



Evolutionism and Early Nineteenth-Century Histories of Religions

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Evolutionism influenced the study of religion long before Darwin. Histories of religions feature prominently in the metaphysical philosophies of history of the Romantic period; these philosophies of history, in turn, draw on an essence-and-development concept of evolution constructed within eighteenth-century biological preformationism and theosophy.¹ Preformationist and theosophical evolutionisms posit physiological and spiritual development of humanity. Ballanche and Schelling show how Romantic philosophers of history applied essence-and-development evolutionisms to history, to humanity and to God. For both Ballanche and Schelling, history is the unfolding in time of the essence of humanity; for both, the history of religions provides empirical corroboration for the metaphysical order underlying history. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century essence-and-development evolutionism historicized, and thereby reconceptualised, Christian providentialism, soteriology and theodicy. Historians of the study of religions have insufficiently appreciated this fact, both historiographically and methodologically.

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Eighteenth-century Evolutionisms

Beginning with the observations and experiments of Francisco Redi and Jan Swammerdam in the second half of the seventeenth century, the work of the great microscopists refuted the theory of spontaneous generation of organic life. In its place, Swammerdam, whose microscope revealed the intricate organisation of even the tiniest of insects, postulated that all reproduced life must preexist morphologically in the parental seed: 'There is never generation in nature, but only a lengthening or increase of parts.'² Biological preformationism substitutes development from a preexisting essence for generation: living beings contain in themselves, like the germ in a seed, tiny preformed structures that are inert but otherwise exact miniature replicas of themselves. At the moment of fertilization, the inert structure waiting in the germ is activated and starts growing, expanding in all directions until it has become in full size what it already was in miniature.³ Preformationism assumes that the germs of all organisms must have been formed at the beginning; hence its corollary doctrine of *emboîtement*, or encasement: at the creation of the world all future generations of living things were encapsulated in a set of primordial germs.⁴

Though preformationists were divided into ovists—the followers of Marcello Malpighi and Swammerdam, for whom the preformed germ is in the female's egg—and animiculists—disciples of Antony van Leeuwenhoek, for whom the preformed germ is in the male semen—preformationism dominated, in one version or another, biological thinking throughout the eighteenth century. The Swiss natural philosopher Charles Bonnet (1720–1793), a champion of preformationism right up to the end of the eighteenth century, added subtleties to the theory in response to challenges from empirical data—in particular, those posed by the polyp *Hydra*. The buds that form on the *Hydra*, from which little polyps develop, do not contain parts within it, like the bud of a plant, all ready to expand and unfold; moreover, buds can form anywhere on the body of a *Hydra*. In order to account for this data without abandoning preformationism, Bonnet jettisoned the concept of *emboîtement* while retaining the idea of preformed particles or germs:

I do not affirm that the buds which produce separate young polyps were themselves miniature polyps, hidden under the skin of the mother, but I affirm that there are under the skin certain particles which have been preorganized in such a manner that a little polyp results from their development.⁵

Change in the essence of a species is impossible in preformationist biology; hence the opposition of eighteenth-century preformationists to any notion of transformation of species. Correspondingly, adherence to transformist views implied both opposition to preformationism and defence of spontaneous generation.⁶ Bonnet nevertheless worked out a theory of palingenesis, or the serial rebirth of species, in which the appearance of species undergoes modification in relation to revolutions of the globe, or planet-wide cataclysms, while the fixity of species in relation to each other is maintained.⁷ Bonnet's palingenetic modification of species is not a matter of environmental change followed by reactive adaptation; rather, it reflects Leibniz's doctrine of pre-established harmony among all substances of the universe, so that both the germs of the various species and the sequence of the revolutions of the globe have been preformed, and the two sets of preformations have been coordinated by God. In other words, the unfolding of the germs of the various species has been provisionally programmed to coincide with the unfolding of the successive catastrophes.⁸

Palingenetic modification is neither random nor directionless; species increase in both biological complexity and spiritual perfection. Each catastrophe, while introducing biological refinements, also and inseparably marks a step forward in the restoration of fallen creation. As the catastrophes play themselves out, and as the pre-existent essences of species unfold, the entire chain of being advances toward God.⁹ Bonnet's theory, to which he gave the name philosophical palingenesis, reconceptualises Christian teleology and soteriology in the naturalistic language of biological preformationism. The term Bonnet chose to designate his palingenetic sequence is 'evolution'. The meaning of the Latin root *evolvere* is 'to unroll or unfold'; its noun, *evolutio*, referred to the unrolling of a scroll. Eighteenth-century natural philosophers, availing themselves of the sense of unrolling, applied the term *evolutio* to the successive unfolding of preformed structures encased in germs.¹⁰ Evolution is here a synonym for the preformationist archetypal pattern of essence and development that purports to be at once scientific and soteriological.

The most important figure in the construction of theosophical evolutionism is the Swabian Pietist pastor and natural philosopher Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782). Building on Jakob Boehme and the Christian Kabbalah,¹¹ Oetinger conceives of God as the *ens manifestativum sui*, the Life-principle that strives from a dark original cause toward its own realization and corporealization. Divine self-realization, or theogony, means that God actualizes himself progressively in the development of life. Divine self-realization is a process of corporealization because, on the Boehmist rejection of a spirit/body dualism, Oetinger insists that in its self-actualization the divine Life moves toward an indestructible spiritualized corporeality, which he calls, again following Boehme, *Leiblichkeit*. (This is Boehme and Oetinger's interpretation of Paul's words in I Corinthians 15 about the glorious bodies of the resurrected.) *Leiblichkeit* is, in Oetinger's phrase, 'the end of the paths of God'; it is the manifestation and unfolding of the inner plenitude of divine existence and the transformation of every form of life into a 'spiritual body', the totality of which will finally constitute God's body, which he must have in order to be 'all in all'.¹²

In the Boehmist tradition, there is a dark aspect to the divine unfolding. Evil and suffering are not external to God, but arise as an eternal moment of theogony. And since

creation is part of the self-manifestation and self-realization of the divine nature, it too is characterised by conflict and suffering.¹³ Oetinger shares the idea that the self-actualization of the divine life, far from being a joyful, triumphant procession, is a painful struggle. That evil and suffering are necessary elements of theogony and soteriology reveals the theodical dimension of Boehmist theosophy.

Oetinger frequently speaks of the 'essence' of created things. The essence contains not only the form but also all the potentialities and possibilities of realization of a thing.¹⁴ The unfolding of essences is initiated by the operation of a secret interior impulse, which Oetinger calls 'the electrical fire concealed in all things', that was interfused with matter at the creation of the universe.¹⁵ The life force inherent in this fire possesses an urge to realization at progressively higher levels of being. All of Creation, including humanity, participates in this urge to realisation, an urge that does not rest until life has reached perfection in the full realization of spiritual corporeality.¹⁶ Oetinger's *Theology Drawn from the Idea of Life* (1765), which Benz describes as a systematic presentation of Oetinger's *Naturtheologie*,¹⁷ depicts the development of nature and humanity as the unfolding or evolution of the divine life. Evolution and theogony are simply different ways of looking at the same process. Evolution is the theogonic process of the progressive self-actualization of the divine life seen from the perspective of creation. Since this process overcomes the separation between creation and God, Oetinger's evolutionism is a theosophic soteriology. The unfolding of essences toward the full realization of spiritual corporeality is the theosophical sense of evolution.

The theosophical and biological preformationist senses of evolution constructed in the eighteenth century are closely related. Oetinger's essence and electrical fire correspond to germ and fertilization in biological preformationism. Evolution for both Bonnet and Oetinger signifies the development or unfolding of preexistent essences, and both constructions reconceptualise Christian teleology and soteriology. Oetinger, we may add, read Bonnet and cites his works from time to time.¹⁸ Indeed, convinced that scientific knowledge and religious knowledge dialectically illumine each other, Oetinger wrote *Theology Drawn from the Idea of Life* as an attempt to restore the inner connection between the scientific and the Scriptural views of the universe severed in the contemporary philosophical systems of Newton, Leibnitz and Christian Wolff.¹⁹

Evolutionism and Romantic philosophies of history

The preformationist and theosophical evolutionism constructed in the eighteenth century posits physiological and spiritual development of humanity. They do not extend the idea of progressive development to history or the social order, and they most certainly do not imply the French Enlightenment idea of human perfectibility through the exercise of reason. The Romantic revolution in historical mindedness, by applying the idea of development to human institutions and even to humanity itself, set the stage for the elaboration of speculative philosophies of history. Romantic philosophers of history, however, rejected Turgot and Condorcet's rational progress model of development and turned instead to the essence-and-development evolutionisms we have outlined above. I shall demonstrate how Romantic histories of religions are indebted to eighteenth-century evolutionism by examining the philosophies of history of two thinkers from the Romantic period, one French—Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847)—and one German—Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854).

Ballanche's philosophy of history is to be found in a series of works gathered under the overarching title of *Essays on Social Palingenesis*. Ballanche derived the term palingenesis directly from Bonnet.²⁰ In accord with Bonnet's preformationism,

Ballanche argues that social palingenesis, or social evolution (he uses the terms interchangeably), does not alter human nature; it simply develops a pre-existent human essence:

[T]he human race is one and identical with itself from its origin up to the present; it will be so until the end. Its faculties are in no way successive. That which it is, it has always been and will always be. . . . [T]he human race does not need to disengage itself from an inferior essence in order to become what it is: the evolution of the human race is within itself.²¹

Ballanche's chief point of divergence from Bonnet is his insistence that the unfolding of the human essence over time constitutes not biological but social ascent. Social palingenesis records the series of births, deaths and rebirths of societies throughout the centuries of human history. Ballanche traces the evolution of humanity from a pre-social stage of near-brutishness through various stages of society, each characterised by a particular form of social order—for example, the patriciate of the early Roman Republic. Each new stage of social evolution marks the initiation of a greater proportion of humanity into full participation in religion and society. Social evolution will culminate in full religious and social equality for all humanity. This religio-social utopia, which Ballanche believes to be close at hand, will mark the completion of the terrestrial phase of the rehabilitation of humanity from the Fall. The unfolding of the human essence will continue, but in a new phase of purely spiritual evolution through the celestial hierarchies.²² Just as Bonnet's philosophical palingenesis conflated spiritual with physiological evolution, so Ballanche's social palingenesis conflates spiritual with social evolution.²³

The birth of a new social order requires the death of the old; hence changes in social order, which Ballanche calls 'ages of crisis' and 'ages of end and renewal', are traumatic and often violent.²⁴ While each social evolutionary advance must therefore be won at the price of suffering, such suffering is not needless because it is the means by which humanity expiates original sin.²⁵ Ballanche's identification of expiation as the motor that drives social evolution displays the providentialism that animates his philosophy of history.

Ballanche worked out his theory of salvation within and by means of the social order in response to the cataclysmic sociopolitical event of his generation: the French Revolution. His theory of social evolution enabled Ballanche to comprehend the horrific events of the Revolution—events that caused many of his contemporaries to doubt the divine governance of history—within the providential order. Moreover, it was the Revolution itself that revealed to Ballanche the fundamental law of social evolution via suffering governing history.²⁶ In the works comprising the *Essays on Social Palingenesis*, Ballanche applies to the entire span of history the providential law displayed in the Revolution: rehabilitation from the Fall by means of social progress merited through suffering.

The various mythologies and religions of the world similarly become intelligible in light of the key to history revealed in the French Revolution. Ballanche interprets all mythologies as variations on an ideal, universal mythology, which is itself nothing other than an allegorized account of the operation of social palingenesis in humanity's remote past.²⁷ The Saturn-Jupiter-Bacchus sequence of divinities in Greek mythology, for example, prefigures the sequence of social orders actually undergone in ancient history.²⁸ Revealed Christianity, in turn, continues the process of the unfolding of social palingenesis. The Christian doctrines of religious equality and charity mark an epochal

transition in the historical process because they make religious truth the potential possession of all humanity and substitute cooperation for violence as the agent of social change. The gradual extension of these religious principles into the civil sphere is the ongoing task of the centuries after Christ.²⁹ While Ballanche asserts that Christianity fully manifests true religion for the first time, he equally insists that its content is already contained in the religions that came before it. Pre-Christian religions direct the social evolution of specific peoples by providing them with the truth necessary to each stage of their development in a form relative to their capacities. In acknowledgment of the unity of the religious development of humanity, Ballanche baptises the religions of the ancient world as 'anterior Christianity'.³⁰

Ballanche's philosophy of history applies preformationism to history, including the history of religions. That is, historical events are fully intelligible only in light of the developmental principle, manifested in the French Revolution, of the progressive rehabilitation of humanity from the Fall through social evolution. We may speak of Ballanche's philosophy of history as 'metaphysical empiricism'. That is, an *a priori* schema controls the interpretation of empirical data.

In Ballanche, one can make a clear distinction between ontology and philosophy of history: God is transcendent, and it is human understanding of the divine order and the redemptive process that unfolds in history. In the later philosophy of F. W. J. von Schelling, however, ontology and philosophy of history are interdependent.

From about 1806 Schelling's metaphysical thinking reflects his reading of Boehmist theosophy and his discussion of it with Franz von Baader. Schelling encountered Boehme and Oetinger at a time when he was growing dissatisfied with contemporary philosophical efforts to combine a dynamic conception of change with a static essentialism. Under their influence, he attempted to incorporate genetic and volitional principles into the very core of ontology.³¹ The theosophical influence is clearly discernible in *The Ages of the World* (1811–1813, published posthumously), in which Schelling undertakes a logical analysis of the ontological relations that constitute the eternal process that is God—Oetinger's *ens manifestativum sui*. God's eternal nature, as the archetype of sequential time, constitutes the past; sequential time, the medium for God's self-revelation, is the present; and the return of all things to God is the future. Past, present and future—the three ages of the world—are constituted by God's own nature and radical freedom. They represent the world's going out from and return to God—or, as Schelling liked to say, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of human consciousness.³² Schelling, in short, interprets history and nature as the development, or self-actualization, of the pre-existent divine nature. And the unfolding of the divine life, as for Oetinger, is both a theogony (divine self-revelation and self-actualization) and a soteriology (restoration of Creation to unity with God).

In *Ages of the World*, Schelling elaborated his analysis of the divine nature into the *Potenzenlehre*, or theory of the three Potencies, which he also called the 'negative philosophy'. Schelling defines the Potencies, simultaneously rational 'laws' and volitional 'drives' and designated A¹, A², and A³, as individual agencies, each with its own internal impulse. The first Potency, A¹, is the unlimited possibility of being (*sein Könnende*). Because it does not discriminate among possible forms of being, it is indeterminate and devoid of objective being. The second Potency, A², 'the pure being' (*das rein Seiende*), imparts determinate structure to the limitless possibility of A¹, thereby enabling the formation of objective being and a concrete world. The third Potency, A³ 'being-with-itself' (*das bei-sich-Seiende*), fulfils and balances the first two Potencies and mediates between subjectivity and objectivity. Representing the totality of possibilities

but without being for that reason indefinite, accommodating the determinate but without losing its inner spontaneity, the third Potency furnishes the pattern for an ultimate ontological synthesis of selfhood (as foreshadowed by A¹) and an objective world (presaged by A²). As such, Schelling identifies the third Potency alone as the true essence of Spirit (*Geist*).³³

In their original, premundane state, the Potencies possess ideal being but are bereft of actual existence. This lack is overcome (the recognition of a lack and its overcoming is the Schellingian dialectic) by a wilful movement within the first Potency. Exercising its nature as unlimited possibility, A¹ ceases subordinating itself; opposing the harmoniously rational order, it expropriates for itself the preeminent position in the world system that is properly that of the third Potency. The wilful actualisation of the first Potency transforms it into a positive force for disorder. Since actualised A¹ behaves in a manner opposite to its former indeterminate form, Schelling speaks of it as 'inverted' and symbolizes it with the new designation 'B'. The inversion of A¹ into B is a necessary evil (Schelling's version of the *felix culpa*) because it is only by this dialectical moment that the Potencies move from ideal to actual existence. The inversion of the first Potency transforms the other two Potencies, placing all three in a state of tension. A², now forced to assume a subordinate position, acquires both a purpose—to drive B back to its proper subordinate position as A¹—and a 'selfhood'—the will to achieve this goal. And since the realisation of A³ as the synthesis of A¹ and A² presupposes a prior attainment of the proper relationship between the other two Potencies, A³ cannot emerge in its full actuality until the other two Potencies have successfully completed their development. In its state of tension A³ no longer appears as the eternal harmony of the subjective and the objective (although on the ideal level it remains that); instead, it assumes the form of a future condition, the final cause toward which the entire organism of the universe and course of history are evolving.³⁴

Because the development of the actualized Potencies—the life of God—is the historical process itself (and Nature), the Potencies point beyond themselves toward a domain of knowledge capable of empirical verification. That is, the dynamic structure of God's eternal nature is discernible in history, above all the history of religions (since religions explicitly address themselves to Spirit). Beginning with the treatise, *On the Deities of Samothrace*, read to the Bavarian Academy of Sciences on 12 October 1815, and continuing through the 'historico-critical' studies of mythology and religion comprising the *Philosophy of Mythology* (1827) and *Philosophy of Revelation* (1829), (both published posthumously in 1854), Schelling attempted a comprehensive analysis of the history of religions as empirical verification of the ontological categories deduced in his negative philosophy. These studies, Schelling's 'positive philosophy', constitute a theogony, or narrative of the life of God revealed in and through the world process.³⁵

Schelling's positive philosophy represents a reversal of his opinion of the philosophical value of the history of religions. When Joseph von Görres and Friedrich Creutzer set themselves the task of filling out Schelling's Jena period transcendental metaphysics, in which nature and history are the manifestation of the Absolute in matter and time, with the positive content of the history of religions, Schelling considered such studies a waste of time.³⁶ Once, however, he became convinced of the philosophical content of the positive religions, he poured over Görres' *Mythengeschichte der asiatischen Welt* (1810) and especially Creutzer's *Symbolik and Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (1810–1812). *Symbolik and Mythologie* is in fact Schelling's primary source for the religions of the ancient world and the most cited reference in the entire positive philosophy.³⁷

Philosophy of Mythology arranges the mythologies and religions of the ancient world into a history of religions according to the degree to which each manifests the progressive actualization of the Potencies. 'Incomplete mythological systems', such as early Persian Zabism (star-worship, usually 'Sabeism') as well as Buddhism,³⁸ are undeveloped systems manifesting only the inverted first Potency. The religions of ancient Syria and Mesopotamia, displaying the stirring into activity of the second Potency, represent an important step forward in the theogonic process but remain incomplete. Most ancient mythologies and religions, in Schelling's interpretation, manifest the conflict between the inverted first Potency and the second Potency. Only the mythologies of Egypt, India and Greece, in which the third Potency emerges into full consciousness, comprise 'complete mythological systems'.³⁹ That Schelling conceives of ontology as the core of mythological thought and, conversely, mythology, as the concrete embodiment of ontology, displays the interdependence of his negative and positive philosophies—of, that is, his ontology and philosophy of history.

The entire mythological process, according to Schelling, is fulfilled and completed in the Eleusinian Mysteries. The Mysteries, recapitulating and bringing into consciousness the evolution of mythology, reveal the three Potencies, in the forms of their corresponding divinities (Zagreus, Bacchus and Iakchos), as simply different manifestations of one and the same God (Dionysus). The attainment in the Mysteries of a three-in-one Supreme God brought the Greeks to the threshold of an explicit formulation of absolute monotheism and prepared the classical world for the reception of the Christian revelation. By understanding the ancient myths as figurative images of the One God rather than as literal truths, mythological consciousness 'overcame itself' and the age of mythology at last yielded to the age of revelation.⁴⁰ *Philosophy of Revelation* presents Christianity as the fulfilment of the development of the second Potency. Osiris, Shiva and Dionysus were manifestations of the second Potency in complete mythological systems. Inasmuch as the history of mythology is true theogony, the redemptive work of Christ had already begun under the masks of these pagan saviour gods. The incarnation of the second Potency in Christ as the Son, however, is the final, explicit stage of its life because it marks the personal appearance of God in history. The Incarnation as *kenosis* (in Schelling's interpretation, the complete objectification of God) marks the historical moment when the objectification of God in the second Potency reaches its outermost extension and begins its return.⁴¹

Revelation is necessary because myth, while it intuits divine unity and ultimate spiritual harmony, is incapable of fully expressing human freedom. Schelling identifies Judaism as the transitional phase from mythology to revelation. The disclosure of the person of the Father is the first fulfilment of mythological anticipation; yet while Judaism signals the end of myth, it is incomplete revelation because the Son must still appear as man to actualize the truth. According to Schelling, only with Christianity, or the personal appearance of God in history as the Son, is revelation fully achieved. Christian Revelation makes actual what was only intuited and represented in myth and incompletely actualized in Judaism.⁴² Further, revelation, for Schelling, brings to humanity not only a clearer apprehension of the theogonic process but a new, higher relationship to God. The divine-human relationship made possible by the agency of the second Potency, the Son incarnate as Christ, permits human consciousness to enter into a free and personal relationship with the living God, the lord of being.⁴³

Schelling's history of religions recognizes the Christian revelation as the supernatural religion that completes mythology, the natural religion. Since paganism and Christianity are stages in a single theogonic process, Christianity may be conceived of as the future

of paganism; and even if pre-Christian religions contain errors, the process as whole is truth. Mythologies arose because the human spirit is, in Schelling's term, 'God-positing' (*Gott-setzend*); that is, the successive development of religion in the ancient world is informed and directed by the divine presence within human consciousness. The theogonic process, however, is not objectively present or clearly apprehended in its early stages; only in revelation does it become clear and conscious.⁴⁴ Schelling's history of religions, reflecting his analysis of the divine life, is both a theogony (divine self-revelation and self-actualization) and a soteriology (restoration of humanity and Creation to unity with God).

In his Munich lectures on the positive philosophy (1827–1841), Schelling sketched a third epochal transformation in the theogonic process: from revelation to the philosophical religion of Spirit. While Spirit, as the source of being, underlies every stage of the theogonic process and is active from the beginning, its actualization must await the full objectification of the second Potency in its incarnation in Christ. Just as revelation presumed mythology, so philosophical religion presumes the Christian revelation because it is Christ who opens the possibility of the final era of full freedom.⁴⁵ The philosophical religion of Spirit will resolve the ideal and the real in the human person, just as in the premundane realm A^3 resolves A^1 and A^2 . The age of the Spirit, as the fulfilment of the actualisation of God's life in history, will bring (1) history to a close; (2) the direct, personal experience of God; and (3) the definitive restoration of fallen consciousness in the attainment of a universal *Wissenschaft* that grasps the true nature of all things and beings.⁴⁶ Schelling confessed that the entire aim of his positive philosophy was nothing less than the restoration of humanity's fallen consciousness.⁴⁷

In the negative philosophy, Schelling articulates and schematises the structure of the ontological Absolute through a *a priori* metaphysical reflection; in the positive philosophy, he exemplifies and thereby reaffirms the reality of this structure *a posteriori* by means of the empirical evidence marshalled in his history of religions.⁴⁸ Since the structure and meaning of history are intelligible only in light of God's pre-temporal nature, Schelling's treatment of the phenomena of religion is, in Beach's formulation, more exemplification than empirical confirmation.⁴⁹ As in Ballanche's philosophy of history, an *a priori* metaphysic controls interpretation of empirical data; hence we may similarly speak of Schelling's positive philosophy, including his history of religions, as a 'metaphysical empiricism'.⁵⁰

For both Ballanche and Schelling, history is the unfolding in time of the essence of humanity; for both, the history of religions provides empirical corroboration for the metaphysical order underlying history. While it is possible that Schelling influenced Ballanche in a minor way through intermediaries, these correspondences derive fundamentally from the common grounding of their philosophies of history on eighteenth-century constructions of evolution as essence-and-development. Moreover, whereas Schelling derived his principle of historical intelligibility from a logical analysis of the nature of God, Ballanche derived his from an analysis of the French Revolution. Similarly, although both systems emphasize suffering, the centrality of suffering to Ballanche's social palingenesis arises not from a duality at the heart of the divine nature but from his attempt to comprehend the horrors of history within the providential order. These differences reflect a characteristic distinction between German and French Romanticism: German Romantics, descended from Lutherans and Pietists, wrote histories of the inner life; French Romantics, even while repudiating eighteenth-century rationalism, retained the Enlightenment conviction that political events and social institutions are constituent elements of human development.

Evolutionism and the Study of Religion

Evolutionary thought before Darwin was not only, or even predominantly, a matter of the transformation of species. As the foregoing discussion of essence-and-development models demonstrates, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century evolutionisms historicized, and thereby reconceptualised, Christian providentialism, soteriology and theodicy. Historians of the study of religions have insufficiently appreciated this fact, both historiographically and methodologically.

Eric Sharpe's widely read *Comparative Religion: A History* begins with the fusion in the decade 1859–1869 of a philosophy of history derived from Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer with Darwinian evolution. Arguing that this evolutionary approach first organized the materials of the study of religion into the science of comparative religion,⁵¹ Sharpe then traces, under the motto 'Darwinism makes it possible', the unilinear evolutionary theories of religion of the British anthropologists of religion John Lubbock, E. B. Tylor, and R. R. Marett. The entry on 'Evolutionism' in Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, by James Waller and Mary Edwardsen, similarly surveys the developmental schemata of the British anthropologists of religion. Sam Preus, who criticizes Sharpe for exaggerating the importance of biology and Darwin to the history of the study of religion,⁵² devotes a chapter each to Comte and Tylor in his study of naturalistic approaches to the study of religion. He identifies Comte's schema of the three ages of humanity as 'the first temporal paradigm through which modern sociological and anthropological study of religion really came into its own as a new discipline'.⁵³ Sharpe and Preus disagree over the value of nineteenth-century unilinear evolutionary theories of religion. Sharpe dismisses them as doctrinaire positivism; Preus recognizes their inadequacies but acknowledges them as landmarks in the non-theological, naturalistic approach to the study of religion. Despite their very different ideas about the study of religion, Sharpe and Preus agree that the evolutionary framework that matters to the history of the study of religion is the Comtean-Darwinian variety. Walter Capps, in the chapter on evolution in his recent overview, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, augments the Comtean-Darwinian framework with a discussion of German Idealist developmentalist philosophies. Even so, Capps presents evolutionary thought about religion, from Hegel to Marett and beyond, as a single, if complex, approach to the study of religion.⁵⁴

The anthropological lineage and the philosophical Idealist lineage provide the intellectual contexts of mid- and late-nineteenth-century giants of our discipline such as Tylor and Max Müller. They are therefore central to what Capps calls our 'second order tradition', and it is entirely appropriate that they receive attention from historians of the study of religion. Nevertheless, neither of these lineages makes intelligible the histories of religion actually produced in the early nineteenth century by Ballanche and Schelling (and, for that matter, by Indo-Christians like Ferdinand Eckstein, Catholic Traditionalists like Louis de Bonald and the early Félicité de Lamennais, and Illuminists like Antoine Fabre d'Olivet, to speak only of French thinkers). A full understanding of the history of the study of religions between the Enlightenment and the mid nineteenth century requires careful investigation of the approaches to religion actually practised in the Romantic period.⁵⁵ The present article contributes to such investigation.

I am not, I hasten to add, arguing that Preus ought to have included the Romantics in his history of the naturalistic approach to the study of religions. My point is rather that a history of the study of religions in the nineteenth century (as opposed to a genealogy of our intellectual ancestors) must include the Romantics. Conversely, the recovery of early nineteenth-century approaches to the history of the study of religions ought not be

confused with a celebration of Romantic methods and goals. It is this that vitiates the value of the work of Jan de Vries, one of the few historians of the study of religions to take cognizance of the Romantics. Contrasting the visionary, intuitive approach to religion of the Romantics, of Friedrich Creutzer in particular, with the objective approach of later nineteenth-century positivists and evolutionists, Vries decries the dominion of *ratio* over emotion and imagination in the latter's work and the resultant spiritual impoverishment they bequeathed to our discipline. Vries advocates a study of religion in the Romantic mode, only purged of its factual errors.⁵⁶ Vries, let us note, nowhere mentions Romantic evolutionism; he takes it for granted that evolutionary approaches to the study of religion belong to positivist thought.

This historiographical discussion has led us to the methodological point. Preus distinguishes the naturalistic approach to the study of religions that treats religion as an unprivileged part of culture from approaches grounded on theological or metaphysical assumptions or confessional commitments.⁵⁷ This article suggests that scholars who take Preus's distinction seriously must extend it to demarcate the naturalistic approach to the study of religions from natural theologies. Natural theologies obtain knowledge of true religion (usually the basic doctrines of Christianity or, rarely, some other religion or, as is increasingly common today, some core sacrality or mode of consciousness that lies beneath and is the source of all positive religions) independently of revelation from investigation of the natural world (cultural as well as physical). We have seen how Romantic histories of religions used the extra-revelatory language of essence-and-development evolutionisms to reconceptualize the Christian doctrines of providentialism, soteriology, and theodicy. If such systems are not confessional theologies (indeed, both Ballanche and Schelling were regarded as heterodox by their fellow Catholics and Lutherans, respectively), they are not the naturalistic study of religion either. The criterion of the naturalistic study of religions is the use not of non theological language but of naturalistic explanation. Ballanche's and Schelling's approaches to the study of religions, while characteristically Romantic, are anything but exceptional in their status as natural theologies. To a large extent, the dominant approaches to the study of religions in the twentieth century, as the surveys of both Sharpe and Capps make clear, belong, in one mode or another, to the category of natural theology. The failure to distinguish between (or the wilful conflation of) naturalistic explanation and natural theology accounts for the theological or metaphysical content of so much of the contemporary study of religion.⁵⁸

Notes

- 1 A version of this paper was read to the History of the Study of Religion Group at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Philadelphia, PA. Research for this article was undertaken during the tenure of a postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 2 Jan Swammerdam, *Miraculum naturae* (1672), quoted in Bentley Glass, 'The Germination of the Idea of Biological Species', in Bentley Glass, Oswei Temkin, and William L. Strauss (eds), *Forerunners of Darwin, 1745–1859*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1959, p. 43.
- 3 This definition is taken from Charles Bonnet, *Palingénésie philosophique in Oeuvres d'histoire naturelle et de philosophie*, 8 vols., Neuchâtel 1770–1783, p. 7:267.
- 4 Bonnet, *Considérations sur les corps organisés* (1762) in *Oeuvres*, p. 3:75.
- 5 Bonnet, *Contemplation de la Nature*, quoted in Bentley Glass, 'Maupertuis, Pioneer of Genetics and Evolution' *Forerunners of Darwin*, p. 78.
- 6 Glass, 'The Germination of the Idea of Biological Species', p. 43.
- 7 I have discussed Bonnet's theory of palingenesis in more detail in 'Palingénésie philosophique to Palingénésie sociale: From a Scientific Ideology to a Historical Ideology', in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55 (1994), pp. 421–439.

- 8 Bonnet, *Palingénésie philosophique in Oeuvres*, p. 7:186.
- 9 Bonnet's metaphysical interests are particularly prominent in *Palingénésie philosophique* (1769–1770), written after blindness prevented further experimental work.
- 10 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, New York, Harper 1960 (1936), p. 243.
- 11 Pierre Deghaye, 'La Philosophie sacrée d'Oetinger' in *Kabbalistes chrétiens*, Paris, Albin Michel (*Cahiers de l'Hermétisme*) 1979, p. 237.
- 12 Ernst Benz, *Evolution and Christian Hope: Man's Concept of the Future from the Early Fathers to Teilhard de Chardin*, trans. Heinz G. Frank, New York, Doubleday 1966, pp. 168–9; F. Ernst Stoeffler, *German Pietism During the Eighteenth Century*, Leiden, Brill 1973, p. 113.
- 13 Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic*, Albany, SUNY Press 1991, pp. 105, 110.
- 14 Ernst Benz, *Les Sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande*, Paris, Vrin 1987 (1968), p. 60.
- 15 Ernst Benz, *The Theology of Electricity*, trans. Wolfgang Taraba, Allison Park, PA, Pickwick Publications 1989 (original German edition 1970), p. 47. Deghaye notes that Oetinger's *philosophia sacra* is also a *philosophia ignea*. Deghaye, 'La Philosophie sacrée d'Oetinger', p. 240. On the electrical theology of Oetinger and his circle, see also Antoine Faivre, *Philosophie de la Nature: Physique sacrée et théosophie XVIIIe-XIXe siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel 1996, pp. 181–207.
- 16 Benz, *Theology of Electricity*, p. 53.
- 17 Ernst Benz, 'Die Naturtheologie Friedrich Christoph Oetingers', in Antoine Faivre and Rolf Christian Zimmermann, *Epochen der Naturmystik: Hermetische Tradition im wissenschaftlichen Fortschritt*, Berlin, E. Schmidt 1979, p. 260.
- 18 Benz, *Theology of Electricity*, pp. 62, 64.
- 19 Benz, *Evolution and Christian Hope*, p. 168; Faivre, *Philosophie de la Nature*, p. 201.
- 20 Pierre-Simon Ballanche, *Essais de Palingénésie sociale: Prolegomènes* (1827) in *Oeuvres complètes*, 6 vols., Paris 1833, reprinted Genève, Slatkine 1967, p. 4:9.
- 21 Ballanche, *Prolegomènes in Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 4:386–7.
- 22 Ballanche, *Prolegomènes in Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 4:55, 123.
- 23 For a full discussion of Ballanche's thought, see Arthur McCalla, *A Romantic Historiosophy: The Philosophy of History of Pierre-Simon Ballanche*, Leiden, Brill 1998.
- 24 Ballanche, *Institutions sociales* (1818) in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 2:45.
- 25 Ballanche, *Prolegomènes in Oeuvres complètes*, p. 4:267.
- 26 Ballanche, *Prolegomènes in Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 4:179–80.
- 27 Ballanche, *Essais de Palingénésie sociale: Orphée* (1829) in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 5:5.
- 28 Ballanche, *Orphée*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 5:153–4.
- 29 Ballanche, *Prolegomènes in Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 4:63–5.
- 30 Ballanche, *Prolegomènes in Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 4:114, 155.
- 31 Edward Allen Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology*, Albany, SUNY Press 1994, p. 112.
- 32 Robert F. Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling: The Influence of Boehme on the Works of 1809–1815*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press 1977, pp. 270–1.
- 33 Beach, *The Potencies of God(s)*, pp. 108, 117–27.
- 34 Beach, *The Potencies of God(s)*, pp. 130–6.
- 35 Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling*, pp. 259–260.
- 36 Thomas F. O'Meara, *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism: Schelling and the Theologians*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press 1982, pp. 52–7.
- 37 Beach, *The Potencies of God(s)*, p. 36.
- 38 In the early decades of the nineteenth century Buddhism was widely considered to be an early form of Hinduism.
- 39 Beach, p. 224.
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp. 239–40, 242–83
- 41 O'Meara, *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism*, pp. 118–19.
- 42 Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680–1860*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1972, p. 319.
- 43 Victor Nuovo in Paul Tillich, *The Construction of the History of Religion in Schelling's Positive Philosophy*, trans. Nuovo, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press 1974, p. 22.
- 44 O'Meara, p. 117; Beach, p. 246.
- 45 Nuovo in Tillich, *The Construction of the History of Religions*, p. 32.

46 O'Meara, pp. 119–20.

47 Quoted in Frederick de Wolfe Bolman's introduction to F. W. J. von Schelling, *Ages of the World*, trans. Bolman, New York, Columbia UP 1942, p. 61.

48 Beach, p. 161.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 149–51.

50 I have borrowed the phrase 'metaphysical empiricism' from Schelling himself, who uses it in a more technical sense to describe the method of his positive philosophy. See Beach, pp. 148–62.

51 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, La Salle, Open Court 2nd ed. 1986, p. 27.

52 J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1987, p. 102.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

54 Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Minneapolis, Fortress 1995, pp. 53–104.

55 On the distinction between the science of the past and the past of the science of today see Georges Canguilhem, 'Introduction: The Role of Epistemology in Contemporary History of Science', in *Ideology and Rationality in the History of the Life Sciences*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge, MIT Press 1988, pp. 1–23.

56 Jan de Vries, *The Study of Religion. A Historical Approach*, trans. Kees W. Bolle, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World 1967, pp. ix, 61, 220.

57 Preus, pp. ix-x; see also p. xxi.

58 See *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

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