

Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity

*The Post-Theistic Program of French
Social Theory*

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I Introduction: rethinking Comte

At the heart of Auguste Comte's program for resolving the 'crisis' of (early) industrial society – and explicitly so with the publication, in 1851, of *Système de politique positive ou Traité de sociologie* – was a project for 'positivising' religion by instituting (as its subtitle announced) *la religion de l'Humanité*. My aim in this inquiry is to interrogate that project, together with the wider conceptualisation to which it was linked.

Today, no doubt, to suggest that Comte's labyrinthine synthesis of philosophy, science, sociology, politics and religion is *worth* reexamining, let alone from its religious side, will meet with scepticism. We have learnt very well to mistrust all systematisers, and we are bored with the shibboleths of the nineteenth century. Who cares, any more, about Comte's totalising scientism, or about the organised idolatry of *la société* which it underwrote? Why dig up Positivism, only (presumably) to bury it again? One answer, I mean to show, stems from Comte's crucial but underrecognised place in the formation of modern, and postmodern, French thought. Another concerns the continuing (or renewed) pertinence of fundamental thinking about the social itself as a topic for reflection. Yet another would argue the value of grappling with Comte as a way to clarify problems in the vantage point (political, reflexive, emancipatory) from which, in the first place, these considerations press into view.

This will already make clear that the interrogation I have in mind is not only the hard questioning of a suspect caught near the scene of a crime. Even those, I will suggest, for whom Comte is the intellectual progenitor of an odiously self-enclosed corporatism may learn something from his thinking. What I propose is an engagement with Comte, not just against and about him. The themes of such an engagement, and its angle of approach, require more comment. But before elaborating, it may be useful to set the stage by recalling first, in Comte's own terms, what he actually meant to establish. What was, or was to be, 'positive' religion?

The project of Positive Religion

Based on a ‘demonstrable faith’, but otherwise homologous with the Catholic form of Christianity it was ‘destined’ to replace, the religion of Humanity was to be a triple institution.¹ Its full establishment required a doctrine (*dogme*), a moral rule (*régime*) and a system of worship (*culte*), all organised and coordinated through a Positivist Church. The first of these, the doctrine, could be considered established in Comte’s own writings, though not yet in complete form. The ‘objective synthesis’ of the *Philosophie positive* needed to be complemented by a ‘subjective synthesis’, for which the *Politique positive* was to provide the groundwork. As well, though he never got beyond a sketch-plan, there was to be a summarising and integrating *science de la morale*.² Taken as a whole, the Positivist System would provide the scientific–humanist equivalent to what systematic theology had been in the high Middle Ages: it would serve as the intellectually unifying basis of the new industrial order.

Of course, Positivism would be without effect if not disseminated. Hence the need for an educational reform, which in turn was part of a broader pattern of institutional changes designed to provide industrial society with an entire *régime* of cooperative purpose and order.³ What this entailed for the individual was a lifelong process of moral education.⁴ It would begin at home with Mother, continue in the schools with a revamped curriculum under (male) teacher-priests,⁵ and persist in the sermons and ceremonies which Positive Religion would install in a systematic and pervasive ritual round. Prominent among the latter were the sacraments (*présentation, initiation, admission, destination, mariage, maturité, retraite, transformation, incorporation*)⁶ which were to accompany each stage of the life course, and through which each servant of

¹ Comte provides a detailed account of Positive Religion in volume IV of *Politique positive*. Its three parts, moving from *culte* to *dogme* to *régime*, are outlined in chapters 2–4. See x:9–248.

² In the still fuller version of the doctrine, ‘First Philosophy’ would summarise the methodological principles of Positivism, ‘Second Philosophy’ would consist of the Subjective Synthesis, including the theoretical part of *la Morale*, and ‘Third Philosophy’ would systematise *l’action totale de l’Humanité sur son Planète* (x:246–7).

³ ‘Quand la discipline inspirée par l’amour se trouve ainsi fondée sur la foi, le régime la complète et la consolide en développant une activité d’où résulte la réaction, à la fois directrice et répressive, de l’ensemble envers les parties’ (x:167).

⁴ Besides the direct inculcation of *altruisme*, the formula for recalcitrant impulses was that ‘in the name of happiness and duty’ the *instinct nutritif* should be restrained, the sexual instinct severely so, and that envy and vanity should be weakened (x:344).

⁵ From ages 7 to 14, with one year being devoted to each of seven courses of study, corresponding to the seven branches of knowledge (x:250–2).

⁶ The last sacrament, *incorporation* (into *le Grand-Être*) would come after death, following a favourable judgment for those deemed worthy of remembrance (x:130).

Humanity would solemnly rededicate himself (or herself)⁷ to a life of service.

But it was not only individuals who were to be ‘rallied’ and ‘regulated’. The *régime* governed the form and functioning of the ‘tissues’ and ‘organs’ which made up the social body as a whole. Hence a mass of prescriptions for the harmonious (re)ordering of every major institution. The family: role-divided, chivalric, extended, replete with children, servants and animals (x:292–6). The sphere of production: cooperative, functionally ordered, justly meritocratic (x:338–42). The polity: reduced to the humanly manageable scale of a small republic,⁸ oriented to production not war, and linked to others in an ultimately global confederation. Overarching direction would be provided by a complementary leadership of temporal and spiritual authorities. The former (*les patriciens*) was to consist of bankers, industrialists and engineers from whom, in each republic, a committee of thirty, topped by a triumvirate, would be selected to direct the state (x:345). The new ‘Spirituals’, on the other hand, would be the scientists–philosophers–teachers–pastors encadred in the Positivist priesthood itself.⁹

As with Positivism’s feudal–Catholic predecessor, the two leading powers of industrial society were to be not only functionally distinct: each was to have its own form of rule. The lay elites who coordinated production (and distribution) would control the repressive organs of the state. The officers of the Positivist Church, commanding neither wealth nor force, were to exercise a purely moral suasion (VII:504). But there were also differences. The priests of Humanity would have not only care of souls, but also – having regard to their integrated expertise in all the sciences of Man – of bodies too (x:281). As well, their spiritual authority – i.e. their capacity to mobilise public opinion, whether against incorrigible displays of egoism and immorality, or against destructive social conflict over the distribution of social wealth¹⁰ – would be rooted not only in the prestige of their office as representatives of Humanity and mediators of its grace, but also in the ties ‘spontaneously developed’ between themselves and their natural allies. Positivism would draw the support of *les prolétaires* as industrialism’s indispensable, but excluded,

⁷ For women, destined for marriage and motherhood, and excluded from external careers, there would be three fewer sacraments – i.e. no *destination* independent of *mariage*, and correspondingly no *maturité* or *retrait* (x:123).

⁸ The world, with an estimated population of 140 million, would be divided into 70 republics with 300,000 family households and 1–3 million inhabitants each (x:309–10).

⁹ For the triple function of *le pouvoir spirituel* (‘conseiller, consacrer, et régler’), see x:9. For its guiding role within the wider industrial intelligentsia, see x:253–5.

¹⁰ Salaries would be fixed according to a just scale and dispensed centrally through the employer-based civic authority (x:340).

class.¹¹ It would also forge links to women, finding in *la femme* a powerful moralising influence hitherto confined within the familial household, for which Positive Religion would provide, at last, due place and recognition.¹²

The third element of positive religion was its cult: the organised yet 'effusive' worship of Humanity. Under the guidance of the new priesthood, this was to be conducted through public festivals (calibrated with the Positivist Calendar in 'appreciations' for the greatest aspects and benefactors of the Grand-Être),¹³ through worship at the family hearth and ancestral tomb, and through thrice-daily private devotions (x:131). If the doctrine was designed to *synthesise* the understanding, and the regime to *synergise* action, the cult was to mobilise and canalise that benevolent harmonisation of the instincts Comte called *sympathie*, as the proper inspiration for the other two.

The living centre of Positive Religion was, indeed, precisely here: in the feelings of venerative, identificatory and devotional love towards Humanity which the liturgy and teaching of its Church were designed continually to engender. As with Feuerbach (1957), Positivism took sentiments, especially those of the most elevated forms of love, to be the essence of religion.¹⁴ In Comte's general formula: feeling guides action in line with practical knowledge supplied by the intellect. The worship of Humanity was to fix in its adherents a lively impression of such harmonious coordination of the whole human being. The effusions of its rituals would also strengthen the altruistic impulses seen as vital for the correct orientation of thinking and acting. To which there was a corollary. If the cult of Humanity 'consecrated feeling over intellect', it also, in the Romantic vocabulary of gender dimorphism, elevated the symbolic role of women, identified by Comte as a sex naturally predisposed to express and embody the finest (and least grossly physical) sentiments of all. From medieval chivalry and Maryolatry, Positive

¹¹ Strictly speaking, *les prolétaires* were not to be considered a 'class' at all, but the 'nutritive' function's 'moral milieu' (x:332–3).

¹² Within the spiritual power, nonetheless, even the saintliest women were subordinate to (exclusively male) priests. 'Le caractère propre au sacerdoce ressort naturellement de sa comparaison générale avec celui qui convient à la femme. Plus sympathiques et plus synthétiques que le milieu pratique qu'ils doivent discipliner, les deux éléments de la spiritualité ne diffèrent que par la proportion des deux qualités, dont la première est plus féminine et la seconde plus sacerdotable' (x:72).

¹³ The Festivals are discussed throughout the *Politique positive*. The *Calendrier* itself, subtitled 'Tableau concret de la préparation humaine', with its thirteen lunar months and prescribed daily festivals, is appended to the *Catéchisme positiviste* (xi:334).

¹⁴ 'Destinée surtout à nous apprendre à vivre pour l'autrui, la religion doit essentiellement consister à régulariser la culture direct des instincts sympathétiques.' This would 'healthily' reverse the priority which Christianity (in traditional form) had given to doctrine over worship (x:85).

Religion would distil guardian angels and subcults of Clotilde ('ma sainte ange')¹⁵ and the *Vierge-Mère*. Not to mention the sacred icon of *l'Humanité* itself: in the statuary of its Temples, a thirty-year-old woman cradling a boy-child in her tender arms (XI:127).

Looking back over the period of his first synthesis (1826–42) Comte liked to think of himself as the Aristotle of Positivism. With the religious program, announced in the second, he aspired to be its St Paul – not only as an evangelist for the new faith, but above all as the organiser of its Church. Besides congregations, there were literal churches to be built, surrounded by elaborate cemeteries, and Positivist priests to be recruited, trained and set to work. The religion of Humanity was to have two hundred residential presbyteries in France alone, with one priest per 6,000 inhabitants.¹⁶ Beyond that, beginning with the most advanced societies of Western Europe, then spreading from the 'white races' to the 'less advanced' regions of Asia and Africa, it was to expand into a global organisation. Coordinated by national and regional councils, under the overall guidance of seven 'metropolitans', this would culminate in the primacy of the *sacerdoce* in Paris (x:323–7). Not merely St Paul; in fact, Comte was to be Positivism's St Peter as well, inaugurating the office of *Grand-prêtre de l'Humanité* in his own august person.¹⁷

Comte, Nietzsche, Marx

In practical terms, Comte's founding religious project was a complete, even preposterous, failure.¹⁸ It was, like Comte himself, an easy-to-satirise victim of its own rigidities, archaisms and inflated ambition. Nevertheless, the thinking *behind* that project is worth reflecting on because in two important respects the problems with which Comte was grappling in the aftermath of the French Revolution have not only endured but belong, I would argue, within the still unsurpassed horizons of our epoch.

¹⁵ As he called 'Mon éternelle amie, Madame Clotilde de Vaux (née Marie), morte, sous mes yeux, au commencement de sa trente-deuxième année', in the *dédicace* which prefaced the first volume of *Politique positive*.

¹⁶ Each to house 7 vicars and 3 fully fledged priests, plus lay workers and any number of trainees. Altogether, there were to be 100,000 fully qualified Positivist priests worldwide. The master plan is outlined in *Catéchisme positive* (XI:272).

¹⁷ 'Toute la hiérarchie théorique subit immédiatement l'impulsion continue du Grand-Prêtre, qui nomme, déplace, suspend, et même révoque, sous sa seule responsabilité, ses membres quelconques' (x:325–6).

¹⁸ For a first-hand account of the Positivist Society and its aims, see Littré, 1864:592–603. As a curious residue of the Society's Latin American influence, the official state motto of Brazil, where Positivists were active within the modernising elite at the end of the nineteenth century, is to this day *Ordem e progresso*.

To be noted first is Comte's (anticipatory) relation to Nietzsche as a pioneering but troubled champion of the post-Enlightenment break with theism. For all its dogmatic and ecclesiastical airs, Comte's positive faith in Humanity is suspended over the abyss which Nietzsche inscribed with 'the death of God', to which it can be interpreted as both a panic reaction and a strategic response. Like Nietzsche's madman in the marketplace, Comte was 'seeking God'; yet he was doing so, in the endless turmoil of post-Napoleonic France, in the very midst of God's cultural demise. For Comte, too, the waning of theism in the dawn of positivity entailed, at the limit, not just the decay of belief in an external yet ineffable super-being,¹⁹ nor indeed just the delegitimising moral and political consequences of this. It entailed a shattering epistemic break. The rise of a scientific world-view spelt the end of all supernaturalist ontologies, however attenuated, and their displacement by an immanentist materialism, grasped as the primacy of experienced actuality behind and beyond which we cannot go. At the same time, partly through the discoveries of empirical science itself, this same shift induced a profound decentring. After Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton, the human species upon whose reason and experience the new science was based, was discovered not to be the centre of anything.

[T]he discovery, or rather the proof, of the double movement of the earth constitutes the most important revolution in science belonging to the preliminary stage of human reason . . . it is by virtue of the earth's motion that the Positive doctrine has come to be directly incompatible with all theological doctrine by making our largest speculations relative, whereas previously they had an absolute character. (XI:190-1)

The 'this-sided' disintegration of a shadowy beyond implied the valorisation of human actuality. Yet the Copernican turn undermined the naive anthropocentrism on which the old theism had depended. To make humankind the measure and source of all moral and epistemological value might still be the indicated path. However, if we were to be true to our knowledge, it was a path that could only be taken with the clear recognition that for the human subject to take itself as a foundation was a *relative* standpoint which could only be ratified as such. In any case, a return to innocent illusion was barred. If the humanity pitched into an a-centric universe was to provide itself with a new map and compass, this could only be done in full awareness of the perspectival relativity of all human constructions, and with no guarantees concerning their Truth.²⁰

¹⁹ The historical course of the *décadence de Dieu* is traced in the third volume of *Politique positive* (IX:507 et seq.).

²⁰ Macherey (1989:31-3, 121-2) also notes the similarity between Comte's relativism and

The striking affinities between Comte's and Nietzsche's understandings of the paradoxical implications of the scientific break from theism are not accidental. Nietzsche cites or alludes to Comte in several of the texts²¹ in which he discusses what it would mean to become contemporary with, and take responsibility for, the enhanced scientific and technological power of the species, and the this-sided grasp of the world on which such knowledge depends. But the relation is two-way. If Nietzsche, in a certain measure, appropriated Comte, Comte can also be read in the light of Nietzsche. That is: his entire reconstructive effort can be seen as an attempt to grapple with the vertiginous disorientation – and nihilism – which Nietzsche was to place at the foreground of attention. Of course it is a different response. Rather than pushing perspectivalism or nihilism all the way, Comte strenuously reacts, in the medium of a traumatised ex-Catholic sensibility, against the threat of 'anarchy', both social and interior to the individual subject. And where Nietzsche, allergic to 'moralic acid', embraced Dionysus (as a figure for the divine but amoral procreativity of Life) against the Crucified, Comte followed the 'secularising' path of those who sought, contrariwise, to extract from Christianity – indeed from all religions – Love as the rational kernel of its ethic, and Humanity as the truth of its God.

The stormy passage, from Hegel to Nietzsche via the Young Hegelians, of the immanent critique of religion in nineteenth-century German thought was examined by Löwith in a celebrated debate with Blumenberg about 'secularisation'.²² A comparison with the corresponding French narrative would be instructive. In general terms, the German development proceeds from the cultural and subjective grounding of 'spirit', an interiorisation of the divine principle that had already been personalised and desacredotalised through Protestantism; whereas the French, in the current that runs through the *idéologues*,

Nietzsche's perspectivism, though without reference to the 'Copernicanism' that is a recurrent theme in Comte (e.g. VII:46 and IX:349).

²¹ Besides the reference to 'positivism' in the 'History of an Error' section of *Twilight of the Idols* (Nietzsche, 1990:50), two passages in *Daybreak* explicitly comment on Comte (Nietzsche, 1982:82, 215–16). I discuss these in chapter 7 below.

²² Löwith's *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1967) argues the continuity of modern German philosophy with Protestant theology, particularly in those moves which proclaimed a break from, or supersession of, the latter. The general framework is laid out in *Meaning in History* (1949), and it is this text which Blumenberg addresses in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1985:27–9). For Löwith, modern thought in repudiating God only secularised the Christian theme of salvation in/through history and so did not involve a fundamental break. The real break was Christianity's own turning away from the cosmos to history as the ground of meaning in the first place. Blumenberg attacks this view as 'substantialist', and insists that intellectual modernity is indeed discontinuous, particularly with regard to its changed grounds for the legitimacy of knowledge and judgment.

Saint-Simonians and sociologists, generated a civic humanism saturated with the corporatism and religious externalism of the unreconstructedly Catholic. Thus the divinisation of Man implicit, for example, in Feuerbach's ambition to translate theology into anthropology, focussed on the generic essence of the human individual. For Saint-Simon, Comte and Durkheim, on the other hand, divine predicates were shifted onto a metaindividual *topos* constituted by the human collectivity in a strong and organic sense.

Nietzsche, it can be said, broke from any version of this neo-Christian schema, while Comte clearly did not. Indeed, Comte's religion of Humanity can be regarded as just a stopgap, or detour, in the 'self-devaluating of the highest values hitherto' (Nietzsche, 1968:9) which Nietzsche, drawing more radical conclusions, wished to push through to a 'transvaluation of all values'. As such, it would be a case of what Heidegger called 'incomplete nihilism',²³ a critique of metaphysics that takes fright at the abyss of evacuated faith and tries to staunch the wound with debris from the shattered idols. It can even be read as not a real rupture at all. As John Milbank observes, "society is God" can always be deconstructed to read "society is God's presence"²⁴ (1993:52).

It can nevertheless be argued that Comte still belongs to a Nietzschean problematic because, in his effort to reconstruct subjectivity in light of the scientific transformation of knowledge, he aimed to root out not only supernaturalism but any absolutely fixed truth, and even – notwithstanding any worshipful way *La Déesse* was to be imagined – any essentialist mysticism about Humanity itself. Against readings of Comte, then, that primarily emphasise his continuity with the ideology²⁴ (Nisbet, 1973) and theology (Milbank, 1993) of the Catholic reactionaries, I would like to insist that his religiosity is *also* marked by the deeply reflected tension of a thought which is, so to speak, becoming post-theistic. As such, its lines of flight intersect with contemporary discussions which, via Heidegger, Bataille and the postmoderns, have revived Nietzsche's scenario of dying gods and twilight idols as the

²³ 'Incomplete nihilism does indeed replace the former values with others, but it still posits the latter always in the old position of authority that is, as it were, gratuitously maintained and the ideal realm of the supersensory. Completed nihilism however must do away even with the place of value itself, with the supersensory as a realm' (1977a:69). For Heidegger, Nietzsche's own 'positivist' enmeshment in a vocabulary of values and valuation left him still within the modern philosophy of the subject, so that his own transvaluation was itself only 'incompletely nihilist' (ibid.:104–9).

²⁴ Nisbet's emphasis on the influence of conservative religious thought on French sociology (e.g. 1973:238–41) leads him to misread some aspects of the latter. Speaking of Durkheim, he observes, 'His positivism has little to do with Comte's brand' (1965:28).

groundless ground on which to construct an understanding of our own discontents and possibilities.

Comte's contradictory position as an anti-metaphysician who sacralises a socio-historical conception of the human also holds a special interest for those trying to think through what it means, at millennium's end, to be of (or on) the left. As an eccentric outrider of the Saint-Simonians, Comte belongs to the ideological preformation of modern socialism.²⁵ As such, his work may be dismissed as a historical footnote to the founders. What is worth highlighting, though, is precisely what was entailed by this performative role.

Comte not only espoused, but deeply probed the rationale for, a cooperative form of society; a rationale which he linked on the one hand to the fundamental (and historically developing) nature of social being, and on the other to the problems of developing a non-transcendentalist religious perspective in tune with the scientific age. Considering that the deepest presuppositions of the transformist impulse – for so long 'wizened and out of sight' both in the Marxism that has prevailed on its radical side and in the moralism (manifest today in identity politics and the 'equity agenda') that has prevailed on its reformist side – became fragile and exposed in the unravelling of the socialist project in the last decades of the twentieth century, we can see here a second order of contemporary significance. As displayed, for example, in Habermas's reflection on communicative rationality (1987), in Derrida's spectrological meditations on justice as the 'messianic' element in Marx (1993), in Levinas's phenomenology of the Other (1969), and (at a less exalted theoretical level) in Lerner's 'politics of meaning' (1996), a reconsideration of the ideological, even religious, roots of socialism has moved (back) on to the agenda. Re-examining earlier figures like Comte, then, can become part of a renewed effort to clarify, and soberly rethink, what most deeply defines a progressive, emancipatory or – to use the maligned word – communist commitment.

Comte, to be sure, is a strange mirror to hold up. His political relation to the socialist tradition is ambiguous, to say the least. A top-down reformist who eschewed the collectivisation of private property in favour of measures to ensure its morally responsive stewardship,²⁶ his politics

²⁵ For Comte's place in the larger contemporary Parisian constellation of prophetic and utopian thinkers, see Manuel, 1962:249–96.

²⁶ These measures included: the establishment of a fixed scale of salaries (X:340–3), the institution of local *salons* for mingling and instruction, which would bring *patriciens* and *prolétaires* together in the same moral milieu (X:314–15), and a succession process in which the passage of property to heirs would be vetted, and eventually, through artificial conception (X:278), separated from heredity as such. The total intended effect was to create a moral atmosphere in which *occupations personnelles* would be converted

had much in common with the Saint-Simonian current, in whose direct orbit he was from 1817 to 1825.²⁷ His political objective, which never changed, was to complete the work of 1789 by developing an institutional framework (including a ‘terrestrial morality’) within which science-based knowledge and production could become systematic, harmonious and predominant, to the benefit of society as a whole. Remnants of the *ancien régime* were at first the main target. ‘It is on the revolutionary school alone’, he noted in *Philosophie positive*, ‘that we can expect that the positive polity can experience a predominant influence, because this is the only one that is always open to new action on behalf of progress.’²⁸ In that spirit, he was an anti-monarchist during the Bourbon restoration, while under Louis-Philippe he urged a cross-class alliance of workers and ‘patriciens’ to press for the reforms that would permit the new industrial/positive system fully to emerge. At the same time, and increasingly, Comte was a partisan of order as well as progress. He was hostile to any form of popular insurrection, or indeed democratising project. With the rise of a radical workers’ movement in the watershed decade of the 1840s, he began, accordingly, to seek alliances on the right. In the upheavals of 1848–51, he detached himself from the republicans, argued for a ‘dictatorship’ (as under Danton), then gave cautious welcome to Louis Bonaparte, whose regime he tried to win to the cause.²⁹ When that came to nothing, he was again pushed into

into *fonctions civiques*, and in which all would be cooperating in a collective and, above all, future-oriented task (IX:491).

²⁷ In 1817 Comte became Saint-Simon’s personal secretary and editor of his house journal, *L’Industrie*. The master’s refusal to acknowledge Comte’s authorship of key articles, and arguments about who was stealing ideas from whom, led to a bitter break. On Saint-Simon’s death in 1825, Comte nonetheless agreed to contribute an essay to the founding issue of *Le Producteur*, which his closest followers put together a bare three weeks after the old man was gone. For a detailed account of Comte’s break with Saint-Simon, see Gouhier (1965:95–109) and Pickering (1993:192–244). The essay at the centre of their final dispute (which Comte wrote in 1922 but which Saint-Simon published, with a disclaimer, only in 1824) was ‘Plan des travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour réorganiser la société’. He always referred to it as ‘mon opuscule fondamental’. He republished it, with five other early essays, as an appendix to the last volume of *Politique positive*.

²⁸ Martineau, 1853, II:437. A critical but ‘appreciative’ assessment of the ‘époque critique, ou âge de transition révolutionnaire’ is laid out in the 55th *leçon* of *Le cours de philosophie positive* (V:394–623).

²⁹ For Comte’s political trajectory, see Pickering, 1993:chs. 2 and 10, and Gouhier, 1965:144–8. Comte’s critique of the Bourbon Restoration for its ‘retrograde’ alliance with remnants of the *ancien régime* continued into the Orleanist regime of Louis-Philippe. Unlike other moderate Republicans, though, he equally opposed Parliamentarism, as he made clear in a letter (with other signatories) he sent to Louis-Philippe in 1840 (Pickering, 1993:432). After seeking the support of women and workers in the *Catéchisme positiviste* of 1852, he sought those of *les hommes d’état* in his *Appel aux conservateurs*, which appealed for subsidies to support (his own) *sacerdoce*. Its tone may

opposition, where, till his death in 1857, he confined his attention to appealing for money, developing a core of acolytes, and propagandising for Positivism and its Church.³⁰

The limitations of nineteenth-century French ‘socialism’, in the non-Marxist stream that runs from the Saint-Simonians to the social democracy of Jean Jaurès and the solidarism (with which Durkheim was briefly associated) of Léon Bourgeois,³¹ are easy enough to state. It reduced to a moral plane both the problem of and solution to the contradictions of industrial capitalism. These contradictions it also defined as transitional rather than inherent, resulting from the incompleteness of industrialism’s emancipation from pre-industrial ways of seeing, feeling, thinking and acting. Correlative with this conflation, which was carried into the heart of Comtean, and Durkheimian, sociology, there is no conceptual room for the economic as such, either as the basis of class relations or as the moulder of social structures and processes through the logic of capital and commodities. Such phenomena are assimilated instead to technical realities (production, industry) on the one side, and to social-moral ones (distribution, coordination) on the other. Therewith, the conflictual and disintegrative effects of the free market are defined as a kind of cultural pathology which can be cured by institutional reforms designed to harmonise, solidarise, ethicise etc. the whole sphere of production and exchange. Anarchists, libertarians and Critical Theorists will add that, faulty social analysis aside, there are serious weaknesses of vision in this form of socialism too. Enthusiasm for *l’industrie* was the watchword for a bad utopia: society as a vast workshop, productivist, technocratic and held together as a managed harmony of useful functions by a centrally directed state. It is a vision which hovers at the edges of the *Communist Manifesto*’s transitional program,³² and one that, for all of Marx’s own horizon of freedom beyond the realm of necessity, the ideologues of the Second and Third Internationals never submitted to much critical scrutiny.

Once such a critique is admitted, however, there remains a residue of

be gathered from the new slogan that appears in its frontispiece: *La Famille, la Patrie, l’Humanité*.

³⁰ After Comte’s death, the Positivist Society, under Pierre Laffitte, continued to propagate Comte’s ideas. Its last major public involvement was a campaign, in alliance with the Parisian Catholic hierarchy, to prevent the city authorities from relocating the main Paris cemetery outside the city limits. See Ariès (1981:541–5). The cult of the dead was a central feature of religious Positivism.

³¹ Léon Bourgeois expounded his social philosophy in *La solidarité* (1896). For Durkheim’s involvement with *solidarisme*, see Lukes, 1972:350–4.

³² In points 6 (‘centralisation of all means of communication and transportation in the hands of the state’) and 8 (‘establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture’) (Feuer, 1959:28).

considerations that have not been entirely dispelled. One set of issues concerns the constitution and axiological status of the collective subject. 'The standpoint of the old type of materialism', wrote Marx in his 'Theses on Feuerbach', 'is civil society. The standpoint of the new materialism is social humanity or human society' (Marx and Engels, 1947:199). The dictum applies to the ideological as well as the theoretical plane. In all its variants, and however qualified by individualism, socialism's sacral term is always some version of the first person plural. This 'we' forms both the ground and horizon of progressive political activity. The transformist aim is to autonomise and finally heal it, so that the organised collectivity of society is no longer coercive, no longer masks the domination structure of a pseudo-community, and does not stand in contradiction to the 'I's that make it up. But how is such a collectivity – Bloch's 'not-yet community'?³³ Bernstein's (and Habermas's) community-as-regulative-ideal? Blanchot's (1986) *communauté invouable*? – to be conceived? How is it to be thought with respect to social, psychological and historical categories? How, with respect to agency? How, if we are to avoid dogmatism or idealism, can 'social humanity', or a guiding 'we', be grounded? What meaning can be ascribed to it within a critical, demythologised, socio-historical self-understanding?

I do not want to suggest that Comte provides a satisfactory answer to these questions. Nonetheless, what he projected into the category of *l'Humanité* arose from a persevering attempt both to provide one, and in the context of a world-view which aimed to make theory practical, and return it to earth. Comte's elaboration of that term, then, including his attempt to ground it in an analysis of 'the social tie', might usefully be revisited as part of a wider inquiry into the social problematics of transformist thought.

Comte's treatment, however, is connected to a less digestible point. The worship of *l'Humanité* was not just designed to inspire us all forward. Its institution, as concept and cult, was tied, within a program of social reconstruction, to the perspective of unity and order. Progress itself, Comte insisted, is 'the progress of order'. And what secures order, as the complex of practices that bind individuals together in a society, and binds together this binding, is 'religion'. In so far as Comte confounds, under the technicist rubric of industrial society, the problem of capitalist order with that of social order as such, we may dismiss both his analysis and his prescriptions as a misrecognition of the problem. Given the social antagonisms and cultural corrosion that are endemic to

³³ For the 'not-yet' as a dialectical utopian category, see Bloch, 1995:310–11.

the dynamics of capitalist industrialisation, it is no wonder he proposes such a vast apparatus of *régulation* and *ralliement* to hold it all together. Has he not, in fact, simply mistaken the ideological superstructure for the base of the social formation he would religiously unify?

These objections may be granted, yet it may still be possible to learn from what Comte was aiming to do. Colletti, dismissive of determinist and economistic forms of Marxism, but equally opposed to the inflated role of will and subjectivity in counter-strains, suggested a policy, in such matters, of constructive engagement. The split between Kautsky and Plekhanov on the one side, and ‘Austro-Marxists’ on the other, he notes, ‘can be traced to the basic orientations into which bourgeois culture was split in the second half of the nineteenth century’ (1972:18). That split, between equally one-sided approaches to the relation between social consciousness and social being, had persisted in orthodox Marxism’s attitude to its ‘bourgeois’ sociological rival. Classical sociology may be judged idealist, subjectivist etc. in so far as it takes consciousness (the *conscience collective* for Durkheim, the intentionality of social action for Weber) to be the key for explaining social structure. But criticising this should not lead us to forget, first, that ideology is also consciousness which, as mental appropriation, changes both subject and object, and, second, that ‘ideological social relations’ are an independently effective part of the social whole.³⁴

Colletti implies the possibility of a critical appropriation in which one form of one-sidedness might correct another. Althusser, thinking more especially of French classical sociology, though less open about the appropriation he is recommending, goes further. Ideology – as the sphere in which individuals are ‘interpellated’ as subjects and in which, as a crucial element of that interpellation and its cognitive consequences, individuals bear an ‘imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence’ (1971:152–5) – is irreducible. It is not, as some passages in the early Marx appeared to suggest,³⁵ destined to disappear as an

³⁴ ‘The term “socio-economic formation” is a vivid expression of the fact that the object of *Capital* has the character of a “whole” . . . i.e. something including in its scope both social *being* and social *consciousness*, or rather both conditions *a parte objecti* and conditions *a parte subjecti* . . . Both subject and object are part of an *objective* subject-object process. The superstructure is itself an aspect and articulation of the structure . . . it is however equally true that the superstructural or ideological level, though it may be *part* of the structure and of social being, nonetheless is so as *consciousness*, i.e. it has a specific role *vis-à-vis* other parts of the structure’ (Colletti, 1972:10–11). It may be noted that Colletti follows Rickert in including Comte (as a small-‘p’ positivist) among those who do not recognise this. However, as I suggest (chapter 4 below), such a characterisation misses the mark.

³⁵ Althusser discusses Marx’s treatment of ‘philosophy’, and the status of his own, in *For Marx* (1969). See especially 28–30 and chap. 2, ‘On the Young Marx’.

expression or epiphenomenon of class domination, or after ‘real knowledge’ has replaced empty ‘speculation’ (Marx and Engels, 1947:15). In effect, what Comte calls ‘religion’ is what Althusser calls ‘ideology’; from which angle, the way to understand what the Comte/Durkheim tradition defined as the problem of religion and social order would be to recast it (and the mechanistic metaphor of the ‘superstructure’) in terms of the structures and processes through which the prevailing complex of social relations is *reproduced*.

Comte and the canon

So far I have suggested that there are substantive reasons why re-examining Comte’s thought might be worth while. But as the reference to Althusser implies, there is also another reason. This has to do with a further set of issues concerning misimpressions – affecting other figures beside Comte himself – which have arisen because of Comte’s place, or rather non-place, in the canon of modern western thought.

Talcott Parsons opened *The Social System* with the rhetorical question (from Crane Brinton) ‘Who now reads Spencer?’ (1968:3). With more than equal force we could ask the same about Comte. Since the early studies by John Stuart Mill (1961) and Caird (1885), and writings by Harrison (1975) and other partisans of the Positivist Society, there have been, until very recently (Pickering, 1993; Scharff, 1995), no serious full-length studies of his thought in English.³⁶ In the history of socialism, Comte’s place has been eclipsed by Saint-Simon (whom few read either), and in that of French sociology (with more justification) by Durkheim. Comte’s reputation in France has fared little better. He may have been, in the century before Sartre, ‘the only mind worthy of interest which French philosophy produced’ (Althusser, 1969:25); but after the initial flurry of controversy, and Lévy-Bruhl’s sympathetic explication (1903), Comte’s work was largely ignored – buried, as Althusser puts it, under a ‘relentless hostility’.³⁷

³⁶ Mary Pickering’s intellectual biography of Comte – the first volume of which (up to 1842) was published in 1993 – significantly updates Gouhier (1933–41, 1965) and is an important historiographic resource. Robert Scharff’s *Comte after Positivism* (1995), a finely argued rescue of Comte’s philosophy of science from Mill’s appropriation, treats Comte in the ‘post-positivist’ context of Anglo-American philosophical discussion about ‘historical sensitivity and ahistorical objectivism’. These books, published since this study was begun, suggest that an interest in Comte is beginning to revive.

³⁷ Partly, perhaps, as a result of Althusser’s own influence, there was some revival of interest in Comte in France during the 1970s. Particularly noteworthy is the work of Angèle Krémer-Marietti (1980, 1982), which reexamines Comte’s notion of representation, language and sentiments, and of Kofman (1978) which (psycho)analyses the gender dimension. The cursory treatment that Foucault gives Comte in *The Order of*

Comte's obscurity would be unremarkable if he had been a merely minor and transient figure. However, and leaving aside his British influence through John Stuart Mill, Comte's influence on French thought, and so, these days, on Anglophone thought as well, has been profound.³⁸ Somewhat like Hegel, that other grand historicist totaliser of his epoch, his system broke into pieces among his legatees.³⁹ But elements of that system entered many discourses, academic and non-academic,⁴⁰ some with a powerful posthumous career. This is evident in biology⁴¹ and even more in sociology, a word he coined. In the quest for a positive 'science of science', a Comtean imprint is also palpable in the field of historical epistemology: that is, in the project of developing a theoretical history of knowledge, pursued in different ways by Bachelard, Koyré, Canguilhem and, more latterly, Foucault.⁴²

There have also been periodic attempts to amend and reformulate Comte's larger project, including its political and religious dimensions. Though he cited Montesquieu, Rousseau and Saint-Simon as the main precursors of his relaunched sociology,⁴³ Durkheim's wider program

Things (1970), even in a work that focuses on the hinge period to which Comte belonged, is indicative however of the marginalised position Comte more generally continued to hold.

- ³⁸ Comte's thought also had an (unacknowledged) impact in Germany. Husserl's diagnosis of the 'spiritual crisis', with its attack on the ascendancy of a 'negative' rationality, and its championing of 'philosophy-science', differs from Comte in urging a return to pre-Socratic Greek philosophical roots, but its starting point (and its language) is almost identical. '(O)ur age is according to its vocation a great age – only it suffers from the skepticism that has disintegrated the old, unclarified ideals. And for that reason it suffers from the too negligible development and force of philosophy, which has not yet progressed enough to overcome skeptical negativism (which calls itself positivism) by means of true positivism' (Husserl, 1965:145). The allusion in the last line is unmistakable.
- ³⁹ For a first-hand account of splits in the Positivist Society itself, see Littré (1864). For the decline of the Positivist movement in Britain, see Wright (1986:240–72).
- ⁴⁰ Among those influenced by Comte were Charles Maurras, founder of Action Française (Nolte, 1965:52 et seq.), and Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Movement.
- ⁴¹ For the influence of Positivism on biology in nineteenth-century France, both through *La Société de Biologie* (founded in 1848 by Robin and Segond) and through Émile Littré, see Canguilhem (1994:251–60).
- ⁴² In his introduction to the English edition of Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault surveys this development, highlighting the fact that 'for a century and a half (after 1789) the history of science carried with it in France philosophical stakes' (Canguilhem, 1991:11). For him, though, Comte is less central than a more general contrast between the French and German engagements with the 'question of Enlightenment'. The German case involved philosophy 'in a historical and political reflection on society . . . In France it is the history of science which has above all served to support the philosophical question of the Enlightenment: after all, the positivism of Comte and his successors was one way of taking up again the questioning by Mendelssohn and Kant on the scale of a general history of societies' (10).
- ⁴³ Durkheim's essay on Montesquieu, 'Quid Secundatus politicae scientiae instituendae

can certainly be understood that way; as too, though the disguise is heavier, can the early Althusser. With the reception of linguistic theory and phenomenology, and with the rise of structuralism and poststructuralism, the Positivist matrix which had shadowed, and partly shaped, the *sciences humaines* during the first half of this century was certainly dislocated and displaced. Even here, though, Comtean themes have often been close to the surface, as for example in that chapter of *De la grammatologie* where Derrida asks whether grammatology can be 'a positive science'.⁴⁴

In France, the background presence of the Comtean inheritance has been real, but of little mainstream interest. In the Anglophone vogue for new French thought, lack of acknowledgment has been reinforced by lack of knowledge. Deconstruction, received into American thinking through literary studies, and taken up by a political interest in 'decentring' the (western, white, male, heterosexual etc.) subject, popularly gave itself a pedigree that ran almost in a straight line from Nietzsche to Heidegger to Derrida.⁴⁵ A sideshoot went from Saussure and Peirce to Barthes, discourse analysis and Foucault. In such a truncated account, the fuller intellectual history sedimented within (post)structuralism understandably got lost in translation.

The British case was less straightforward. There, as Anthony Easthope (1991:1–33) has detailed, the initial reception of new French thought went mainly through Althusser, in the context of a far-reaching 1970s debate within and about Marxism.⁴⁶ What came out of that moment was a reworked neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony (Hall, 1984), a theory of ideology which took critical social and cultural theory towards a problematisation of subjectivity and discourse,⁴⁷ and was a

cotulerit', written as the Latin thesis requirement for his *agrégation*, and his essay on Rousseau's *Contrat social*, posthumously published in 1918, were published together in English in 1965 (Durkheim, 1965). Durkheim's Bordeaux lectures on socialism and Saint-Simon credit the latter, much more than Comte, with the scientific–diagnostic science of society he aimed to develop (Durkheim, 1962).

⁴⁴ In part 1, chap. 3. Not surprisingly, since Derrida takes writing to be the undoing of any *logos*, Derrida's answer is more than negative. 'On what condition is grammatology possible? Its fundamental condition is certainly the undoing [*solicitation*] of logocentrism. But this condition of possibility turns into a condition of impossibility. In fact it risks ruining the principle of science as well. Graphematics or grammatology ought no longer to be presented as sciences; their goal should be exorbitant compared to *grammatological* language' (Derrida, 1974:74).

⁴⁵ Mark Taylor's *Altarity* (1987), which sketches out the genealogy for a 'postmodern a/theology' from Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger to Derrida (and so reads the latter through the prism of the former), is a case in point.

⁴⁶ Ioan Davies (1995:10–62) has examined this debate, which prominently pitted E. P. Thompson against Perry Anderson and the dominant group in the *New Left Review*, in the course of a wider examination of the rise of a British 'cultural Marxism'.

⁴⁷ The intermediary figures here were Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985).

pathway towards the galaxy of Parisian postmoderns. Paul Hirst's (1975) Althusserian study of Durkheim implied a corrective, and so also continuous, relation between them; but neither he nor anyone else was concerned to explore Althusser's larger debt to Comte. When Althusser recanted the 'theoreticist' positions advanced in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, he confessed that 'Nous avons été Spinozistes' (1974:65). Some, looking for elaboration, went back to Spinoza himself;⁴⁸ but debate focussed on issues of theory and practice,⁴⁹ and none were disposed to challenge this characterisation as the proper name for Althusser's deviation. The price of ignorance was a missed opportunity. Had Althusser been understood against the background of what was distinctive in the modern French sociological tradition as a whole, it might have been possible to see that Hegel – and Stalin – were not the only ghosts at the table of contemporary Marxist theory. It might also have been possible to see that the Althusserian intervention invited critical reflection not just on socialist *science*, but on socialist *ideology* – using that term 'positively' – as well.

Whitehead observed that 'a science that omits to forget its founders is lost'. But this only holds in the domain of what Horkheimer called 'traditional theory' (1972:188–243) – that is, where knowledge accumulates in some objectifiable way, and where the results can be conceptually separated from the process of thought which produced it. Neither condition obtains in social, political and cultural theory where theory, having to grapple with the inherence of the subject in the object, must eschew a false detachment and strive instead for critical reflexivity. Nor are these conditions satisfied where the aim is to develop, not simply the one best theorisation, but an entire repertoire of modes of thinking, and thinking about thinking, which might optimally help to generate a multidimensional understanding of a multiplex world. Under such circumstances, founding figures are certainly not to be fetishised. But neither are they to be forgotten, at least as mnemonic markers for the themes, concepts and framing devices carried by their thought, together with the other names that mark its subsequent development and dissemination.

The question of canons – what they include and exclude, how they

⁴⁸ 'For Althusser, ideology is best understood as a concept precisely equivalent to Spinoza's "knowledge of imagination" . . . In fact it is no exaggeration to say that the entire project of Althusserianism comes down to the issue of Spinoza *versus* Hegel, or the claims of a Marxist theoretical "science" as opposed to a subject-centred dialectics of class-consciousness, alienation, "expressive causality" and other such Hegelian residues' (Norris, 1991:34–5). Althusser's relation to Spinoza is also an important feature of Eliot (1987).

⁴⁹ See especially the title essay in E. P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory* (1978).

are formed, and what to make of them – has become controversial with respect to literature and the arts, as well as in the domain of theory (Guillory, 1993). The very notion has become suspect, implying (in the medieval manner) pre-given Authorities whose lead we must follow and to whom we must defer. But in a more pluralistic and less dogmatic sense what one might call, if not a canon, then a shifting canonical assemblage of the intellectual tradition, is indispensable for theorising in the human domain. Within such an assemblage, carrying forward the themes, categories and metatheory of even major thinkers now *passé*, can provide both a principle of intelligibility *vis-à-vis* related, or opposed, forms of theoretical approach, and an ongoing resource, at least as a kind of second-order software, if no longer with respect to their ‘effects of truth’. This is not to say that the intellectual canon is always what it should be; nor – though it is never fixed, and always contested – that it can be altered at will. It is just that we tend to construct our organon for thinking with the aid of what, and whom, the current canon foregrounds. To which extent, the relation to it of past thinkers, paradigms and traditions is always worth reconsidering.

Comte’s posthumous disregard can be blamed on his own idiosyncratic and sectarian deficiencies. However, recalled now as neither a real philosopher nor a real sociologist, we can also interpret his being forgotten as an effect of the very process of intellectual fragmentation which he strove in vain to overcome. In this respect, he belongs to a larger tradition of reflecting and theorising about the grand themes of society and human nature which, for most of this century, has fitted poorly into the established disciplinary grid, and has been marginalised as a result. One does not have to claim Comte’s genius to have been equal to that of those great German thinkers whose philosophical reputation (deservedly) outstrips his, and whose *speculations orgueilleuses* he despised, in order to argue that this disregard is unwarranted. What makes it so is the strategic place Comte occupies in modern European intellectual history. Indeed, it is plausible to argue that that history, and its informing effects on the present, are unintelligible if we take no account of the project and metanarrative Comte tried to synthesise, the influence it came to have in the (French) development of the human sciences, and, by way of postmodern theory, the more recent impact, and implications, of its disarticulation and collapse.

A better understanding of Comte can help illuminate, more particularly, two developments in the larger complex of European thought. The first, originating with Bacon’s *Great Instauration*, is traceable through the *Encyclopédistes*, to Condorcet, Destutt de Tracy and the *idéologues*, and thence to Saint-Simon, Comte and their derivatives. The

guiding aim of this current was to develop a grand synthesis of scientific knowledge through systematically mapping its results and principles. This in turn would provide a basis both for a naturalistic understanding of humanity's place in the cosmos, and for forging an intellectual instrument for extending human (self-)control. In historical terms, the project presented itself as a correction of Aristotle – particularly the Aristotle of the Scholastics – in light of the rise of the natural sciences. If the initial target was Aristotelianism, however, the principal thought-opponent was Plato, and by extension all a prioristic, idealist, in short 'metaphysical', forms of reason. Comte's contribution was to apply this critique to the rationalist political and moral theory of the *philosophes* so that, by means of a real 'science of Man', the Baconian matrix could be fully positivised as the subject and object of its own gaze.

The second sub-genealogy we have already come to. More particularly French, it pertains to the theoretical career of that idea for a post-theistic religion which, after 1789,⁵⁰ reconstructive reformers sought to install as the historically proper replacement for the Catholicism of the *ancien régime*. At the centre of this story is the rise and fall of the social – *qua* Humanity and Society – as a sacred absolute, and of sociology as the *logos* of that god. This itself, though, may be regarded as a (perhaps closing) chapter of a much longer French adventure with reason and faith – an adventure which issued from patristic Christianity's attempt to reconcile the mysteries of faith with Greek philosophy, and whose opening storms go back to medieval theology and controversies over rationalism and natural philosophy at the University of Paris in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Pieper, 1960). In its classically constructive moment, and with a neo-Kantian amendment,⁵¹ the (modern) narrative runs from Saint-Simon's *Nouveau christianisme* and Comte's *Religion positive*, to Durkheim's civic religion. The project's disintegration can be traced through the structuralist, phenomenological (and Bataillian) break-up of the Society-subject, and thence to all the 'death of . . .' pronouncements which returned thought to a black hole in which reason and faith had both disappeared.

⁵⁰ Beginning with the Jacobins' *culte de la Raison* in 1793, and *culte de l'Être suprême* in 1794. At the inauguration of the latter in the Champs de Mars, 'Robespierre set fire, with a torch handed to him by David, to a huge cardboard figure of atheism, which went up in flames, exposing to view a rather smoky statue of Wisdom, after which the whole Convention, and delegates from the sections, ascended an artificial mountain where appropriate ceremonies were performed' (Cobban, 1982:232). Gouhier suggests that Comte's religion of Humanity can be understood as 'une survivance de l'époque révolutionnaire' (Gouhier, 1933–41, 1:5–7).

⁵¹ Durkheim's 'neo-naturalist' reconciliation of positivism and Kantian idealism is examined by Wallwork in *Durkheim: Morality and Milieu*. The immediate linking figure is Charles Renouvier (Lukes, 1972:54–7).

Comte offers an illuminating vantage point from which to examine both of these developments. His Positivism was fashioned *both* as a scientific systematisation of science *and* as humanistically demystified religion. To be sure, Comte was not the only cross-over point. Bacon's House of Salomon prefigured the Positivist priesthood. Appeals to 'natural religion', as an alternative to the prescientific reliance on Authority and Revelation, were a common coin among freethinkers in the century preceding Comte. De Tracy's *Elémens d'idéologie* and Saint-Simon's writings *before* he met Comte – indicating the need for a science of Man and, on that basis, a new synthesis of knowledge to complete the scientific revolution as the industrial-age basis for a moral renovation⁵² – show clearly enough that these themes were not original with him. But Comte was the first to think out, systematically and self-consciously, the integration of both projects. Hence, in the intellectual tradition of modernity, the importance his thought holds both as a strategic reference point and as an event with its own continuing effects.

Order of exposition

Against the background of these considerations, I propose to investigate the themes, structure and movement of the Comtean system with particular attention to the relation between its religious and social-theoretical elements. I focus on the religious side for two reasons. First, because this is crucial to understanding Comte's project as a whole; secondly, as a way to broach more contemporary issues concerning transcendence, politics and the social, particularly as these touch on the problem of critically rethinking what Comte formulated as Humanist faith.

To that end, I propose to explore Comte's religious and theoretical position – in his terms, the doctrine of Positive Religion – at four levels. The first (chapters 2 and 3) will consider the overall schematics of his attempt to produce a totalisation of human knowledge and consciousness. The next (chapter 4), will consider his proto-sociological analysis of the contemporary 'religious crisis' to which that totalisation, and its associated program of reforms, was conceived as a response. Chapters 5 and 6 examine his theory of social being, in both its 'static' and 'dynamic' aspects, highlighting that being's complex dual status (as subject/object for both science and religion) and its transcending significance as the self-perfecting incarnation of Love. This, finally

⁵² The need for a philosophical synthesis of the sciences is laid out in Saint-Simon's 1807 essay, *Introduction aux travaux scientifiques du XIXème siècle*. His *Mémoire sur la science de l'homme* was written in 1813. See Pickering, 1993:70–85.

(chapter 7), will bring us to Comte's reflection on the nature of the Positivist godhead, which figured *l'Humanité* as *le Grand-Être*, and whose dedicated *serviteurs* he enjoined us all to be.

Comte's thought, I mean to show, was radically flawed, not only as science and as a socio-political program, but at its fideistic core, that is, as a religious position that would sublimate the old gods. At the same time, it opened up a complex of issues concerning what is theoretically, ideologically and politically implied by a thoroughgoingly 'social outlook' that cannot be lightly dismissed. In that spirit, the study will conclude (chapter 8) with a consideration of what might be retrieved from the ruins. After Durkheim, the secularising attempt to conceive, and institute, the human collectivity as a divine ensemble irrevocably collapsed. Nevertheless, the work of Bataille, Althusser, Baudrillard and Nancy is adduced to show that drawing the non-catastrophic consequences of this collapse has enabled revised versions of (what I will call) socio-theology to generate a new (or renewed) field of questions still pertinent to a politically charged manner of thinking about the social.

In explicating Comte himself, the order of inquiry could no doubt have been different. Comte's system of systems, somewhat like Hegel's 'circle of circles', is complexly interrelated, indeed to the point of a baffling self-referentiality. It can be entered anywhere or nowhere. But for the same reason, at whatever level we enter it, we cannot avoid encountering the totalising systematicity which characterised every aspect of his thinking. To begin with a reflection on its abstract schematics at least has the advantage of underlining that point. Such a starting point will also introduce us to that 'mania for unity' which John Stuart Mill (1961) and many others have found indigestible in the temper and movement of Comte's thought. As we shall see, Comte's synthesising zeal not only symptomatises a horror for the hell of non-closure. It also self-consciously expressed what he took to be a divine impulse, *l'amour universel* – an impulse which lies at the heart of his religious project, and whose misrecognition, and implicit violence, can be diagnosed, religiously as well as conceptually, as its original sin.