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The Official Journal of the

*North American  
Schelling Society*

***Political Eschatology,***

by Sean J. McGrath

(Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2023)

176 pp., \$27.00 (Paperback), ISBN 9781666738094

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Reviewed by Matthew Nini

In *Political Eschatology*, Sean McGrath embarks upon a demanding intellectual journey and, as its title suggests, breaks through the narrow confines of academic disciplines in order to think freely. The title itself may pose a challenge to the uninitiated reader: what is “political eschatology”? The *eschaton* refers to the end of all things and, in the Christian tradition in which it is most prevalent, to the end times—during which the final act of God’s revelation will play out. But what does it mean to think eschatology in conjunction with politics? It is here that McGrath follows in the footsteps of some of the great political thinkers of the twentieth century: Eric Voegelin, Ernst Bloch, Jacob Taubes, and Günter Anders all used the theological concept of the eschaton to think the political moment in which they lived. McGrath elaborates his own compelling theological ideas about the eschaton and then proceeds to think through the crises of the twenty-first century using the eschatology he has developed. The preface and first long chapter, entitled “Endtime,” sets the stage by exploring eschatology and its intellectual history. Thereafter, essays on consumerist culture, the environmental crisis, the pandemic, and hospitality follow. While a part of the author’s strategy is to denounce the injustices of today and link them to a historical and philosophical lack of imagination, the

tone is ultimately prophetic. McGrath is leading us through a difficult exercise in thinking the future without determining it in advance, something that requires a major paradigm shift. This change in attitude, this conversion or *metanoia*, is what the book's multifaceted strategy aims to effect.

The meditative preface opens with the thought onto which the reader must hold fast the better to understand the peregrinations to come: “the present world is a thing that could and should be other than it is.”<sup>1</sup> To think eschatologically, McGrath says, in linear time and with the end in mind, implies beginning one's thinking with a negation (here he is following the precedent set by some of his favorite sources: the Lurianic Kabbalah, Oetinger, and above all, Schelling). This negative beginning implies rejecting the world as it is. This thought of “a road not taken at the inception of early-modern history”<sup>2</sup> is one that is acknowledged in other disciplines: historians of architecture, for example, are steadily coming to the realization that the modern is not the product of historical necessity—the buildings we live and work in, often square, grey, and unwelcoming, need not have looked that way; the aesthetic of modernity could have been different.<sup>3</sup> But for philosophers, this seems to be a more difficult thought to entertain. Later, McGrath will posit that this is because of the pervasive influence of Hegel, and those who would see his philosophy as building up toward “the end of history.” In different terms, McGrath will end up repeating an accusation made against Hegel by one of his most astute exegetes, Ernst Bloch, who argues that there is no room for the new, for a “*novum*” or completely unprecedented and unpredicted event in Hegel, because the latter has been enthralled by the idea of anamnesis.<sup>4</sup> This “spell of *anamnesis*” is ultimately caused by an Aristotelian metaphysical principle that McGrath rejects: confusing potency with possibility—i.e., placing possibility as the highest and the first and watching the world tick along like a cosmic watch according to the set principles established from the beginning. In McGrath's Schellingian framework, what is historically last is the highest, not what came at the beginning: the world as a totality can only be judged once one has reached the end of all things—the *eschaton*—and before then, anything is possible.

This theoretical framework is central to the manner in which McGrath seeks to interpret the crises of the present age. What it ultimately yields is an account of the secularization of western culture, a process serving as the ether in which the crisis is submerged, and which can be best understood eschatologically. Drawing on a plethora of canonical sources (Max Weber, Karl

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<sup>1</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, viii.

<sup>2</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, vii in 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Frampton, *The Other Modern Movement: Architecture 1920–1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Subject—Objekt, Erläuterungen zu Hegel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962), 481.

Löwith, Marcel Gauchet), McGrath argues that it is Christian theology that yields the conception of time that makes modernity possible, which possibility in turn allows for the rise of secularism. While the ancient world mostly conceived of time as cyclical and the role of human agency therein negligible, Christianity, following the example of Judaism, sees time in linear fashion. Not only the world we live in but time itself has a past, a present, and a future, and we are inevitably caught up in the middle of it, living in the present. In theological terms, God created the world out of nothing; it then fell prey to sin and evil; the son was meant to redeem it; and now we live in an age of redemption, the age of the spirit, at some point between the middle and the end. But it is the anticipation of the end that is decisive. To be a Christian is to wait for the second coming of Christ, something that the first disciples thought would happen within their lifetime. But when the last eyewitness of Christ's ministry died, the community of believers was forced to reinterpret the *eschaton*. In the synoptic gospels, written from when apostolic witnesses were still alive, Jesus says: "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things [i.e., the signs of the eschaton] have happened."<sup>5</sup> By the time the Gospel of John is written, the first generation has passed away, and the Christ has not returned. A new strategy is needed. Writes McGrath: "Eschatology in John is no longer a teaching about what will happen, it is primarily a teaching about how to live now."<sup>6</sup>

This interpretive shift is the birth of modern eschatology. In its wake, modern political thought, beholden to the paradigm of linearity and finitude, must find a way to think the eschaton. Whether tragically or comically, in Armageddon or Utopia, the way things are will come to an end, and this end is ultimately the possibility-condition for thinking how society could be different than it is. Political revolutions are therefore "disavowed eschatology"<sup>7</sup> or, to use Eric Voegelin's famous phrase, an immanentizing of the eschaton.<sup>8</sup>

Following Max Weber and Marcel Gauchet, McGrath sees the development of liberalism as being a product of the political engagement with eschatology. "From biblical voluntarism, through medieval nominalism, to Lutheran acosmism, it is a short step to Protestant secularism, liberalism, and secular humanism."<sup>9</sup> McGrath leans heavily on Weber's account of the Protestant work ethic as a driving force in the liberal-capitalist worldview, ultimately leading to consumerist culture, the underlying disease that gives rise to modernity's crises like so many symptoms: our appetite for endless

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<sup>5</sup> Matt 24:34–35; Mark 13:30–31; Luke 21:32–33.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, 9. See also John 16:33.

<sup>7</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 120.

<sup>9</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, 16.



consumption is what objectifies and commodifies everything we meet, whether nature or neighbor. Crucially, McGrath reminds us, none of this ever stopped being about religion; the theological register is more relevant now than ever, since our greatest ill— consumerism—is ultimately a perverted expression of a distinctly Christian religious sensibility. “Religion plainly did not disappear in the late-twentieth-century developed world,” he writes. “Rather, it changed form. Consumers have not necessarily ceased believing in God; many of them have become curators of their own religious experiences.”<sup>10</sup>

In making his critique of consumerism, McGrath is at his best. Drawing on sources as varied as Heidegger, Žižek, and Wilfred Sellars (one feels that a protracted engagement with Adorno, who has similar complaints, would have been productive, but would have required much additional space in order to accomplish), McGrath makes a strong argument about the emptiness of consumerism as successor to Christian community:

Consumerism is grounded in the belief in the individual’s endless freedom to upgrade his identity through the purchase of mass-produced products and thereby achieve “recognition” and perhaps, if the ad makers are to be trusted, material beatitude. The desire of the consumer is endless, and therefore infinitely lucrative because it is purely negative: it consists in an unlimited capacity to choose on an ontologically limited plane: we are “free” to choose, not our forms of political organization or the economic structures of our societies, but from an endless variety of material goods. The ethos of the age, the ethos of consumption, is not optional. [...] The absence of real decision is crucial to the logic of consumerism, which demands of the consumer an infinite effort to find satisfaction in that which can never satisfy. [...] The hysteria of consumption is a situation of maximal unhappiness, for we are like the gerbil on the wheel that can never get anywhere no matter how fast it runs, and at the same time, and by virtue of that unhappiness, in a situation of maximal profit to finance capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

This state of affairs is one in which capitalism’s need for constant growth collides with the infinite desires of the human heart. Capitalism perpetuates constant growth through commodification: things that were once off-limits to the logic of the market (healthcare, romantic relationships, clean water, human dignity) acquire a price tag so that the capitalist does not run out of things to

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<sup>10</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, 95.

sell. The human being itself winds up broken down into its constitutive parts, marketed appropriately and sold like derivatives on the stock market. Anyone who has ever used a dating app should know that they have gone looking for love using the same consumerist mechanisms used to sell livestock insurance.<sup>12</sup> The mystery of the encounter with the Other, the mystery of personhood—Christianity’s great contribution to anthropology, McGrath would want to say—has suffered the fate of the Gospel’s seamless garment: at best, torn up and sold piecemeal; at worst, raffled off wholesale. Even the earth itself, described by Plato in the *Timaeus* as a living thing, a “*zōon*” with a soul, the “World-Soul,” can be cut apart, liquified, sold, and combusted into noxious remains.

But McGrath is not criticizing capitalism or its counterpart liberalism per se. He would seem to think (and this reviewer is inclined to agree) that these can be salvaged. The problem is that a number of wrong turns were taken along the historical trajectory that led from medieval-feudal Christendom to liberal-secular modernity. Each moment in the development McGrath evokes has something about it that can be commended. But each also contains a moment of tragedy. Two of these tragic moments, crucial for the consumerist turn, are the separation of the individual from the communal; and the reduction of all knowledge to *Technik*: I am alone with my desires, and the only logic according to which I can consider them is that of the buying and selling of external fabrications, the idols that enchant us but leave us longing for more.

But the most original aspect of the book is not this diagnosis of the problems of the modern mindset, but the invitation to think this progression differently. Rather than seeing the melancholy of consumerism as the inevitable end of history, McGrath emphasizes that the ambivalent nature of every turn in history means it could have been otherwise: liberalism realizes Christianity’s drive to recognize the dignity of the individual, but that same individualization opens the floodgates to self-commodification in consumer capitalism. Realizing that the present is not as it should be, and could have been otherwise, is the first step in thinking a tenable future. To say, for example, with Max Weber that Christianity secularizes itself does not mean that the Gospel of Christ tragically and ridiculously ends in the Gospel of Consumption. What if the self-secularization of Christianity were, as visionary thinkers such as Joachim de Fiore thought, something else? Rather than its self-destruction, one could see the “end” of Christianity as a total interpenetration of Christ’s message with its environment, an actualization of Christian charity that announces precisely what the Christ preached—neither a Church nor a Corporation, but the *Basilea tou Theou*, the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>12</sup> Barnaby Lewer, “To Fall in Love, Click Here,” in *Jacobin*, February 2016.  
<https://jacobin.com/2016/02/internet-dating-commodification-love-valentine>

This Kingdom is not a definite place with a definite set of norms, but an open future into which one has a kind of prophetic insight. To paraphrase Schelling, who provides the deepest philosophical inspiration for this book, the past can be known, but the future can only be intuited, and what is intuited cannot be recounted as something known but rather prophesied.<sup>13</sup>

In this vein, the book is ultimately a long fight between two rival conceptions of time: Hegel's end of history, which leads inevitably to a final worldview, the tyranny of materialist consumerism; and Schelling's eschatology, an open future that gives us a space to imagine a different world. As I read, however, I imagined a different opposition—not Hegel vis-a-vis Schelling, but anachronistically, between Nietzsche and McGrath. The former appears briefly in the first chapter, accusing Jesus of being a hater of life and demanding that we have the courage to think the thought of recurring time.<sup>14</sup> Here it is hinted that Nietzsche has no stomach for eschatology. Elsewhere, this becomes clearer. For what McGrath calls the beginning of eschatological thinking—the recognition that the world is not as it should be—Nietzsche calls nihilism.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche would have us embrace the world as it is, as it has always been, as it shall always be. One thinker sits up in the mountains of Sils Maria. He cannot see the landscape through the fog. It does not matter—beyond it, there is only more of the same. Another sits in a cabin on the coast of Newfoundland. He, too, cannot see through the fog. But he hears the sound of the ocean, and he imagines distant shores.

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<sup>13</sup> F. W.J. Schelling, *Die Weltalter. Fragmente. In den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: Biederstein, 1946), 3.

<sup>14</sup> McGrath, *Political Eschatology*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> “Nihilist ist der Mann, der beurteilt, dass die Welt, wie sie ist, nicht sein sollte und dass die Welt, wie sie sein sollte, nicht existiert. Daher hat Existenz (handeln, leiden, wollen, fühlen) keine Bedeutung; daher ist das Pathos des ‘Vergeblichen’ das nihilistische Pathos – und eine Inkonsequenz des Nihilisten.” (“Nihilist is the one who judges that the world as it is should not be, and that the world as it should be does not exist. Therefore existence (action, suffering, willing, and feeling) has no meaning; thus the pathos of ‘futility’ is also the pathos of nihilism — and a contradiction on the part of the nihilist.”)

*Nietzsches Werke*. Vol 9: *Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe, aus dem Nachlaß 1884–1888*, 2 (Leipzig: C.G. Naumann, 1906), 60, translation mine.

