise appears extremely similar) which argues for the convergent truth of the worlds many faiths, Schellenberg collects all ‘religion’ into a single basket in order to dismiss this supposedly distinct and identifiable area of human life and knowledge as immature.

My complaint here is not with the judgement upon religion as immature, but on the constructed concept of religion in the first place. The category of ‘religion’ is a consequence of Schellenberg, Hick, and countless others claiming a neutral and objective perspective outside of religion which promises greater insight, than those within who profess a religious faith themselves. One certainly can, as modernity has, construct religion this way. But, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, pointed out half a century ago, “it is not entirely foolish to suggest that the rise of the concept of ‘religion’ is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself.”²⁴ Insofar as Schellenberg’s goal is to convince the “Nones” not to give

18 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2007).

19 This reading of *Religion After Science*, places Schellenberg in opposition to Lyotard’s assertion that “Science has always been in conflict with narratives,” such that after science we are left with a postmodern nihilism. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), xxiii.

20 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 45.

21 *Ibid.*, 106–11.

22 *Ibid.*, 7–8.

23 *Ibid.*, 4. This point has been well made by a number of scholars including: Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (Macmillan, 1963); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (Yale Univ. Press, 2015); William T. Cavanaugh’s chapter “The Invention of Religion,” *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), and Jonathan Jong, “On (not) Defining (non)Religion”, *Science, Religion and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2015).

24 Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 19.

up on transcendence, perpetuating the simplistic and modern idea that life can be separated neatly into secular/religious categories and alternatives, may not help his cause.

If there is no neutral Archimedean perspective — even in light of deep time — with which we can adjudicate religious claims to begin our search for triple-transcendence, what are we to do? Thomas Hobbes faced with this problem, turns to the need for some “Arbitrator or Judge” to settle the dispute.²⁵ That is, the need for an agreed authority. Since what we are seeking to know is transcendent, that which exists beyond, above and beneath the whole realm of experience, only the transcendent being itself could have such an authoritative perspective. Human beings cannot place ourselves as final judges since it is our reasoning and experience that needs surrendering to a higher authority than oneself — especially for those who are placed in such positions of authority, as leaders, interpreters, priests, prophets, or kings. In Christianity, there is only one king, true prophet, or high-priest — the transcendent being itself. Here we find in the epistemology of traditional Christianity all the humility, imagination, and curiosity that Schellenberg seeks.

An agreed epistemic authority cannot be established upon reason or argumentation, since it must stand apart from these as judge, but only (unfortunately) upon social convention and personal commitment. The lack of such a universally agreed authority, as characterises the modern period, does not make discourse immature or futile. It simply means that the concepts upon which reasoning depends are essentially contested concepts.²⁶ The contested nature of revelation does not, however, mean that all claims of revelation can be swept aside in one fell swoop as Schellenberg seeks to do.²⁷ Instead, each must be tested and examined with “radical particularity” because the grounds for faith cannot be separated from the content of faith itself.²⁸ That is we have to get into the nitty-gritty of theology and what is it that is being claimed to have been revealed. In Christianity, as for the natural sciences and many other world faiths, this problem means that theological reasoning must flow *a posteriori* from a point of revelation — a given or point of *data* — to which one is committed and which allows further evidence to become salient to the inquirer. To be committed here means to let one’s imagination be ignited afresh and cast a new vision of the world. In Christianity, imagination and revelation cannot be pitted against one another, but must always be found together as revelation “expands the imagination; makes the imagination the locus and vehicle of its reception.”²⁹

Schellenberg’s agnostic religion does not offer an escape from this problem of religious authority, it merely bets on a future revelation of triple-transcendence (once we have evolved in such a way to be able to receive it), rather than a past one.³⁰ But there remains the need for revelation to which one then becomes emotionally attached, imaginatively committed and loyal. Revelation is not the antithesis of reason if one humbly allows revelation to ignite and illuminate the imagination anew so that the human knower pursues *after* revelation with the full curiosity that only love and commitment can supply.

IV. ROMANTICISM, ESCHATOLOGY, AND THE IMAGINATION

This brings us to the third, most pronounced, strand of modernity in *Religion After Science*; namely, romanticism. Schellenberg stands within the current trend of post-secular and post-naturalistic (and even post-humanist) philosophers searching for the existential depth and meaning in the world, but who can-

25 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan; English Works* (Bohn, 1839), vol., 3, 13.

26 W.B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” in *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (Chatto & Windus, 1964), 157–91.

27 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 34–35.

28 William J. Abraham, “Eschatology and Epistemology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 588.

29 Richard Bauckham, “Conclusion: Emerging Issues in Eschatology in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 681.

30 “The question now is not what would the first-century Jesus do? More likely, it will be what would future enlightened and mature people think and about such things...” Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 127.

not find their way back into the seeming (and all too often actually) naïveté, superstition, and abusiveness of traditional organised religions and communities. Again, this conundrum is not new to the twenty-first century, but appears as an echo of the romantic artists and philosophers of previous centuries.

Like the Romantics of the past, Schellenberg's developmental view of religion starts by declaring that traditional religions are wrong about at least one thing — “the end is not near”.³¹ Paradigmatic of religion within the constraints of modernity, *Religion After Science* is an attempt to separate transcendence from eschatology. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing thus similarly spoke of history as the developmental “education of mankind” (1780), cast as a journey through which humanity moves from immaturity to mature rationality. As Karl Löwth's classic study showed, these myths of progress are weak reflections of Christian hope.³²

Whereas many thinkers in the modern period offer a secular eschatology — an ‘end of history’ — without transcendence, Schellenberg seeks an account of transcendence without eschatology. As explored above, Schellenberg inherits modernity's ‘myth of progress’ and seems to endorse at least the “hopeful aspiration” that there are laws to history.³³ What Schellenberg staunchly rejects is the idea that the current age is one of arrival or finality.

Although he does not fully explore this connection, Schellenberg clearly intuitively grasps the epistemological importance of eschatology. It is the deep future, not the deep past, that allows him to sweep aside all historic or current religions and their claims of revelation. As the climax of a rich narrative, rejecting eschatology is the quickest and simplest way to reject the whole narrative, whether that be the Christian narrative, the myth of secularisation, or any other. It is the refusal to imagine an ending that is the fundamental pillar of Schellenberg's agnosticism. We should not fall into the old mistake of pitching romanticism and enlightenment in opposition, for as seen clearly in *Religion After Science*, it is romanticism's rejections of eschatology that is the compliment of the Enlightenment's denial of revelation.

Christian eschatology has never just been about predictions of the temporal future; what would happen at the end of history or after a person dies. As has been apparent again in 2020, apocalyptic and eschatological language is frequently used to claim that something of potentially ultimate significance is happening in the present. The most fundamental claim of Christianity is not that Jesus is coming back, but that the future has already been inaugurated in the present through Christ's death and resurrection. This is a point of revelation, which does not give much (if any) direct propositional knowledge of God, but instead functions as the spark and orientation of the Christian imagination. Remembering these events again and again, as Christians are wont to do, is not to rehearse the events of the past, as in preparation of a history exam. Instead, it is the continual attempt to re-imagine the world in light of the claim that these events have ultimate, eschatological, significance. Hope for “eternal life,” as Kathryn Tanner has argued, “is a present reality; we possess now, in an unconditional fashion, life in God as a source of all good and need not wait for death to pass from the realm of death to that of life.”³⁴ It is a hope or statement as much about the graced nature of the present, such that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:39), as it is about the future.

In contrast to the realised secular eschatological visions of utopia — from Thomas Moore to Karl Marx to Francis Fukuyama — it is this “now” of Christian eschatology that Schellenberg rejects. Instead, Schellenberg draws on the other half of Christian eschatology, the “not yet” of the Kingdom of God, which prevents Christianity from baptising any particular political or economic system or of claiming now the certainty and completeness that will only come at the end of the story. If this is all the humility and imagination Schellenberg wants for religion — it is already present in Christianity. However, without the poetry of the prophetic or event for the imagination to re-remember, Schellenberg's own “not yet”

31 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 23–26.

32 Karl Löwth, *Meaning in History* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949).

33 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 73.

34 Kathryn Tanner, “Eschatology Without a Future”, in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Mikael Welker (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 231.

remains contentless, and all his appeals to a more imaginative religion fall flat.³⁵ For “the primacy of imagination” lies precisely in the realm of eschatological thought.³⁶ Without an eschatology Schellenberg’s religion has nothing to feed and sustain the imagination.

Schellenberg’s hope is left closer to Jacques Derrida’s indeterminate “to come”. As James KA Smith has argued, absolutely indetermined hope, like absolutely agnostic belief, is simply not possible.³⁷ We do not need claims to finality, comprehensive knowledge, or specific details, but the human imagination does need some direction, memory and act of judgement with which to cast its new and open vision of the future. Without proper discussion of “the grounds of hope or the sources of hopeful imagining”, we cannot distinguish imagination from fantasy, or hope from wishful-thinking.³⁸ What is Schellenberg’s ground for hope? It seems to be the progress made in other fields of human investigation, particularly natural science. For this grounding to work, however, these other human projects must already be linked to the triple-transcendence in some significant way, such that ‘the human religion project’ is not a special little sphere in an otherwise secular world. Thus, we must question the very modern premise with which we started, and instead grant that transcendence, if it exists at all, “is not merely what lies beyond the world, but first and foremost what supports its givenness.”³⁹

V. CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO REVELATION

In *Religion After Science*, Schellenberg affirms a great many things that the Christian tradition has taught for centuries. The scope of the ambition to know God (or triple-transcendence) is far bigger and more difficult than many imagine. That we need to remain deeply apophatic about the inner nature of God (or triple-transcendence, as Schellenberg prefers although to the apophatic tradition this is not doing any additional work). Why think that humans have or even could succeed in knowing God on our own at all? Historical record shows that the human mind and heart are a “perpetual factory of idols” and attachment to idols causes rational and ethical bankruptcy.⁴⁰ Schellenberg claims to launch his developmental perspective on religion on the basis of scientific discovery, but science is not adding anything significant here that the Christian tradition has not taught for centuries.

The question behind *Religion After Science* is a deeply theological one; what are the necessary conditions by which we might improve on the “poor-quality of religious investigation of the past”?⁴¹ Put less arrogantly, what are the necessary conditions by which we might know God, triple-transcendence, Reality, the One, the Ground of Being, or whatever? I have argued in this response that the conditions of modernity, for a complex range of reasons, do not serve this goal well. In particular, I have suggested that the positioning of transcendence as something like just another object of human enquiry, a definable area of human investigation, and a matter to which we can make progress from a position of assumed neutrality, is a fundamental mistake. What makes religious inquiry hard is not just that transcendence lies beyond the world, but that it also lies beneath it and that it is implicated by and hidden in all that we do know. It is the transcendent, rather than agnosticism or humanism, which is the wellspring of human art and imagination.

The difference between Christianity and Schellenberg’s analysis of the present situation is that in many ways Christianity diagnoses the problems as more serious. The Christian outlook on the ‘human

35 Here I am denying any sharp Kantian distinction or separation between the “reproductive” and “productive” imagination. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. P. Puyser and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), B151–52, p.256–57.

36 Richard Bauckham and Trevor A. Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 110.

37 James K. A. Smith, “Determined Hope: A Phenomenology of Christian Expectation”, in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition Amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. H. W. Katerberg and Miroslav Volf (W.B. Eerdmans, 2004).

38 Bauckham, “Conclusion: Eschatology in the 21st Century”, 681.

39 Dupre, *Passage to Modernity*, 251.

40 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.8.

41 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 120.

religion project, including Christian religion itself, is more pessimistic than Schellenberg's can be. As such, optimistic proposals for a "new agnosticism" and "new religious humanism," do not go far enough. For Schellenberg, hope ultimately lies with humanity, or some future species descended from humanity. For Christianity, hope only lies with God, to reach down and communicate in a way that is at least partially comprehensible to the human mind. In this way, Christianity subverts the problem of immaturity, and instead calls us to a kind of trusting surrender and imaginative maturity that can only be properly described as "childlikeness" (Mark 10:14; Matthew 18:1–5).

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