

# Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis's "Christianity or Europe"

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## INTRODUCTION

GERMAN ROMANTICISM IS COMMONLY ASSOCIATED with nationalism and seen as antithetical to cosmopolitanism. This is due not only to the nineteenth-century romantics' embrace of nationalism and their appropriation by later German nationalists, but also to the romantics' outspoken critique of the cosmopolitan Enlightenment.

The early German romantics criticize the Enlightenment for failing to appreciate the most essential components of truly human life: love, emotional bonds, beauty, shared faith, and mutual trust. They claim that the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, abstract principles, and rights overlooks these crucial aspects of human existence.

Their approach makes for a very radical *Zeitkritik*, but this does not mean that the early German romantics are reactionaries.<sup>1</sup> In their own way, they endorse many of the ideals of the Enlightenment, especially the ideals of individuality, freedom, anti-authoritarianism, and equality. But they accuse the Enlightenment of having degraded these very ideals to atomistic individualism, rootlessness, self-interestedness, and abstract legalism, and they aim to correct this by showing the way to an alternative.

Although it has not been sufficiently appreciated so far, one finds the same attitude of critical transformation of Enlightenment thought with regard to the ideal of cosmopolitanism. I argue in this essay that the early German romantic author Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) developed

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<sup>1</sup>This is brought out well by Frederick Beiser, in his introduction to *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics [Early Political Writings]*, ed. and trans. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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a version of the cosmopolitan ideal that is distinctively romantic. Moreover, this ideal is of much greater significance for understanding his philosophical work than is commonly recognized.

Novalis did not reject cosmopolitanism as such but only its Enlightenment versions. He was critical of the approaches of Kant and Fichte, which he regarded as wrongly based on an abstract and legalistic notion of human rights (*AB*, III, 416: #762).<sup>2</sup> He viewed Kant's assumption that self-interest and social antagonism will help bring perpetual peace closer as absurd and harmful. Egoism would perpetually threaten any so-called peace (*GL*, II, 494–95: #36/45).

In reaction to such views, Novalis and his philosophical friend, Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), developed cosmopolitan ideals of their own. In his 1796 review of Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Friedrich Schlegel evoked a vision of humanity united in a spirit of fraternity without the need for coercive laws. Schlegel's presentation of his ideal of a worldwide non-coercive republic of republics remained sketchy, however. It was Novalis who provided a more fully elaborated cosmopolitan vision. His cosmopolitanism is found in his notes, but most explicitly in an essay which he read to the romantic circle in Jena (1799), and which was published posthumously under the title—not chosen by Novalis—"Christianity or Europe: A Fragment."

In this essay, Novalis evokes an ideal centered on emotion, spirituality, and concrete connectedness of human beings to each other to replace the Enlightenment focus on rational knowledge, material goods, and moral and legal principles. He contrasts his romantic conception of humanity united by "faith and love" with what he sees as the specifically modern, antagonistic focus on "having and knowing." He uses the image of the European medieval period to evoke the idea of a golden era and to elicit a longing for a cosmopolitan, global, spiritual community.

Novalis presented his "speech" to the Jena romantic circle on November 13 or 14, 1799.<sup>3</sup> The group included Friedrich and Wilhelm August Schlegel, Dorothea Veit, Caroline Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Johann Wilhelm Ritter, and others. Novalis's friends knew that he had been studying medieval history since the spring of 1799, and that he had just read, with great admiration and enthusiasm, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher's *Speeches on*

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<sup>2</sup>References are to *Novalis Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, 6 vols., ed. Richard Samuel, Hans-Joachim Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–2008). I shall follow the following abbreviation scheme:

*AB*: *Allgemeines Brouillon*

*Bl*: *Blüthenstaub*

*CE*: *Die Christenheit oder Europa*

*FS*: *Fichte-Studien*

*GL*: *Glauben und Liebe*

*HS*: *Hemsterhuis Studien*

*LLF*: *Logologische Fragmente*

*TF*: *Teplitzer Fragmente*

*VB*: *Vermischte Bemerkungen*

Translations are mine, but I have benefited from Beiser's translations. Page references contain title, volume, page, and fragment number. If the passage referred to is also included in *Early Political Writings*, the page number in the English translation follows a '/'.

<sup>3</sup>Novalis referred to the text as a "speech" (*Rede*), which is most likely an allusion to Schleiermacher's speeches (*Reden*) on religion. See the letter from Novalis to Friedrich Schlegel dated January 31, 1800 (IV: 317–18).

*Religion to its Cultured Despisers*, which had appeared earlier in the same year. Nevertheless, his speech produced consternation and controversy.

Schelling immediately presented a hedonist materialist, "Epicurean" parody.<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schlegel reported to Schleiermacher (who did not attend the meeting in Jena) that it was curious that Novalis combined admiration for his *Speeches* with enthusiasm for Roman Catholicism.<sup>5</sup> Novalis's friends disagreed on what to do with his text, which had originally been considered for publication in the journal *Athenaeum*. Dorothea Veit opposed publication from the beginning. Friedrich Schlegel thought it would be a nice example of philosophical irony to publish Novalis's text together with Schelling's parody, and Novalis liked this idea. The group discussed several other options but could not reach agreement. Asked for advice, Goethe counseled against publication of either text. Novalis then requested that the manuscript be returned to him.<sup>6</sup> When Schlegel and Tieck edited Novalis's works after his death, they included only fragments of the speech in the first editions. The complete text was first included as a result of a unilateral action by the publisher, Georg Reimer, who inserted it in the fourth edition of 1826.<sup>7</sup> Tieck took it out again when he edited the fifth edition. Looking back, he wrote: "we found the historical view too weak and insufficient, the conclusions too arbitrary, and the whole treatise weak, so that the weaknesses could be discovered very easily by any knowledgeable person."<sup>8</sup>

"Christianity or Europe" has been the subject of much dispute ever since, and few texts have been interpreted in such entirely incompatible ways as this one. The text seems to exalt medieval European Christianity, and it has been read therefore as a defense of reactionary feudalism or a conservative (or even National Socialist) political manifesto.<sup>9</sup> Others have read it as an aesthetic allegory for inner change,<sup>10</sup> as a theocratic dream,<sup>11</sup> and as a desperate or angry prayer

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, "Epikurisch Glaubensbekenntniss Heinz Widerporstens," in Schelling, *Briefe und Dokumente*, ed. Horst Fuhrmans (Bonn: Bouvier, 1973), vol. 2, 205–14. Schelling's text was a response to both Schleiermacher and Novalis.

<sup>5</sup>*Aus Schleiermacher's Leben: In Briefen*, ed. Ludwig Jonas and Wilhelm Dilthey (Berlin: 1861), vol. 3, 133–34.

<sup>6</sup>On these proceedings, see Richard Samuel's introduction to the text in *Schriften*, vol. 3, 497–506.

<sup>7</sup>Novalis, *Schriften*, eds. Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, fourth augmented edition (Berlin: Reimer, 1826).

<sup>8</sup>Novalis, *Schriften*, 5th ed., I, xxxv; quoted in Richard Samuel's introduction (vol. 3, 500).

<sup>9</sup>From a critical Marxist perspective, see Georg Lukacs, *Fortschritt und Reaktion in der Deutschen Literatur* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1947), 49–70, esp. 61–63. For an overview of the conservative appropriation of "Christianity or Europe," see Hermann Kurzke, *Romantik und Konservatismus: Das "politische" Werk Friedrich von Hardenbergs (Novalis) im Horizont seiner Wirkungsgeschichte* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1983).

<sup>10</sup>Gerhard Schulz comments on "Christianity or Europe" in his *Novalis Werke* (München: Beck, 1987), 802.

<sup>11</sup>Haym denounces "Christianity or Europe" as the "dream of the autocracy of the religious organ," and as an "uncritical enthusiasm" that developed under the influence of Schleiermacher's *Speeches*. Haym fails to see the interrelation between Novalis's essay and the rest of his work and can do little more than call the text "arbitrary" and "contradictory." Rudolf Haym, *Die romantische Schule: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1870), 460–67. A similarly restrictive interpretation of the text as a merely religious vision is found in Hans-Joachim Mähl, *Die Idee des goldenen Zeitalters im Werk des Novalis: Studien zur Wesensbestimmung der frühromantischen Utopie und zu ihren ideengeschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1965), 373–74.

for a miracle.<sup>12</sup> In the 1960s it was appropriated as a “leftist” critique of modern technocratic society,<sup>13</sup> but it has also been regarded as a proto-Hegelian history of the absolute,<sup>14</sup> and simply as “strange.”<sup>15</sup>

In light of these diverse readings, a cosmopolitan interpretation needs a defense.<sup>16</sup> I believe, however, that the case for a cosmopolitan reading is strong. Against the broader background of Novalis’s romanticism, it becomes clear that the medieval image painted in “Christianity or Europe” plays a *symbolic* role and should not be taken as a literal description of the historical past or as a blueprint for the future. Rather, the romantic picture of medieval Europe is to evoke poetically the ideal of a re-unification of humanity, a cosmopolitan reunification through “faith and love.”

I start with a brief sketch of the contents of “Christianity or Europe.” In order to explain and defend a cosmopolitan reading, I subsequently discuss Novalis’s underlying philosophical assumptions. Most other interpreters have read the text one-sidedly from a literary or a religious or a political point of view; or, when they have approached the text from a philosophical angle, they have sometimes imposed rigid interpretative frameworks on it.<sup>17</sup> Instead, I look at what Novalis himself says about philosophy, about the role of the romantic poet-philosopher, and about the use of symbols, and then show what this tells us about the status of the medieval imagery of “Christianity or Europe.” This will require us to look outside this essay to other published and unpublished writings. Doing so will enable us to get a better sense for the spirit of Novalis’s writings in general and this text in particular. I end by showing that Novalis’s cosmopolitanism not only fits extremely well with the views on politics and human self-realization expressed in his other texts, but also that it is, in fact, their culmination or fullest development.

#### “CHRISTIANITY OR EUROPE”

Few historians will recognize the Middle Ages in Novalis’s essay. He depicts medieval Christian Europe as an ideal era in human history, but in the process the era becomes almost unrecognizable to the professional historian. Novalis disregards the chronology,<sup>18</sup> provocatively eliminates social and political tensions, and de-

<sup>12</sup>William Arctander O’Brien, *Novalis: Signs of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 240.

<sup>13</sup>Richard Faber, *Novalis: Die Phantasie an die Macht* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1970).

<sup>14</sup>Theodor Haering, *Novalis als Philosoph* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1954), 486.

<sup>15</sup>Jack Forstman, *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism [Romantic Triangle]* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 59. It is also indicative of the situation that Manfred Frank—author of the monumental work on German romanticism, *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik [Unendliche Annäherung]* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997)—has not (yet) integrated “Christianity or Europe” into his general account.

<sup>16</sup>Only Arthur O. Lovejoy and Frederick Beiser hint at the cosmopolitanism in “Christianity or Europe,” but both do so in little more than a sentence. In their discussions of Novalis’s view of political life, they do not move beyond the level of the state. See Lovejoy, “The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1941): 257–78, at 278; Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 276–77.

<sup>17</sup>Theodor Haering’s Hegelian reading serves as an example here.

<sup>18</sup>Hermann Kurzke (*Novalis* [München: Beck, 1988], 61–62) points out that Novalis counts the introduction of celibacy of priests (eleventh century) as part of the degeneration of the golden era, while he presents the condemnation of Galilei (seventeenth century) as part of its height.

picts the Middle Ages in such a way that they appear as maximally beautiful and harmonious and maximally different from the Enlightenment.

The essay is a provocation right from the start. Novalis starts out by calling the Middle Ages “beautiful, splendid [*glänzende*: splendid, shining, radiant] times” (507/61), thereby taking the light metaphor away from the Enlightenment and redirecting it to the so-called “Dark Ages.” He conjures up a picture of the Middle Ages as an era during which Europe was a harmonious religious and political unity, united in one common religion and under one political ruler (the Holy Roman emperor). Everyone acted on the decrees of the Church, and ordinary people found “protection, respect, and audience” in the Church when they needed it. The churches were full of beauty, music, smells, and mystery. Peace, faith, beauty, and love united all (507/61).

Yet Novalis’s attitude towards the Middle Ages is not one of nostalgia. His vision of the golden era functions as a contrast against which all the ills of the present are highlighted. In presenting the medieval image, he is not so much looking backwards as forwards. He claims that the idyllic state of affairs could not last, and hence that there is no point in longing to go back in time. It was the childhood of humanity, and the primeval unity had to be disrupted by the unavoidable development of humanity: “But for this wonderful realm humanity was not yet mature, not yet educated [*gebildet*] enough” (509/63).

The rise of individualism and market capitalism in the early modern period disrupts the community’s unity of purpose and leads to social fragmentation. Individual interests become opposed to the common good. Commercialization and materialism cause people to fail to cultivate their sense of the transcendent. They use their mental faculties for hedonistic purposes and for the technological satisfaction of an increasingly complex set of needs. Greedy human beings, however, have no time for “quiet collection of the mind, the attentive consideration of the inner world” (509/64). The contempt for religion expands its scope to the imagination, feeling, morality, and the love of art and poetry. “Faith and love” are displaced by “knowing and possessing” (510/64).

Even what little is left of religion is not left intact: within the Church, individualism gives rise to Protestantism, and this causes a divide within Christianity. Moreover, the emancipation of the state from the Church brings with it the opposition between the religious and political spheres, and, in the process, religion gets locked within state borders. This is the start of a gradual undermining of the “religious cosmopolitan interest” and its peaceful influence (511–12/66). The old Roman Catholic Church has almost been destroyed, and the papacy “lies in the grave” (524/78).<sup>19</sup>

The modern approach to nature is a positivist one, which “turned the infinite creative music of the cosmos into the monotonous clattering of a gigantic mill” (515/70). But this arrogant positivism never succeeds entirely in making everything that exists the transparent property of the knowing subject. Says Novalis ironically: “What a shame that nature remained so wonderful and incomprehensible, so poetic and infinite, despite all attempts at modernization” (516/71).

<sup>19</sup>After having been removed from Rome by the French, Pope Pius VI had died in August of 1799, and the French had prohibited the election of a successor.

Novalis sees Europe as having landed in a state of political crisis and continuous warfare. The *ancien régime* in France has fallen, and the post-revolutionary French troops are starting to conquer Europe. Far from endorsing the *ancien régime* and its political institutions, Novalis calls them “inadequate and destitute” (522/76). But that is not to say that the new order is an improvement: “If only the historical goal of the war were, as in the sciences, a more intimate and varied connection and contact between the European states! . . . If only Europe wanted to awaken again! And if only a state of states, a political *Wissenschaftslehre*,<sup>20</sup> were impending” (522/77). Instead, people are rooting for one side in the battle of old against new, obedience against freedom, loyalty against individual rights, without seeing that the only real solution for the political turmoil lies in comprehensive spiritual change.

For Novalis, all these evils are facets of one development, namely, of the rupture of the original ties of love and faith. Their rupture leads to social fragmentation, antagonistic egoism, irreligious one-dimensionality, crude positivism, ecclesiastical territorialism, and constant warfare. This syndrome leads to a situation in which vast regions of human experience are cut off: poetry and the imagination in general, the contemplation of nature, feeling, and spirituality.

Novalis expects a renewal before too long. But renewal cannot come from more of the same—that is, not from more warfare or enlightened self-interest:

It is impossible for worldly powers to find an equilibrium; only a third element, which is worldly and supernatural at the same time, is able to bring this about. No peace can be concluded among the conflicting powers; all peace is only an illusion, only a truce. At the level of cabinets, of the common consciousness, no unification is conceivable. (522/77)

Only a spiritual power can bring about real change and lead to real peace and a new way for individuals to relate to each other. Only through inner religion, not through outward institutional reform, can unity be re-established. “The war will never end if one does not pick up the palm branch which can be offered only by a spiritual power” (523/77).

The current anarchy and destruction, however, form the perfect seedbed for a new religion that will create a new world that is at once a spiritual and a political unity (517/72, 524/79). It will lead to “genuine freedom,” peaceful state reforms, and the unification of humanity without regard to national borders (524/79). Then nations will feel friendship and devotion towards each other; they will readily make the necessary sacrifices (523/78); and they will “undertake works of peace, celebrating with hot tears a great banquet of love as a festival of peace on the smoking battlefield” (523/77).

Novalis calls this new spirituality “Christian.” The concept of “Christianity,” however, is to a large extent disconnected from the historical religion known by that name. Novalis writes that Christianity has three forms. First, it can be conceived as

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<sup>20</sup> *Politische Wissenschaftslehre* may mean that a state of states is analogously reflexive to Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* (knowledge about knowledge), or it may mean that there is an analogy between the newness and historical importance of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and of the required reorganization of Europe, or it may mean both.

“the creative element of religion,” or “joy in all religion”; here ‘Christianity’ seems to serve as an umbrella term for religion and spirituality in general. In a second sense, Novalis writes, Christianity is “mediation in general,” that is, the belief in the capacity of everything immanent to be a link to the transcendent (523/78, see also 520/74). The third meaning, Novalis says, is “belief in Christ, his mother, and the saints.” This must have provoked his Protestant and Jewish friends, but Novalis does not devote any serious attention to the relation between what he describes as Christianity and other forms of religion, because he regarded such differences as merely outward and inessential. He calls it “indifferent” and a matter of choice which of the three forms of Christianity one embraces, and embracing all three is fine by him too (523/78).

It is Novalis’s conviction that the “traces of a new world” can be seen in Germany (519/73). The Germans (and Novalis must be thinking here of the romantics in particular, especially of Schleiermacher,<sup>21</sup> and of intellectual life in Jena, Weimar, and Berlin in general) have achieved a critical distance from the Enlightenment’s one-sided focus on the intellect, to the point where it “shows . . . a new universal individuality, a new history, a new humanity, the sweetest embrace of a young surprised church and a loving god, not to mention the intimate conception of a new messiah in its thousand members” (521/74). Although he sees Europe as the place where the new era will start, Novalis explicitly expands the scope of the ideal to cover the whole world: “The other parts of the world wait for Europe’s reconciliation and resurrection to join with it and become fellow citizens of the kingdom of heaven” (524/78–79). This is when all humans will once again be emotionally and spiritually intimately connected through bonds of faith and love, and peace will ensue.

While Novalis does not, of course, provide a clear blueprint for political action in the traditional sense, he does assign a task to his audience. He ends with the exhortation not only to have patience and courage, but also to proclaim the new spirituality with “word and deed” (524/79).

From the account so far, it is clear that the much-debated question of what category of discourse “Christianity or Europe” fits under<sup>22</sup> is ill-posed. The question is not whether the text should be classified as an essay on religion *or* on history *or* on politics *or* on the arts and sciences *or* on philosophy.<sup>23</sup> The reason this question is ill-posed is not just that Novalis criticizes the type of thinking that orients itself by such dichotomies. More importantly, by asking which category the text fits under, one entirely overlooks the fact that the text bears on each and all of these spheres by sketching the possibility of their re-integration.

Novalis’s cosmopolitan account raises several other questions. First of all, it is not clear what the status of his positive pronouncements is. He criticizes the Enlightenment for reducing philosophy to a matter of logic and definitions, but

<sup>21</sup>See the mention of the “brother” (*CE*, 521/75), and the pun on Schleiermacher’s name, which means “veil maker,” on the same page.

<sup>22</sup>For an overview, see Herbert Uerlings, *Friedrich von Hardenberg, genannt Novalis: Werk und Forschung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), 569–613.

<sup>23</sup>For just one example, see Forstman, *Romantic Triangle*, 61: Novalis “is not interested in history,” but in cosmogony and apocalypse instead.

one may wonder, after the demotion of argument, what communicative force is left for his own prose. Second, does not the cosmopolitan reading make too light of what at first glance may seem like his Europocentrism and Roman Catholicism? I have already indicated that the answer to that question lies in the proper appreciation of Novalis's use of 'symbolism', but what is meant by that term needs more explanation.

#### NOVALIS'S VIEW OF PHILOSOPHY

Novalis's views do not lend themselves easily to the kind of description and analysis normally recommended in most Anglophone philosophy departments. Because he does not argue for his view, at least not in the strict, non-romantic sense of "arguing," and because he believes that a direct, discursive exposition of his view is necessarily inadequate, even the description of his view is, methodologically and practically, a tricky matter. It is tempting to try to make romantic philosophers academically respectable according to current mainstream philosophical standards by steering clear of quotes filled with hot tears and banquets of love or with young churches in sweet embraces with loving gods. But selecting quotes on the basis of their palatability or expository nature leads to misrepresentations. It would make Novalis look like an ordinary philosopher by currently dominant standards, where in fact he rejects the customary view of the goal and methods of philosophy.

Yet Novalis was steeped in the philosophical tradition that includes thinkers such as Kant and Fichte, and he was highly reflective about his own stance toward that tradition. The metaphilosophical notes that he took during his philosophical studies provide the necessary clues for describing his view of philosophy in more customary terms, and these methodological notes also provide valuable hermeneutic keys to his poetry. Against that background, then, the cosmopolitanism of "Christianity or Europe" will become clear.

A good starting point is Novalis's critique of Enlightenment philosophy. In his eyes, Enlightenment philosophers have adopted a mechanistic attitude towards thinking. They cling to definitions, neat categorizations, and the rules of logic. "They have learned to derive and infer like a shoemaker has learned to make shoes" (*Bl*, II, 431: #47/17). Like other romantics, Novalis criticizes Enlightenment philosophers for undervaluing the role of the creative imagination. He objects to the common opposition of reason and imagination. Indeed, he occasionally equates the two by saying, "Reason is immediate poet—directly productive imagination" (*AB*, III, 421: #782).<sup>24</sup> In his view, philosophers who aim at exhaustively describing the truth in discursive and "literal" language, banning poetry from the realm of philosophy, will not attain it. Truth cannot be packaged and communicated ready-made by one person to the next. Arriving at, or better, striving for the truth is a matter of creativity and spiritual activity (and receptivity) on the part of the truth-seeking individual.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>See also *FS*, II, 258: #498: "Practical reason is pure imagination"; and *AB*, III, 418: #775: "The creative imagination is divided into reason, power of judgment, and power of sense [*Sinnenkraft*]."

<sup>25</sup>See also Novalis's description of philosophy and its history in the *Logological Fragments* (1798), II, 522–32.



This view can be better understood against the background of (and as a radicalization of) the Copernican Turn in philosophy, on the one hand, and of Kant's notion of the productive imagination and genius, on the other. Novalis shares with Kant the view that the subject is world-constituting. Knowledge should not be understood in terms of the mind's tracking independently existing objects. Rather, objects conform to the structures that the subject imposes on the world. But Novalis disagrees with Kant as to how the world-constituting role of the subject should be conceived. He loosens up Kant's analysis of these structures, which he regards as too rigid, and he greatly expands the role of the imagination.

With Fichte, Novalis endorses the idea of an absolute ground of self and world. He criticizes Fichte, however, for what he sees as the latter's foundationalism. He objects to Fichte's account of the I's immediate self-awareness and stresses that the absolute ground is not accessible and evades definitive description. Rather, using a concept from Kant, he calls it a "regulative idea" (*FS*, II, 254: #472). The idea of a ground of self and world, however, implies to Novalis that both are intimately related, that the distinction between thought and reality is fluid, and that the self is constituted in the process of cognizing/imagining the world as much as the world is constituted in the self's act of cognizing/imagining it (*ibid.*).<sup>26</sup>

Novalis combines the view of the world-constituting role of the subject with a broadened notion of genius (a much-debated notion at the time). Genius, Kant had said, is "a *talent* for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other; hence the foremost property of genius must be *originality*." The products of genius are so highly original, in Kant's view, that although they serve as models once they are produced, artists follow no communicable procedure and are not able to "describe or indicate scientifically" how to bring such products about (*CJ*, V, 307–08).<sup>27</sup> Novalis agrees with much of this account, but whereas Kant strictly limited the sphere of genius to fine art, Novalis lifts this restriction and regards genius as relevant to all areas of human experience. Consequently, there is no sharp distinction between the real and the imagined. Novalis calls genius "the capacity to discuss imagined objects as real ones, and also to treat them as such" (*Bl*, II, 421: #21/12).<sup>28</sup>

Novalis occasionally refers to his own view as "magical idealism" (*TF*, II, 605: #375; cf. *AB*, III, 315: #399), in contrast to Kant's "transcendental idealism." "Magic is the art of using the world of sense arbitrarily [*willkürlich*]" (*Poeticismen*, II, 546: #109). It is the art of turning external objects into thoughts and thoughts into external objects. "Both operations are idealist. Whoever has completely mastered both is the *magical idealist*" (*AB*, III, 301: #338). Hence, Novalis challenges

<sup>26</sup>See also Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism (1781–1801)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 432. For an extensive discussion of Novalis's views, situating him among his philosophical contemporaries (though with an emphasis on Novalis's *Fichte-Studien*), see Manfred Frank's *Unendliche Annäherung*, and its (shorter) English counterpart, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004).

<sup>27</sup>References are to *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1900–). 'CJ' refers to *Critique of Judgment*.

<sup>28</sup>A more in-depth discussion of the differences and similarities between Novalis's and Kant's notions of genius lies beyond the scope of this essay.

the common distinctions between the internal and the external world, between the natural and the supernatural, between knowing, thinking, and imagining, and so on. Poetic inspirations (“revelations of the spirit”) are at once imaginings and reality.

This should not create the impression that just anything goes. Novalis rejects philosophical “anarchy” (*FS*, II, 289: #648). Philosophy, in his sense of magical idealism, is still oriented toward the idea of the absolute. By consciously juxtaposing different descriptions of it, however, it bears witness to the fact that this idea cannot be attained or even exhaustively described. It has “infinite determinations,” says Novalis (*FS*, II, 290: #649). Elsewhere, he speaks of “experimenting with lightness and multiplicity” and of the “free method of generation of truth” (*AB*, III, 445: #924): “Fichte and Kant . . . do not know how to experiment with lightness and multiplicity—not poetic at all—Everything is still so stiff, so fearful.”

In a passage in his Hemsterhuis studies, Novalis elaborates on his alternative view of philosophy:

Hemsterhuis has a wonderful passage on spirit and letter in philosophy. According to him the letter is merely a *help* for philosophical communication—the true essence of which consists in after-thinking [*nachdenken*].<sup>29</sup> The speaker merely leads the direction of thought in the hearer—and thereby it becomes after-thinking. *He thinks* and *the other thinks after him*. Words are an untrustworthy medium of fore-thinking [*vordenken*]. The genuine truth must, according to its nature, *show the way*. Therefore, the only thing that matters is sending someone onto the right road, or better, giving him a certain direction towards the truth. He will then get there automatically, if only he is *active, desiring*, to get to the truth. The exposition [*Darstellung*] of philosophy consists, therefore, merely in themes, first sentences—certain sentences that *push* [*Stoßsätze*]*—the exposition exists only for active lovers of the truth. The analytical elaboration of the theme is for slow or unskilled ones, those whom the mother first needs to teach how to fly, and how to maintain a certain direction. (HS, III, 373–74: #35)*<sup>30</sup>

Thus, while there is a propaedeutic role for “analytic” treatments, true philosophy *points one in the right direction*, instead of trying to secure particular conclusions. Philosophy is essentially a matter of communication between persons, between speaker and hearer. Both are active and creative in this process—Novalis also speaks of “philosophizing together” (*Gesammtphilosophiren: HS*, II, 374: #35). He does not assign the task of “showing the way” to the guild of academic philosophers. He rejects the sharp distinction between philosophy and literature and holds that anyone with the love of truth and the right spiritual attitude counts as a philosopher—in fact, that most academic so-called philosophers do not fit this description and that many poets do. Because philosophy should provide *Stoßsätze*, be evocative instead of discursive, and give pride of place to the imagination and feeling, “poetry is the hero of philosophy” (*Anekdoten*, II, 590: #277; cf. *CE*, III, 515–16/69–71).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup>In ordinary usage, the word means “to think.” Novalis here makes use of the fact that the word includes the preposition ‘*nach*’, which means “after.”

<sup>30</sup>Also, but with some alterations and without reference to Hemsterhuis, in *LLF* [1798], II, 522: #3. Hemsterhuis’s own text is less radical. See his *Alexis ou De l’age d’or*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Paris: Jansen, 1792), vol. II, 168.

<sup>31</sup>Novalis’s distance from Hegel is very clear here. On Hegel’s view, philosophy should move beyond poetry and be “strictly conceptual.” Novalis’s conception of poetic philosophy should make one way of interpretations of him as a Hegelian *avant la lettre*, as found in Theodor Haering, *Novalis als Philosoph*.

## STYLE AND SYMBOLISM IN "CHRISTIANITY OR EUROPE"

It is not surprising, then, to find "Christianity or Europe" full of *Stoßsätze*. To "push" his audience, Novalis uses his style and tone. He uses provocations, an apodictical tone, and a mystical style as rhetorical tools to prod the hearer or reader to start thinking creatively and take up a higher, non-ordinary perspective. He provokes his audience, for example, by saying that the Pope had good reasons for condemning Galileo, by describing the Jesuits in halfway positive terms, by calling the separation of church and state a disaster, and by labeling the Bible a book of "meager content" (512/66).

The certainty of his tone, furthermore, serves not to make a claim to descriptive accuracy, but to present the ideal to his hearers and elicit in them faith in the ideal:

The entire representation is based on making present that which is not present and so on—the magical power of fiction—My Faith and Love is based on representative faith. Thus the assumption—perpetual peace has arrived, God is among us, America is here or nowhere, the golden era has arrived, we are moral, and so forth. (*AB*, III, 421: #782/89–90)

Enigmatic language (*Rätselsprache*)—as Novalis calls it at the beginning of his 1798 collection of fragments, "Faith and Love"—is another favorite medium. "The mystical expression is one more stimulus for thought," he writes (*GL*, II, 485: #3/35). Few historical figures in "Christianity or Europe" are introduced by name. Luther, for instance, is first called a "fiery mind" who protested the old order while being a "member of the guild" himself (viz., the clergy) (*CE*, III, 511/65). The purpose here is to invite the reader or listener to be an active participant in the creation of ideas rather than the passive recipient of bits of information.<sup>32</sup>

But while such measures might make the audience active, they do not yet explain how philosophical texts point in a particular *direction*, and this is where Novalis's notion of symbolism becomes important. This notion lies between that of an arbitrary sign and a literal designator. It is related to "metaphor," but it seems better to explain how Novalis uses the term than to rely on any preconceptions regarding the contentious concept of metaphor.

According to Novalis, symbolism serves to evoke ideas that cannot be exhaustively described in direct, literal terms. He holds that every idea needs a symbol (*GL*, II, 487: #15/38). Although he describes symbols in terms of analogy, he uses a very loose notion of analogy, according to which the term is synonymous with '*air de famille*' (*Poeticismen*, II, 540: #72). Symbolism provides the means to activate the minds of the audience and to "push" them in a certain direction without spoon-feeding them particular thoughts.

Important for understanding "Christianity or Europe" is the fact that, in Novalis's writings, the symbolizing object itself is affected by its role as symbol. For

<sup>32</sup>Fragments are another favorite medium of the early German romantics. They are evocative, ambiguous, "tasks for thought" (*Denkaufgaben*) instead of ready-made arguments. They are considered to promote the inner activity on the part of the audience, and they bear witness to the impossibility of a finalized philosophical system. Novalis uses fragments in "Faith and Love," "Flowers," and "Pollen," among others. "Christianity or Europe" carries 'A Fragment' as a subtitle, but it is not clear whether this stems from Novalis or from his editors, Tieck and Friedrich Schlegel.

Kant, who had also argued that ideas need symbols and that symbolism should be understood in terms of analogy, an organism can symbolize a constitutional monarchy without this having any impact on the representation of the organism. A hand mill can be a symbol for an absolutist state, without this leading to a new perspective on hand mills (see *CJ*, V, 375). For Novalis, by contrast, the empirical entity chosen to serve as a symbol for the romantic ideal is itself transfigured (“romanticized”) in the process. In “Faith and Love,” the happily married Prussian king and queen symbolize the perfect state in which all citizens are united through love—but the couple is described in such super-mundane terms that the real existing Prussian monarch promptly ordered the text to be censored, fearing it would raise expectations to an unfulfillable level.<sup>33</sup> In “Christianity or Europe,” the Middle Ages are to symbolize a cosmopolitan golden era, but in the process the medieval period is romanticized to the point of becoming almost unrecognizable to the unromantic historian.

In other words, Novalis looks to the Middle Ages in creating the ideal of humanity united in faith and love, but the Middle Ages then come to serve as representation of the ideal. The cosmopolitan ideal is at once an intimation of an ideal world to come and an idealization of the Middle Ages.

Novalis famously expresses this procedure by saying:

The world must be romanticized. In that way one rediscovers the original meaning.<sup>34</sup> . . . When I give the commonplace a higher meaning, the ordinary a mysterious appearance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the semblance of infinity, I romanticize it. This procedure is reversed for the higher, the mystical, the infinite . . . It gets a common expression. Romantic philosophy. *Lingua romana*. Alternatingly elevating and lowering. (*LLF*, II, 545: #105)

The romantic genius-philosopher sees the higher, the transcendent, in the lowly and the common, and vice versa, interchanging immanent and transcendent genres. This “seeing” is of course not a matter of picking up something that is already “out there” and visible for everyone. Rather, starting from something immanent (here medieval history), the poet-philosopher evokes a transcendent idea (here the ideal of humanity as re-united), but in doing so the particular empirical starting point is transformed into a representation of this idea (here the idealized image of the Middle Ages in “Christianity or Europe”).<sup>35</sup> The creative evocation of the idea and the “idealization” or “romanticization” of medieval history are two aspects of the same activity. With regard to the image of the monarchical couple in “Faith and Love,” Novalis says that he “elevates the contingent to the essential” (*AB*, III, 398: #685).<sup>36</sup> The contingent is elevated at the same time that the ideal is represented as incarnated in it.

<sup>33</sup>See Richard Samuel, introduction to “Faith and Love,” in *Novalis Schriften*, II, 479.

<sup>34</sup>With the ‘original meaning’, Novalis presumably refers to the meaning the world had for people before its demystification in the modern era.

<sup>35</sup>Charles Larmore (*The Romantic Legacy* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1996], 7–16) has called this the “creative-responsive transformation” of the given.

<sup>36</sup>In Novalis’s eyes, it is both desirable and inevitable that one finds multiple ways of articulating the ideal. Symbols are and remain open to multiplication, interpretation, alteration, and criticism. In light of this, it is perhaps less surprising than it might seem at first that Novalis was excited about the idea that Schelling’s hedonist materialist parody might be published together with his speech. It would be a clear example of the “lightness and multiplicity” mentioned above.

The notion of symbolism gives us the key to reading “Christianity or Europe.” It would be misguided to take the poet-philosopher as wanting to present an accurate historical description of medieval reality. It is a “mistake” to confuse or identify the symbol with the symbolized (*AB*, III, 397: #685). This rules out such readings as the claim that “Christianity or Europe” is a Roman Catholic apology or a reactionary defense of feudalism. And the picture of the Middle Ages is not a mere arbitrary sign without any inherent relationship to the signified. Rather, the analogy (loosely conceived) between symbol and symbolized allows the reader or listener to receive direction from the genius’s poetry-philosophy. Starting from the political and religious unity that Novalis thought existed in the medieval period, he evokes the ideal of a golden era, while romanticizing the Middle Ages in the process. The Middle Ages thereby come to symbolize the cosmopolitan unity of humanity, pointing the audience in the direction of a cosmopolitan ideal of love, faith, and unity, but without providing a specific and determinate blueprint.<sup>37</sup>

“Christianity or Europe” is thus itself a piece of art (or perhaps one should say ‘art-philosophy’, since Novalis objects to drawing a sharp distinction between philosophy and art). The fact that it looks like *prose* should not mislead one into thinking it is a political-theoretical piece of argumentation or a piece of historiography in the ordinary sense. It is poetry in prose (and of course, the romantic would question the value of that distinction). The piece is full of imagery, provocations, questions, exhortations, perspectives, and stimuli provided by the speaker to stimulate co-activity on the part of his listeners; and as such, it is, in Novalis’s eyes, philosophy. It aims at making the listeners feel and imagine and think (or, feel-imagine-think, as Novalis questions these distinctions too) for themselves, together.

It is important to note that the speech already contributes to establishing community as it is read. One can safely assume that Novalis aimed at creating a kind of “beautiful” community in the group of romantics to which he read his piece. Poetry establishes the highest form of community, as he had written earlier:

Poetry is the end [*Zweck*] of philosophy . . . poetry constitutes the *beautiful* society, or *the inner whole*—the world family—the beautiful household of the universe. . . . Through poetry the highest sympathy and co-activity—the most intimate, most wonderful community becomes real. (*HS*, II, 372–73, #32)

Furthermore, Novalis ends his text with the exhortation that the audience go out and proclaim the new spirituality in word and deed.<sup>38</sup> The advent of the new era can be seen already in Germany. This is reminiscent of a statement elsewhere: “We are on a mission: our vocation is to educate the earth [*zur Bildung der Erde*]” (*Vb/Bl*, #32).

<sup>37</sup>Cf. *GL*, II, 485: #4/35–36: “What one loves one finds everywhere and sees similarities to it everywhere. The greater the love, the wider and more diverse this resembling world.” Novalis would be the last person to draw a sharp line between symbols and arbitrary signs, though. As soon as the genius comes to “see” a connection between what seemed an arbitrary sign and what it stands for, the first may assume the role of symbol.

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *FS*, II, 296: #667: “About humanity. Its pure, complete formation [*Ausbildung*] should first become the art of the individual, and only then, from that point on, should it be passed on to the great masses of the peoples and then to the species.”

## NOVALIS'S VIEWS ON POLITICAL LIFE

Novalis's cosmopolitan ideal is the natural extension, and indeed the culmination, of his ideal of *Bildung* and his related view of the role of the state. Novalis's ideal of *Bildung*, or comprehensive personal development of the individual, should not be misunderstood in an atomistic sense. He views self-perfection as requiring the social context of a community (as well as one's recognition that one is a member of a community). Ultimately, this community comprises all human beings. One is a "perfected human being" (*vollendeter Mensch*) only when one regards oneself as a member of the larger organic community of all human beings. Hence, Novalis equates the "perfected human being" with the "world citizen in the true sense" (*eigentlicher Weltbürger*) (*Fragmente und Studien*, 1799–1800: III, 560: #34).

A central idea found in much of the social contract tradition—that the *interests* of the citizens are served by their joint submission to the laws of a state, and that their common good can provide the glue that holds the state together—is, in Novalis's view, misguided and dangerous. Self-interest provides a bond with the state that is opportunistic, superficial, and conditional. It does not form a basis for a harmonious and enduring state. Instead, the imagery Novalis uses in "Faith and Love" conjures up a harmonious social whole which is coordinated via values and emotional and spiritual bonds—a perfect and enduring political community in which people feel emotionally connected to the state and to their fellow citizens.

Novalis further denies that the essence and justification of the state is to promote the well-being of its individual citizens or to guarantee them basic rights and freedom. He rejects the social contract justification for the authority of the state on the grounds that it wrongly assumes that the primary unit of which the state is composed is the individual independent citizen. Against such approaches, Novalis asserts, "The state does not consist of individual humans, but of couples and societies" (*AB*, III, 470: #1106/90). By nature, people are not independent individuals, but more or less bound to one another (*AB*, III, 416: #762/89).

The dominant symbol used to evoke the ideal political community is that of the family. The family is here seen, in typical romantic ("romanticized") fashion, as a community that is not a mere aggregate of egoistic individuals to last as long as they regard this as advantageous, but an enduring and intimate bond of love and devotion that nurtures the personal development of the individuals within it. Novalis's use of the idealized family as a symbol for political organization should not mislead one into thinking that he views the family as the only, or even the most, important principle of social organization. He attributes a necessary role to the *state* for the process of *Bildung*: "The need for a state is the most pressing need of a human being. To become and remain a human being, one needs a state. . . . All culture stems from the relations of a human being to the state. The more formed [*je gebildeter*], the more a *member* of a formed [*gebildeten*] state." (*AB*, III, 313: #394/88). The "true, perfect state" is a state in which individuals are united in "faith and love," as are the members of a family (e.g., the happily married Prussian royal couple). This is a state—Novalis calls it a "poetic" state—in which the individuals are in perfect spiritual harmony, which expresses itself (among other

things) in their readiness to make sacrifices for the state or their compatriots if necessary.<sup>39</sup>

As the *Bildung* of the populace progresses, political life will become regulated more through shared values and other spiritual and emotional bonds than through laws. Eventually, this development will render laws superfluous:

A perfect constitution—the vocation of the *body politic*—of the soul of the state—makes all explicit laws superfluous. If the members [of the body politic] are determined in the right way, the laws are automatically clear. As long as the members are not yet perfect members, laws are necessary. With true culture in general the number of laws will go down. Laws *complement imperfect natures* and beings. (*AB*, III, 284: #250)

This does not mean that the state will or should eventually disappear.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the preceding quotation claims that the perfect kind of state is a *state* in which citizens act in perfect organic harmony, out of love and devotion for each other and for the commonwealth, without needing coercive law enforcement to motivate them. Rather than predicting the state's demise, Novalis evokes an ideal of its perfection.

The largest community is that of humanity (the “world family”), and the state is a necessary means to elevate people to the cosmopolitan perspective (*HS*, II, 372: #32). Both the family and the state are necessary for *Bildung*, but *complete* development is not reached until one regards oneself as a member of the community of all human beings, thereby transcending the levels of both the family and the state.

Novalis's cosmopolitan ideal includes a “state of states” or a “world state,” with members that are coordinated on the basis of love, loyalty, and spirituality (*CE*, 522/77). Like Friedrich Schlegel's ideal of a republic of republics, Novalis's imagined state of states involves no coercive laws. It is a world without antagonism, and hence a world that does not need a system of international law with coercive authority.

If the world were filled with perfect states, but the love and devotion of the citizens of each one were entirely focused inward on their own particular state and their compatriots, having many such states would not add up to a cosmopolitan whole. In “Christianity or Europe,” therefore, Novalis designates *religion* as the spiritual force that transcends state borders, unifies humanity, and leads to the culmination of the process of *Bildung* of the species. Religion need not be Christian in the ordinary sense of the term (see above), and Novalis's ideal is not limited to

<sup>39</sup>On the concept of the poetic state, see Hans-Joachim Mähl, “Der poetische Staat,” in *Utopieforschung: Interdisziplinäre Studien zur neuzeitlichen Utopie*, ed. Wilhelm Voßkamp (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), vol. 3, 273–302.

<sup>40</sup>It could seem that way because following the quote from *AB*, III, 254–55: #79, Novalis writes: “and then all barriers [*Schranken*], all determinations will disappear of their own—and everyone is and has everything without harming the others.” Although Novalis does not specify what he means by the “barriers and determinations,” the fact that he calls a situation without them one in which people “are and have everything without harming the others” makes it likely that what he has in mind is not the disappearance of state borders, but rather the disappearance of the barriers that are erected between people by the system of private property (in line with his ideal of a system of communal property occasionally expressed elsewhere, e.g. at *Bl*, II, 417: #13/11). Even if ‘barriers’ were to refer to state borders, this could mean no more than that the borders between states would open up instead of disappear: they would simply no longer be “barriers.”

Europe. Although the citizens of the ideal state are united by an emotional and spiritual bond to their own country (*GL*, II, 486: #8/36), their bond does not create antagonism toward other states. Rather, their patriotism is a first step on the way to a similar bond at the level of the entire species (*FS*, II, 296: #667). Novalis describes the relations between the different peoples of the world in similar terms as the relations between the citizens in the ideal state (*CE*, 523/77–78).

Thus, Novalis's ideal of a state naturally broadens to the cosmopolitan ideal symbolized in "Christianity or Europe." The perfected human beings are citizens of the world, members of the organic whole of humanity. "The entire human species will eventually become poetic.<sup>41</sup> New golden era."<sup>42</sup>

In short, a full appreciation of the role of symbolism in Novalis's work opens up a new hermeneutical perspective on "Christianity or Europe," according to which the text can be given a cosmopolitan reading. It is important, however, to realize that Novalis's romantic version of cosmopolitanism is radically different from what his Enlightenment contemporaries understood by the term. It is not a view that is primarily political, primarily moral, and so on, in the way in which such descriptions can be used to categorize different forms of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, a cosmopolitan reading of his text should not be seen as *opposed* to, say, a religious reading. Without providing an exhaustive description with a claim to finality, Novalis's aim is to reach a more holistic perspective that is able to integrate symbolically that which, in his view, had been fragmented by the Enlightenment.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>See note 39.

<sup>42</sup>"*Fragmente und Studien*" 1799–1800, III, 677: #631 (in a sketch for *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*).

<sup>43</sup>See my essay, "Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60 (1999): 505–24.

<sup>44</sup>I would like to thank Joel Anderson, Fred Beiser, Thomas Fossen, Manfred Frank, Fred Rush, and two anonymous referees for the *Journal* for their helpful comments.