

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

‘When some future historian of opinion deals with the speculations current at the present day’, wrote Leslie Stephen in 1869, ‘he will find few more remarkable phenomena than the development of the Comtist School’ (*FM* LXXX (1869) 1). The main aim of this school was the propagation of the Religion of Humanity first expounded in the later writings of the extraordinary French thinker, Auguste Comte, who died in obscurity in Paris in 1857. This book considers the extent to which the Comtists succeeded in making an impact in Britain. It is in some ways a very limited study, given precise definition by the focus on Comte. But it is also a massive undertaking because nearly all the major British thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century seem to have studied Comte, even if very few of them committed themselves to the Religion of Humanity. Comte’s influence, it is the aim of this book to demonstrate, far outweighs his reputation. Not only through his acknowledged disciples but through an extraordinary range of philosophers, sociologists, historians, theologians, novelists, poets and men of letters, many of them concerned to disavow his influence and to ridicule his pretensions, he can be shown to have made a significant contribution to the less dogmatic but more pervasive humanism of the twentieth century.

The Religion of Humanity, with capital letters, refers to the specific set of ideas expounded by Comte. It is also conventional to refer to Positivism with a capital ‘P’ when discussing his thought as distinguished from the general positivist principle that all ideas incapable of empirical verification should be dismissed as meaningless. Humanism and the empirical tradition, of course, have deeper roots than Comte. He was not, even in his own reckoning, an original thinker but a systematiser of ideas which had been in circulation for some time about the world and the way we invest it with meaning. He saw himself as offering a systematic reconstruction of belief on the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

basis of centuries of scientific and philosophical advance at the expense of theological faith. The 'Western Revolution', Comte's term for this long negative process which he believed to have eroded the fabric of Christendom, had left a spiritual vacuum which the Religion of Humanity was designed to fill. In so far as the official Church of Humanity barely survived his own century he can be seen to have failed. But a consideration of the general impact of his ideas encourages a less damning estimate of his achievement.

The path followed by Positivism in Britain fits a typical pattern:

One person procreates a thought, a second carries it to be baptised, a third begets children by it, a fourth visits it on its deathbed, and a fifth buries it.
(Freud 1976: vi 134)

The first chapter of this book records the procreation of the Religion of Humanity by Comte and Clotilde de Vaux through the spirit of the age, placing Comte briefly in his French context and passing quickly over his disastrous life to an analysis of his ideas. Careful attention is paid to his works, wherever possible in their English translation, both for their intrinsic interest and because they were so carefully studied by so many British writers. The second chapter considers Comte's first British followers, John Stuart Mill, George Henry Lewes, Harriet Martineau, George Holyoake and a number of lesser figures, some of whom, it has to be admitted, occupy the lunatic fringe of Victorian thinking. Mill and Lewes, however, brought Positivism an immediate philosophical status which it took some time to lose. It was Richard Congreve who carried Positivism to be baptised for it was he who founded the English Church of Humanity. Chapter three follows organised Positivism through its infamous schism of 1878 to the formation of a rival centre for the Religion of Humanity presided over by Frederic Harrison, Edward Beesly and John Bridges; it describes and attempts to classify a variety of committed Comtists.

The begetting of children is perhaps the most interesting part of the story and a major part of this book will accordingly be devoted to a study of what uncommitted people made of the Religion of Humanity. Chapter four provides a chart of this widespread discussion of Positivism in the press and in the universities. Men like John Morley, Leslie Stephen and Henry Sidgwick have long been known to have been sympathetic to the Religion of Humanity. What may cause a certain surprise, however, is the interest taken in it by John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, not to mention liberal theologians

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

such as Mark Pattison, Benjamin Jowett and Brooke Westcott. Historians seemed to be particularly attracted to Positivism, especially at Cambridge, where a succession of Regius Professors presented Comte as a major contributor to the understanding of history. Only the scientists seem to have been almost unanimously hostile to the pretensions of Positivism, none more so than Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer.

Chapter five considers the prominence of Positivism in nineteenth-century fiction. It is my somewhat controversial contention that the novels of George Eliot and to a lesser extent Thomas Hardy and George Gissing, all of whom can be shown to have studied Comte closely, formed an important vehicle for the general diffusion of Positivist ideas. A number of other writers, including Mrs Humphry Ward, George Meredith, Henry James and H. G. Wells, took an interest in Comte and gave further publicity to his ideas, criticising, modifying and developing them in the creative process. Chapter six visits the Religion of Humanity on its deathbed, tracing the declining fortunes of the *Positivist Review*, following the progress of Positivism from London to the provinces, where it flickered into exotic liturgical life in Newcastle and Liverpool, and studying the revival of some of its leading concepts in the work of sympathetic academics such as Patrick Geddes and Gilbert Murray. The final chapter delivers the funeral oration, attempting to diagnose the causes of death and then reading the will, assessing the nature and extent of the Comtean legacy.

The Religion of Humanity was a systematic attempt to found a humanist religion which differed from other forms of religious humanism, whose lower cases reveal their humble informality, in claiming to have established the three essential elements of religion, a creed, a cult and a code of conduct, on a scientific basis without resort to unverifiable supernatural hypotheses. All Comte's beliefs, whether philosophical, historical, moral or religious, were based upon empirical evidence, at least in theory. Metaphysical questions about the existence of God or a future life, since they could not be proved or disproved, played no part in the Religion of Humanity. Comte did, however, preserve what he considered best in Christianity, arguing that Positivism fulfilled rather than destroyed previous religions.

The Religion of Humanity needs to be seen in the context of the wide-ranging contemporary attack on Christianity from the point of view of science, ethics and history, as well as the general *Secularization*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century (Chadwick 1975). Comte gave precise and systematic expression to what was a commonplace view among intellectuals that the old religion must give way to the new. Fundamentalist Christianity was seen to be contradicted by the discoveries of geology and zoology, the theory of evolution offering a direct challenge to any literal understanding of Genesis. Dogmatic Christianity, it was argued, entailed belief in an immoral God who delighted in eternal punishment, in the suffering of his opponents and in the sacrificial atonement of an innocent victim. The historicity of the New Testament was undermined by higher criticism, which rejected the miraculous and reduced the content of the gospels to the moral and the mythical. A modified liberal Christianity began to emerge from this three-pronged attack, accepting many of the scientific, moral and historic assumptions hitherto regarded as hostile to faith. The followers of Comte, however, who despised such compromising attempts to put new wine into old bottles, demanded a clean break from the existing churches.

Among those who rejected all forms of Christianity the Positivists were the most positive, the most definite and precise, in their religious reconstruction. Secularism, for example, was 'basically an agitation for a scheme of rights', in particular the right to free thought and speech (Royle 1974: 292) and most of its leaders were not just anti-Christian but anti-religion of any kind. There were parallel institutions to the Church of Humanity such as the Ethical Movement, which developed a recognisable religious ritual based on an idealist philosophical position. Many other forms of religious heterodoxy found a temporary home in London, all catering for a clientele which could no longer muster belief in traditional Christianity but could not survive without some form of faith. The Religion of Humanity, while no less temporary than these other movements, remains the best documented in terms of printed and manuscript sources, the most interesting in terms of the intellectual quality of its adherents and the most pervasive in terms of its influence on the mainstream of British thought.

The Positivists were never very numerous. It was estimated in 1869 that they could all be fitted into 'a small dining-room' (McCarthy 1899: 380) while the joke about their schism was that they had come to Church in one cab and left in two. Harrison was amazed at the red-carpet treatment he received in the United States, for at home he was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

only 'a crank who lectured a small lot of fanatics in a dingy hole' (W. S. Smith 1967: 102). The official list of the London Positivist Society ran to 93 members by 1891 while the number of subscribers to Congreve's sacerdotal fund rose to 137 by 1898 (McGee 1931: 185). These figures, it should be stressed, represent the high-water mark of Positivist adhesion. Yet their impact was out of all proportion to their numbers. No student, it was claimed, could 'pass through the 'sixties untouched by curiosity about the new philosophical system' (Herford 1931: 41) and from 1860 to 1880 it seemed impossible for any major 'literary or scientific figure who ventured into public controversy' not to 'defend his position in relation to Positivism' (*VS* VII (1964): 398). To John Seeley, newly elected as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1869 with clear instructions to combat this threat, 'the very air seemed full of Comtianism', which appeared 'irresistibly triumphant' (Rothblatt 1968: 153, 177). Ardent young clergymen also felt bound to take up the cudgels against Comte, who continued to occupy a large 'space in the minds of the young men of the eighties' (Pease 1963: 14) and to provoke general interest until the turn of the century.

The Religion of Humanity has not, however, had a good press. Historians of nineteenth-century thought too often dismiss it as the exotic aberration of a coterie of eccentrics, a minor post-revolutionary pseudo-religious cult. It is a paradox recognised by Sir Isaiah Berlin in the first of the Auguste Comte Memorial Lectures that the founder of Positivism, who can be seen to have affected the very categories of our thought, is open to ridicule on a number of issues:

his grotesque pedantry, the incredible dullness of his writing, his vanity, his eccentricity, his solemnity, the pathos of his private life, his insane dogmatism, his authoritarianism, his philosophical fallacies, all that is bizarre and utopian in his character and writings. (Berlin 1954: 3-4)

Comte was an archetypal hedgehog, in Berlin's terms, attempting to fit the universe into a simple, all-embracing pattern (Berlin 1967: 39-40). It is scarcely surprising that he has proved so difficult for foxes, who are more prepared to take experience as it comes, to swallow. But he offered those with a similar need for a complete system of beliefs a fully articulated form of humanism. His personal eccentricities should not preclude a recognition of the powerful attraction he exerted upon a particular type of temperament.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

There have, however, been few impartial treatments of the Religion of Humanity, perhaps because of the fierce reactions his ideas continue to provoke in those of a different temperament. The major historian of *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century* writes with undisguised distaste of 'the grotesque pedantries of Comte's minutely detailed religious ritual' and 'the contrived character of the religion in general' (Simon 1964: 162), which managed to combine 'the worst and weakest aspects' of a whole range of ill-assorted contemporary ideas (Simon 1963: 46). Another historian of the movement, which he places firmly within the context of other *Secular Religions in France*, recognises that the 'elaborate and somewhat artificial systematization of the new religion can easily hide its essentials' (Charlton 1963: 88). The fullest published *History of Organized Positivism in England* discusses the details of the religion more sympathetically but reduces its significance, finally, to its 'promotion of conciliation' (McGee 1931: 234). Some of the political and social aspects of the movement have been discussed (R. Harrison 1959, 1965) and its aspirations to spiritual leadership placed in the context of academic radicalism (C. Kent 1978). None of these historians, however, have made full use of the abundant manuscript material available.

The huge amount of hitherto unpublished evidence on which it draws, its treatment of the Religion of Humanity as the culmination rather than the aberration of Comte's thought and the wide range of literary figures it discusses distinguishes this book from its predecessors. It concentrates very much on the individuals concerned in the movement, attempting to bring out as clearly as possible the character and temperament lying behind their religious conviction. The story of Comte's transformation of character under the influence of his love for Clotilde de Vaux has been told before but the inner struggles of many of his English disciples, so amply documented in their notebooks, letters and diaries, have not so far received the close sympathetic treatment they deserve.

The Religion of Humanity, then, can be regarded as a kind of experiment in religion, an attempt to see whether a totally humanistic creed could satisfy the hearts and minds of those who found Christianity, for whatever reason, inadequate. At the same time, it can be seen as a particular product of its time, a systematic philosophy which provides the historian of ideas with a measure, a piece of litmus paper by which to test Victorian religious chemistry, a thermometer with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism
on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

which to gauge the temperature of their dissatisfaction with Christianity and their desire for an alternative faith. Yet another appropriately scientific analogy might liken this study of Positivism to a cross-section made through the strata of Victorian opinion, revealing unsuspected relationships at a deep level between seemingly disparate religious thinkers. It is the fullness and range of opinion expressed about the Religion of Humanity which makes it such a fruitful point of entry into the Victorian mind. Positivism, as my post-mortem will argue, was very Victorian. But some of the questions it raises about religion, perhaps even some of its answers, remain of interest to humanity in any age.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

THE BIRTH OF POSITIVISM: AUGUSTE COMTE

Life and context

‘Comte did not discover the Religion of Humanity’, one of his followers insisted, ‘but only put into organic shape the floating aspirations of his century’ (FH 1913: 267). He is rightly regarded as a representative figure, ‘at once a symbol and producer of the intellectual climate’ of his time (Willey 1973: 217). He made no secret of his intellectual debts, his major works including long tributes to his many precursors or ‘spiritual fathers’. Born in 1798, he belonged at least in part to the eighteenth century, fulfilling many of the aims of the encyclopedists and maintaining their faith in the unity of the sciences. The very title, *Discours préliminaire*, which Comte was to use twice, advertised his debt to d’Alembert. Turgot provided the essence of his law of human progress, Montesquieu and Condorcet the basis of his political thought. His knowledge of science can largely be attributed to the École Polytechnique, the positive nature of whose teaching, he observed, was absolutely free of all theological and metaphysical ‘mélange’ (Gouhier 1933: I 123).

Comte can also be seen as a Romantic, with his emphasis on feeling and his idealisation of the Middle Ages. His affinities with German thought, which was particularly influential in France during the Second Empire, include Lessing and Kant, both of whom were translated by his fellow-Saint-Simonians, Eugène Rodrigues and Gustave d’Eichthal. He also discovered a positive spirit in Hegel (Littré 1863: 156–7). It would be wrong, finally, to omit his links with British empiricism, in particular with David Hume and Adam Smith, both of whom he recommended to his disciples. These thinkers all occupy prominent places in the Positivist Calendar, the eleventh month of which sets out in schematic form his view of the major contributors to western philosophy (see p. 34).

Most important of all the contexts within which the Religion of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Life and context*

Humanity should be understood, however, is the French Revolution and its aftermath. Comte's rituals, for example, grew from the revolutionary cults of Reason and the Supreme Being. As early as 1794 there were official festivals to celebrate Humanity and her benefactors. Comte, who was convinced that he would follow in the footsteps of La Révellière-Lépaux, grand pontiff of theophilanthropy, and preach in Notre Dame, regarded the church of St Geneviève, which had been renamed the Pantheon after the Revolution but also reconsecrated twice under different Napoleons, as the first Temple of Humanity. The French Revolution certainly looms large in his thought, the Positivist era beginning in AD 1789, year 1 of the Positivist Calendar.

The post-revolutionary thinker who has been said to have exercised the most powerful influence on Comte is Saint-Simon, whose service he entered as secretary in August 1817. He remained a disciple for two years and a colleague for four. Before meeting Saint-Simon Comte had already repudiated God and King and was seeking the regeneration of society through science but he had not systematised these ideas or talked specifically of a spiritual power, the rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, the three states or the classification of the sciences, all of which can be found in Saint-Simon's work prior to his association with Comte (Gouhier 1933: I 235–6). Saint-Simon too sought to reorganise society on the basis of science, looking to the science of history above all to predict a glorious future in which industrial progress would transform the natural world. His ideas, however, were propounded sketchily and unsystematically in letters, dialogues and accounts of visions. While admiring the fertility of his imagination, Comte soon came to feel that he was too inconsistent and changeable to rank highly as a philosopher.

The differences between the two emerged clearly when they wrote separate *avertissements* to Comte's 'Prospectus des travaux scientifiques pour réorganiser la société' in Saint-Simon's *Catéchisme des industriels* of 1822. Saint-Simon complained that Comte had treated only the scientific part of the system, omitting its sentimental and religious aspect while Comte insisted that his main purpose was to raise politics to a science of observation (Littré 1863: 15–25). Comte certainly recognised the stimulus he had received from Saint-Simon but was repelled by his late religious phase, which found expression in *New Christianity*, a sentimental celebration of the powers of love. The intellectual side of Saint-Simonism was still present in the *Exposition*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07897-9 - The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain

T. R. Wright

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The birth of Positivism*

of 1828–9, with its combination of natural law, neo-Catholic restoration and progressive philosophy of history. But the movement developed under Père Enfantin into a crusade for the political and sexual liberation of women, seeking the Female Messiah on the banks of the Nile. Understandably eager to dissociate himself from such unscientific behaviour, Comte explained in two public letters of 1832 that his liaison with Saint-Simon had ended as a consequence of these growing religious tendencies (AC, *CI* I 65–72; III 7–14). His disclaimer of all interest in establishing a new religion, especially a mere parody of Catholicism, however, reads ironically in the light of his later work, while his description of his former mentor as ‘a depraved charlatan’ (AC, *Pol* III xviii) seems more than a little ungrateful.

Comte’s earliest work was published anonymously or under Saint-Simon’s name. His early essays, some of which have been reprinted under the dramatic title, *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization*, were mainly political in emphasis. ‘A Brief Appraisal of Modern History’, first published in 1820, analyses the decline of the old social system established by medieval Catholicism and the rise of the new social system ushered in by scientific advance. His 1822 ‘Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society’ was even more explicit in its attack on contemporary anarchy, especially the negative revolutionary principles of liberty, equality and the sovereignty of the people. A new science of society must be reconstructed, as he maintained in two essays of 1825 and 1826, ‘Philosophical Considerations on the Sciences and Savants’ and ‘Considerations on the Spiritual Power’.

Having come to the conclusion that a complete overhauling of human knowledge was the essential preliminary to any social reorganisation, Comte announced a ‘Cours de philosophie positive en soixante-douze séances’, to begin in April 1826. Only three of these lectures were delivered, however, before the pressure of work combined with marital problems to bring on mental breakdown. After a spell in an asylum and a suicide attempt in the Seine, Comte recovered sufficiently by 1829 to renew the series, which formed the basis of his *Cours de philosophie positive*, published in Paris in six volumes from 1830 to 1842. In this astonishing survey of intellectual progress, Comte attempted to show how each of the sciences, first mathematics, then astronomy, physics, chemistry and biology, had become positive, that