

II

The Facets of “Universal Religion”: Religion in Nineteenth-Century French Utopian Thought

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Introduction

When talking about universal religion as an element of utopian thought, and more precisely of nineteenth-century French utopian thought, one should begin with questioning the relationship between religion and utopia. The polysemy of the concept of utopia means that this relationship cannot be unequivocally described. For Raymond Trousson, a Belgian historian, utopia, as opposed to the myth of the Golden Age, is an attempt to achieve heavenly happiness (Trousson 2001) and can take the form of either literary invention or a political programme which aim to change the world. This would invert the Augustinian image of the City of God; although the latter expresses the quest for peace and justice on earth, the Father of the Church ultimately locates the Christian homeland in Heaven. From this point of view, earthly life and its perfection have to be associated with the Earthly City. U-topia (a non-place, a place that may not be found in this world) differs from the spiritual Kingdom “out of this world” in that it is a fruit of human imagination and endeavour rather than of grace or of God’s interference or act of creation (Servier 1991)¹.

¹ Jean Servier points, nevertheless, to the religious and in particular Judeo-Christian source of utopian imagination: Celestial City, God’s Kingdom, the messianic age and the Thousand-year Kingdom, invoked by millenarism, will prefigure subsequent utopias and inspire later utopian social movements.

Having said that, religion has always been present in various utopias, both literary and political, beginning with the earliest ones; this is a paradox observed by Trousson. As examples, one can quote the Myth of Er in Plato's work, the supra-religious worship of Mithras in More's *Utopia*, Solomon's House and the presence of Christianity in Bacon's *New Atlantis*, or the divine Metaphysician and the trinity of Power, Wisdom and Love in Campanella's *City of the Sun*. Despite the presence of religion in various utopias, one can notice a tendency to limit its significance to endow it with a purely symbolic function and to replace the redemptory with the philosophical dimension. In utopias religion's prerogatives are taken over by science and man's political initiative. Religious redemption is substituted by the quest for a society founded upon just laws, well-organised work and education, communal property and tolerance. Whereas during the Renaissance it is hard to imagine a non-religious utopia (clergymen are usually authors of utopias), during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries religion is increasingly frequently criticised, which steers utopia towards rationality and materialism (e.g. in Cyrano de Bergerac's writings) or atheism (as in Fontenelle's work). Modern utopias are, however, dominated by the presence of natural religion, which is opposed to the abuses and absurd character of founded religions.

This process leads to the revelation of the very essence of utopian thinking, of its desire to displace religion, to bring the New Jerusalem to Earth and to turn transcendence into immanence. This is because utopia is a religion reduced to the human level—the religion of man: "Let's assume that utopia is essentially the religion of man [*Entendons que l'utopie est par essence religion de l'homme*]" (Trousson 2001: 23). This becomes apparent in the nineteenth century after the delegitimisation of religion during the Enlightenment. Although at the end of the eighteenth century some (Dupuis, Volney) would like to see society become secular, while for many, religion retains its importance. And this does not only mean the perpetuation of religious traditions and institutions that indeed continue to attract the faithful. It also means the preservation of religion in the sphere of imagination or, to put it differently, the engagement of religious language and symbolism to express truths and create structures that oppose traditionally understood religiosity. This is exemplified by the movement known as utopian or romantic socialism (Alexandrian 1979, Evans 1948), positivism and lay humanitarianism, where we observe the rise of the idea of the synthesis of religion and politics, revived by the Revolution (Chabert 2004). In this chapter I shall concentrate on a selection of its representatives, paying particular attention to the way religion,

as invoked by their works, takes on the form of a universal religion, and to the way philosophical tenets and principles of social organisation are transposed into the domain of the sacred. In order to achieve this I shall examine a number of projects for temples found in the work of nineteenth-century utopian thinkers.

Saint-Simon's New Christianity and Saint-Simonianism

It is as early as 1803 that in *Lettres d'un habitant de Genève à ses contemporains* [*Letters from an Inhabitant of Geneva to His Contemporaries*] Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, who will play a major role in the development of social utopian thinking, calls for a founding of a scientific council presided over by Newton² and intended to replace the clergy, just as science is to supersede theology and the law of gravity is to supersede God (Bénichou 1977). According to Saint-Simon, traditional Christianity has lost its currency and now the time for New Christianity has come, to which he will devote his 1825 treatise where a traditionalist polemicizes with a moderniser. According to the latter, Christianity is to become the only and universal religion, yet, contrary to what has been said for centuries, it is to render people happy already here on Earth (Saint-Simon 1825). New Christianity abolishes the traditional separation between secular and religious authority, fulfilling the Chosen People's expectation of the Messianic Age, during which all humanity will have one religion and constitute one great community. Saint-Simon's doctrine is based upon the principle underlying all morality, which is fraternal love, while its goal is "the speediest improvement of the physical and moral condition of the poorest [*l'amélioration la plus rapide possible de l'existence morale et physique de la classe la plus pauvre*]" (Saint-Simon 1825: 21). Theology, which diverted attention from this goal towards sterile speculations concerning eternal life, must be abandoned altogether. Scientists, artists, and industrialists ought to join efforts in order to level out social inequalities and to replace hereditary aristocracy with the aristocracy of talent and merit. Christianity was indeed intent on achieving this goal until the fifteenth century and the pontificate of Leo X, when it became

² During the initial stage of his career Saint-Simon plans for a temple and a mausoleum dedicated to Newton to be built next to every centre where a council will preside, supervised by the head scientific council. The mausoleum, where internal worship takes place, leads to an underground part of the temple. External worship pays tribute to all the men who made important contribution to the development of arts and sciences. The church is to be surrounded by laboratories, workshops and a college. Later Newton will criticise the technical and limited character of sciences, wishing to subject society to a dogmatic, theory-based and apriorical education.

a worldly organization. What was needed to reverse this trend was the Reformation, yet Luther's reforms turned out to be only partially successful. In order to reform Christianity in a systematic and thorough manner and to restore the evangelical spirit of fraternal love, one would need to implement Saint-Simon's ideas. In society's spiritual domain the scientists, writers, and artists (they will provide inspiration and projects) are those who will be in charge, while in the secular sphere the industrialists and manufacturers (they will organise the economic life so that it may serve general interest) are those who will have the authority (Bénichou 1977).

Saint-Simon, who dies the very year his major work is published, has many disciples and followers. The latter develop their master's ideas into a cohesive religious doctrine that is characteristic of the "organic" age and puts an end to doubts, moral relativity, and false freedom of the "critical" age associated with the Enlightenment. After the founder's death, Saint-Amand Bazard and Barthélémy Prosper Enfantin, assisted by other key figures gathered forming the college such as Olinde Rodrigues, become the leaders of Saint-Simonianism (Charléty 1965, Picon 2002). As a religious and dogmatic movement, Saint-Simonianism, which has its headquarters (after Bazard's schism) in Ménilmontant (at the time still situated outside Paris), has a short history, beginning in 1829 and ending in 1832 (Bénichou 1977). One of the most interesting ideas, born in Enfantin's community, is the plan to entirely rebuild Paris, presented by Charles Duveyrier in *La Ville nouvelle ou le Paris des Saint-simoniens* [*The New City, the Paris of the Saint-Simonians*] (Duveyrier 1832). According to this scheme, the city was to take on the shape of a man, while the temple located in its heart was to take on the shape of a woman and, more precisely, be a figuration of Messiah's Mother³. Her enormous body was to be surrounded all the way up to the waist with spiral galleries screened with stain glass windows, which would resemble a long robe. Her train was to be crowned with a huge amphitheatre where one could relax under shady orange trees. The woman's right hand points towards the domes of industrial buildings and rests on a globe housing the sacred space of the theatre. In her left hand the King's Mother would hold a silver, openwork-design sceptre topped with a great bright lamp of a lighthouse. In a text by Saint-Simon's another follower, Michel Chevalier, we find considerations regarding the use of metals, sewers (figured as an

³ Saint-Simon's followers were originally seeking a Messiah in Saint-Simon himself, and then in Enfantin, who through marriage was to join the divine Mother (sought in both the West and the East). Her image is closely related to the emancipation of women, postulated by Saint-Simonianism (Bowman 1987).

enormous organ), and electromagnetic force in the construction of the temple, which would result in a huge multimedia show combining visual arts with music⁴, creating an impression of a frenetic communion of all time and space, an immense “glorification of God, of his Messiah and of Humanity” (Bénichou 1977: 304). This vision demonstrates the breach between Saint-Simon’s followers and the sober doctrine of the movement’s founder. The flamboyant religiousness with pantheistic overtones that benefits from the achievement of art and industry, and where the difference between God and nature vanishes, and the Incarnation extends to the entire humanity (or even to the universe), according to the Saint-Simonist ideas of “rehabilitation of matter” and “rehabilitation of corporeality” (Bowman 1987: 172-173), displaces Saint-Simon’s natural religion that boiled down to morality and the implementation of its guiding principle.

Auguste Comte’s Positive Religion

Amongst Saint-Simon’s collaborators and disciples who turn away from their master’s teachings or reinterpret them by creating their own doctrines one may also find the founder of positivism, Auguste Comte. His religious thinking will reach its apotheosis in *Catéchisme positiviste, ou Sommaire Exposition de la religion universelle* [*The Catechism of Positive Religion, or Summary Exposition of Universal Religion*], published in 1852, that is five years before Comte’s death. In the cherished formula—“Love as principle, order as basis, progress as end [*L’Amour pour principe, et l’Ordre pour base; le Progrès pour but*]” (Comte 1852: 55)—Comte opposes both the destructive forces of anarchy and the reactionary forces of traditionalism. Order is impossible to attain without religion, just as progress is impossible without real knowledge: “There exists only one religion, which is both universal and definitive, and towards which all partial and provisional syntheses strive to the extent allowed by historical circumstances”⁵ (Comte 1852: 41). For Comte religion is foremostly a drive towards unity. Although universal religion has no supernatural quality, it possesses its worship, its doctrine and its way of life, which correspond to feeling, intellect, and action. The position

⁴ In the work of Saint-Simon’s followers there is the recurrent motif of total dramatic art (anticipating Wagner’s oeuvre), the synthesis of all arts and of the legacy of the past and bright future.

⁵ “Il n’existe, au fond, qu’une seule religion, à la fois universelle et définitive, vers laquelle tendirent de plus en plus les synthèses partielles et provisoires, autant que le comportaient les situations correspondantes”.

feeling occupies in this triad is telling, as only feeling can forestall the decline of culture experienced by the West since the Enlightenment: "Women's revolution must now complete the proletarian revolution, just as the latter consolidated the bourgeois revolution, which had resulted from the philosophical revolution"⁶ (Comte 1852: 28). This explains the dialogue in Comte's oeuvre between a woman and a Priest of Humanity, two figures inspired by Clotilde de Vaux and Comte himself⁷. Comte's positivist religion is the religion of Humanity (Chabert 2004, Grange 1996, Domaradzki 2005). The latter occupies the place of the Supreme Being, whose arbitrary will become replaced by a struggle against all kinds of fatalism.

Comte left behind a detailed plan for the Church of Humanity⁸, transmitted to posterity by his collaborator, Georges Audiffrent (1885). Located in a wooded area and neighbouring a great cemetery, the Church has the shape of the letter "T" and faces the world metropolis that Paris was to be for a long time to come⁹. It represents the spatial figuration of the positivist philosophy of history and the positivist calendar, showing the evolution of humanity. The nave is flanked on both sides by fourteen chapels¹⁰. Thirteen of these are dedicated to the thirteen calendar months (each lasting twenty-eight days) and one to saintly women who are to be remembered every four years. The chapels are dedicated to great men, including scholars, philosophers, political and religious leaders who made a significant contribution to the progress of humanity. These are Moses, Homer, Aristotle, Archimedes, Julius Cesar, Saint Paul, Charlemagne, Dante, Gutenberg, Shakespeare, Descartes, Frederic II, and Bichat. The saintly women are represented by Heloise. At the rear of the Church there is an altar featuring the statue of the Supreme Being—Humanity—figured as Virgin holding an infant¹¹. Steps leading to the altar symbolizes seven disciplines

⁶ "La révolution féminine doit maintenant compléter la révolution prolétaire, comme celle-ci consolida la révolution bourgeoise, émanée d'abord de la révolution philosophique".

⁷ Comte met Clotilde in 1844 and fell in love with her. She died shortly afterwards in 1846. Comte emphatically declared that without Clotilde his conception of universal religion, based on "sound philosophy" and inspired by Aristotle and Saint Paul, would not have come to being.

⁸ The church would be built in Rio de Janeiro by Brazilian members of the Positivist Church. It was on their initiative that in 1902 the Chapel of Humanity, a miniature copy of the temple, would be built in Paris, in the building where Clotilde de Vaux lived.

⁹ Comte was planning for its future relocation to Istanbul, formerly Constantinople.

¹⁰ The temple does not significantly differ from a traditional church, with its nave, aisles, and apse. In any case, positivist masses were to be said in Roman-Catholic churches until society was ready to accept the new worship.

¹¹ Here we can observe a reference to the Catholic tradition and Marian devotions. Comte is thought to have been particularly inspired by Raphael's Madonna, yet it is more likely that the feminine model for the beloved Humanity was Clotilde de Vaux.

(Mathematics, Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Sociology, Morality) and thirteen categories corresponding to the calendar months which are divided into “primary relationships” (Humanity, Marriage, Fatherhood, Filiation, Brotherhood, Service), transitory stages (Fetishism, Polytheism and Monotheism), and social functions or classes (Priests, Women, Patricians and Proletariat). In front of the altar there is an elliptical space featuring Saint Paul who incarnates religion and is surrounded by other leaders of Humanity. The positivist worship, on the one hand, adulates the goddess Humanity and, on the other hand, pays tribute to the dead, commemorating those most distinguished amongst them. It has a subjective character, which means that positivist “saints” live on only in the memory of the living. Likewise, according to the “subjective method”, although real and incarnated by Humanity, the Supreme Being cannot be conceived of as the transcendental Absolute and only as a relative and purely human imagining.

Pierre Leroux’s Cult of Humanity and Victor Hugo’s *Temple*

Humanity also constitutes the main object of interest of Saint-Simon’s another dissident follower and representative of lay humanitarianism, Pierre Leroux. His key work, *De l’humanité* [*Of Humanity*] appeared in 1840. Leroux’s conception of humanity varies, however, from Comte’s. In his view, it is in humanity that all past religions, old traditions, modern philosophy, and the spirit of Christianity and of the Enlightenment find their summation (Leroux rejects the distinction between organic and critical ages). Whereas for Comte the time of revelation ended irrevocably when humanity entered first the metaphysical and then the positive stage of its evolution¹², Leroux believes in eternal and continuing revelation. Humanity is divine in its nature and if Leroux negates Jesus’s divinity, it is only because of its monopolising, preclusive character. It is for the same reason that he rejects the immortality of the individual soul, accepting however its eternal presence in Humanity. This is because the soul constitutes the expression of spiritual individualism, yet Leroux seeks the third way that would help to avoid the extreme of absolute individualism and absolute

¹² This problem is complex since the positive phase contains the theological phase (including fetishism and polytheism) which enables the positivist religion to gain a fully human character that excludes neither emotions nor imagination.

socialism¹³. He wishes to reconcile the principles of freedom, equality, and brotherhood: "In future society every man will be a pope and emperor to himself [*Dans la société de l'avenir, chaque homme sera à la fois son pape et son empereur*]" (Leroux 1846: 98-99), states Leroux in his book *De la religion nationale, ou du culte* [*Of Religion, or of Cult*]. Humanity needs religion and society a national religion. Leroux finds the latter in the work of Spinoza, who succeeded where Rousseau had failed, namely in marrying the idea of public worship with freedom of conscience. This is where lies the basic utopian outline of Leroux's thinking: he seems to be seeking to achieve the impossible that is to reconcile social responsibility with individual liberty. Although in his work we could not find plans for temples similar to the afore-described ones¹⁴, we can guess that for Leroux, who in 1848 was initiated into regular freemasonry, the temple figured by the Lodge symbolically corresponds to the Church of Humanity, elevated through the self-improvement of all people of good will who thus follow the example of the builders of Solomon's temple.

During the Second Empire Leroux finds himself in exile as a political opponent. It is on the Anglo-Norman island of Jersey that, impoverished, he met Victor Hugo, another political refugee who was then already enjoying certain notoriety. At the time Hugo becomes a prophet of the so called religion of the *tables tournantes*, inspired by the practice of summoning the spirits with the aid of a tapping table; together with his close friends and relatives he will summon over one hundred and ten spirits. The worship of the Tables (Boivin 2009), foretold by Jesus Christ himself (amongst exiles are, for example, Mahomet, Shakespeare, Dante, Napoleon or Luther), is a religion of universal love and forgiveness, which will replace Christianity, just as Christianity had replaced Druidry. According to this doctrine, everything in the world possesses an immortal soul that purifies itself during the cycle of subsequent incarnations until it reaches its spiritual goal¹⁵. Simultaneously, however, drawing on the tradition of the Enlightenment, this doctrine exposes to stringent criticism religious customs and institutions, dogmatic fanaticism, and the abuses committed by the clergy.

¹³ Leroux creates the neologism "socialism", which, signifying the contradiction of freedom, carries for him a negative connotation. The same applies to the term "individualism", which is the opposition of "socialism" (Viard 2009).

¹⁴ Nevertheless, Leroux in his book *Du christianisme* [*About Christianity*] formulates the idea of a Pantheon inspired by a general doctrine, in which every cult of the past will find his place (Leroux 1848).

¹⁵ As we know, Leroux could not agree on this point with Hugo for in his view all humanity shares one eternal life. In Leroux's mind Hugo was a spiritual liberal postulating soteriological individualism.

Hugo's views are succinctly captured by the title of his collection of poems, *Religions et religion* [*Religions and Religion*], published in 1880, which is late in his life. The true and only essence of religion is the following: it refers to what is unknown and infinite. Although all religious systems that undervalue this will necessarily be sooner or later abandoned, they fulfil their role at the time. It is in this context that the poem *Le Temple* [*The Temple*]¹⁶, published in the second series of *La Légende des siècles* [*The Legend of the Ages*] (1877), ought to be read (Hugo 1950: 554-557). The poet calls for a construction of a mysterious, utopian temple built on top of a hill, outside all space and time, where humanity will worship the Unknown; the impenetrable Being will be screened by a curtain inside a gloomy crypt situated under a vault and illuminated by an eternal light. The worship will be accompanied by an elevated ambience and sacred fear, as well as by a belief in goodness emanating from the statue. Everyone will sense the presence of the Deity, but no one will be able to grasp its mystery. And all this will be taking place at a time when there will be no other temple on earth as all of them would have been swept off its surface by the progress of wisdom and time.

Conclusion

The poem is worth invoking because of, firstly, its utopian resonance and, secondly, its motif of the temple which has been the guiding idea of this chapter. Returning to the relationship between religion and utopia we can propose three different versions of it. Firstly, religion can be one of the elements of a utopian vision. The religion in question is here a natural one and expresses society's religious tolerance. This element must be present because of the cultural context in which a text describing utopia is created, although semantically, it may seem secondary or even marginal. This can be exemplified by literary utopias, such as those imagined by More, Bacon, or Mercier. Secondly, religion can be the basis or the medium of a utopian conception of society. This is the case of Saint-Simon's and his followers' New Christianity,

¹⁶ The poem is dated 1874. It consists of 132 verses and is divided into parts of unequal length, written in alexandrines. Together with *La Fin de Satan* [*The End of Satan*] and *Dieu* [*God*], *La Légende des siècles*, which contains the poem *Le Temple*, constitutes a great Hugolian epic, taking up three main issues faced by man: the meaning of the history of humanity, the origin of evil, and the absolute that is God. As Hugo himself states in the preface to *La Légende des siècles*, these are the three facets of the same problem which is Being: Humanity, Evil and Eternity (what is subject to progress, what is relative and what is infinite).

Comte's positivist religion, or Leroux's cult of Humanity: here religion provides language and imagery, helping to articulate the key ideas of utopia. It is a universal religion summarising the whole legacy and all the aspirations of humanity.

Finally, there can be a purely religious utopia where utopian criteria (the representation of an ideal opposed to reality, the quest for a complete transformation of the latter, existence beyond time and space) are applied only to the religious sphere. This type of religious utopia is exemplified by Hugo's poetic vision. Generic and chronological differences aside, the latter belongs to the tradition created by *De Pace fidei* by Nicolas of Cusa, Bodin's *Colloquium heptaplomeres*, Toland's *Pantheisticon*, or Voltaire's *Sermon des Cinquante* [*Sermon of the Fifty*]. The worship described by these works not only surpasses traditional worships (this is what happens in various conceptions of universal religion) but also reassesses the very concept of religion. In modern times religion begins to signify a form of worship attached to a given doctrine. Whereas in the work of utopian socialists, positivists, or humanitarians (although the latter are mostly sceptical about dogmas of any kind), doctrine takes on a social character and the object of worship (its various forms) becomes Humanity, in Hugo's work it practically disappears and the object of worship becomes highly mysterious. In *Le Temple* humanity becomes initiated, reaching the end of its apothatic path, as does the lyrical subject of Hugo's poem *Dieu* (Hugo 1950). Nevertheless, the utopia and the uchronia of the Temple reveal a Being who, unnameable, cannot be even called God.

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