

Introduction

The task of the modern era was the realization and humanization of God –
the transformation and dissolution of theology into anthropology.

Ludwig Feuerbach

In 2005, an American conservative weekly, *Human Events*, published a list of the “ten most harmful books of the 19th and 20th centuries.” Not surprisingly, Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and Mao Zedong’s *Quotations (Little Red Book)* earned the first, second, and third spots, respectively. What was remarkable was that the eighth most dangerous book was the *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42), Auguste Comte’s first masterpiece. This book introduced Comte’s philosophy of positivism, which *Human Events* considered a threat to society because it denied the existence of God, asserting that “man alone, through scientific observation, could determine the way things ought to be.”¹ Curiously, in 2003, the well-known French author and critic of liberalism Michel Houellebecq commended Comte: “Of all the structures produced by a society which do their part in establishing it, religion appears to him to be the most important, the most characteristic and the most threatened: man according to Comte can be defined approximately as a *social animal of a religious type*.” Comte was “one of the first to realize that the foundations of the social world were going to disappear” and that “religion as a system of explanations of the world” was obsolete. He was also “one of the first to have understood that the rational explanation of the universe must henceforth restrict itself to a more modest discourse” and “the first, absolutely, to try to give the social world a new religious basis.” This is the wonder of Auguste Comte: in a time of growing skepticism, he both opposed and favored religion, a stance that continues to confound scholars and social critics. In 1832, he proclaimed his “radical and absolute opposition to every kind of religious or metaphysical tendency.”² Religious beliefs were

¹ “Ten Most Harmful Books of the 19th and 20th Centuries,” *Human Events*, May 31, 2005, <http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=7591> (accessed August 24, 2006).

² Comte to Michel Chevalier, January 5, 1832, *Auguste Comte: Correspondance générale et confessions*, ed. Paulo E. de Berrêdo Carneiro, Pierre Arnaud, Paul Arbousse-Bastide, and Angèle Kremer-Marietti, 8 vols. (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1973–90), 1:229. Hereafter, this work will be cited as *CG*.

anachronistic in an age of science when “human reason” had reached its “virile state.”³ But by the 1850s, he was urging everyone to worship Humanity, creating a new religious system replete with sacraments, and referring to the increasing religiosity of humankind throughout history. The transformation of Comte’s philosophy of positivism into the Religion of Humanity, thanks to his personal experiences and the impulses of the period, is the main subject of this volume and the following one. Although the notion of worshipping Humanity has often been criticized, Michel Bourdeau recently wrote, “In a period where we speak increasingly of crimes against humanity, it is surprising that no one or almost no one thinks to ask himself what there is so singular in humanity that crimes committed against it are the object of such reprobation, as if the response is self-evident. . . . It is time to make room for a central concept of positivist sociology,” that of humanity.⁴

Whereas the first volume of this biography of Comte focused on his early life from his birth in 1798 to the completion of his seminal *Cours de philosophie positive* in 1842, the second and third volumes investigate the remaining years of his life, from 1842 to his death in 1857. This fifteen-year period constitutes the most controversial years of his development, one that is often seen to be at odds with the concerns of his younger period. One of the main arguments of this biography is that there was no sudden break in Comte’s trajectory. There was simply a “new phase of positivism,” as he pointed out himself in 1847.⁵ This phase saw the blossoming of the positivist doctrine that he had established in the *Cours* and in his various early articles. In 1847, he started transforming this philosophical system, which was founded on the sciences, into a religion, the Religion of Humanity. He remained committed to the new field of study, sociology, which he had established in the 1830s, but he now added another science to his knowledge base: morality. Cultivating “altruism,” a word he coined in 1850, morality would be the seventh science in the positivist hierarchy, which already consisted of mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology. Comte asserted that these branches of knowledge had reached their definitive form because they were based on the positive, or scientific, method. Thus their scientific laws must be based on observation and must explain how, not why, natural and social phenomena function. He tweaked his scientific system into a religion by demonstrating that all the sciences, as well as all our activities and feelings, should in the future be directed toward

³ Comte to Armand Marrast, January 7, 1832, CG, 1:233.

⁴ Michel Bourdeau, “Science de l’homme ou science de l’humanité,” *Auguste Comte et l’idée de science de l’homme*, ed. Michel Bourdeau and François Chazel (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002), 294.

⁵ Comte to Henri de Tholouze, December 18, 1847, CG, 4:130. See also Comte to Barbot de Chement, September 13, 1846, CG, 4:130.

society, the subject of sociology. Comte had always believed that a unifying creed regulated the social order. Now he complemented that single belief-system based on the sciences with social practices founded largely on the emotions. Social harmony depended not only on intellectual consensus but also on emotional solidarity. The positivist religion encompassed both a common belief-system and the ritualistic, socializing processes that brought people together around the worship of society.

Michel Foucault portrays the importance of the social body as a replacement for the king's body after the latter was decapitated during the French Revolution: "It's the body of society which becomes the new principle in the nineteenth century. It is this social body which needs to be protected, in a quasi-medical sense."⁶ Lynn Hunt likewise points to the "sacred void" that was left after the king disappeared.⁷ Comte in a sense put society in that space; society needed to be venerated, just as the king had been. From that worship could emerge essential moral values and emotional bonds. Comte dared suggest that religion could exist without God and that a secular religion could embody a moral system.⁸

Comte brilliantly underscored the specificity of society as a real entity with its own regularities that could be captured by scientific laws and as a possible object of worship. Donald Levine writes, "In Comte's view, . . . society is 'essential' in three senses: the term refers to a real being with essential properties, it is required as an object of attachment in order to establish moral guidelines, and it is necessary for instilling the moral values needed to sustain the social order." In Comte's opinion, moral values were needed not only to secure order but to guide progress. They thus helped maintain the cohesion of the social body and its advancement. Moral values were inculcated by "social institutions" such as the family, which developed feelings of attachment and veneration, and religion, which cultivated the love of Humanity.⁹ In the future positivist society, everyone would worship Humanity, working to improve society as a whole; the earth, upon which society depended; and even human nature itself.

The story of Comte's last fifteen years thus fits into competing interpretations of the narrative of the nineteenth century. First of

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 55.

⁷ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 3.

⁸ Michel Bourdeau perceptively notes that Comte deserves credit for having seen "the necessity of asking the question: which religion will exist after the death of God?" Michel Bourdeau, "Auguste Comte et la religion positiviste: Présentation," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 87 (2003): 20.

⁹ Donald Levine, *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 167. See also 169.

all, his tale attests to the growing “secularization of the European mind.”¹⁰ The Church itself had been under attack since the French Revolution for abusing its wealth, power, and position. Many critics of the Establishment sought to create a more tolerant, just, and pluralistic society and found religion to be a hindrance in their campaign. Industrialization and the accompanying process of urbanization led to a decline in churchgoing. Advances in Biblical scholarship and increasingly compelling scientific explanations of natural phenomena challenged Christian revelation. Thinkers such as Karl Marx and Thomas Huxley completely removed theology, if not God, from their philosophies. Ludwig Feuerbach suggested that man created God. As one scholar has noted, philosophers of the nineteenth century believed that “the duty of the modern age was the humanization of God, who was merely a projection of man’s own inner nature.”¹¹ Indeed, man himself was increasingly the focus of knowledge.¹² With the science of society at its core, Comte’s doctrine is often labelled secular humanism. Claude Nicolet, the French historian of republicanism, commended Comte’s positivism for being humanistic because it confirmed the power of man to save himself and to reach his potential by using his reason, a human faculty.¹³ There was nothing beyond man, that is, humanity, and everyone had to work to improve life on this earth rather than pray for eternal salvation.¹⁴

As suggested above, secularization was linked to the growing domination of the sciences, which formed the core of positivism. The nineteenth century saw the triumph of scientists, who had taken power for the first time in the French Revolution. Michel Serres writes about this period,

An astronomer was Mayor of Paris, the inventor of topology was at the head of the Committee for Public Health, the scholars occupied the institutions before the people did and in their place, and a geometer, although a minor, gained the title of Emperor. The nobility and the clergy collapsed, society no longer lived according to the same divisions or the same offices, scientists at last formed a class or a genus, replacing the clerics and forming a new Church.¹⁵

¹⁰ This phrase comes from Heinrich Hermelink. See Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 11.

¹¹ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 310.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1973), 386–7.

¹³ Claude Nicolet, *L’Idée républicaine en France: Essai d’histoire critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 501.

¹⁴ Juliette Grange, Introduction to *Politique d’Auguste Comte* (Paris: Payot, 1996), xi.

¹⁵ Michel Serres, Introduction to *A History of Scientific Thought: Elements of a History of Science*, ed. Michel Serres (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 13.

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Comte's promotion of positivist philosophers as the new spiritual power in the coming "positive era" – the third stage of history when positivism would triumph – attests to the importance of scientists in the nineteenth century. Their status was changing; the old patronage system was dying as scientific careers were becoming professionalized.¹⁶ Comte tried to find his place among the new scientists, as reflected in his various campaigns to enter the Academy of Sciences and to land a position at the Ecole Polytechnique and the Collège de France in order to bolster his authority. But his attempt to achieve academic recognition foundered, and he ended up a scientific bohemian, living at the margins of the scientific establishment and caught in a series of vicious circles. Unconnected by family ties or powerful friends to the scientific elite and unwilling to compromise his integrity, he could not make the patronage system work for him. Nor could he meet the new impersonal professional standards that required specialization and research publications without sacrificing his philosophical mission. His ambivalence toward scientists, which was apparent early in his career, became more marked. He wanted scientists to advance but also to become less specialized, less isolated, and less interested in their own careers – in effect, to reject the demands of professionalization. He urged scientists to become more devoted to the needs of the entire community, an idea that ran against the new individualism of the capitalist, liberal age. He may not have been a democrat in politics but in a sense he was one in the academic world, for he believed the interests of the people should be at the forefront of research. The true scientific spirit had to be an extension of common sense. With their jargon and arrogance, scientists distanced themselves too much from the public. Comte's constant criticism of scientists on these points incurred their enmity. But the positivist doctrine, which was based on the sciences, could not triumph if it did not get the stamp of approval of the scientists. He could not gain legitimacy for his anti-elitist views, which prioritized the needs of the entire community, unless he was part of the elite body of scientists. Unable to resolve the quandary, he presented himself as a martyr, persecuted by scientists, especially mathematicians, who he believed were fearful of positive philosophy because it criticized their dominance and threatened to rob them of their prestigious posts once it triumphed and rearranged society so that social interests prevailed over individuals' selfish concerns.

Besides fitting into the narrative of the growing importance of the sciences and their influence on the emerging secular mind,

¹⁶ Robert Fox, "Science, the University, and the State in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Professions and the French State, 1700–1900*, ed. Gerald L. Geison (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 66–7, 73; Maurice Crosland, *Science under Control: The French Academy of Sciences 1795–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 28–30.

Comte's system demonstrates in an apparently contradictory fashion the inherent religiosity of the period. The French Revolution and Napoleon's efforts to control, if not persecute, the Catholic Church, had caused a dip in religious practices. During the Restoration, religion made a comeback, but the vehement anticlericalism of twenty years had left its mark. Religious ideas became truly acceptable and widespread again only beginning in the 1840s. New religious orders were founded, and new religious schools proliferated thanks to the Loi Falloux of 1850, which allowed freedom of instruction. Religious fervor was reflected in the apparitions of the Virgin in 1846 and 1858. The notion of the Immaculate Conception became a dogma in 1854.¹⁷ Even leftist movements registered the revived Christianity of the period. Eager to help the working class and women, many early socialists tried to reestablish Christianity in a new, more egalitarian form.¹⁸ Beginning in the 1830s, new churches were established, most notably that of the Saint-Simonians, who were inspired by the *Nouveau Christianisme* (1825) of Henri de Saint-Simon, Comte's former employer.¹⁹ Influenced by conservative thinkers and their own Catholic upbringing, Saint-Simon and other French socialists, such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, wanted society to be directed by moral values. K. Steven Vincent writes, "Employing notions of 'civic virtue' and 'civil religion' . . . , the socialists were able to fashion a progressive social theory which was strongly moral – even spiritual."²⁰ Although Comte preferred the value of fraternity to that of equality, he felt much affinity to these republican socialists, whom he saw as his chief rivals in trying to guide society to do more for the common people. But unlike many of them, he boldly sought to disassociate morality from a religion based on God. As Michel Serres points out, Comte glimpsed that "there exists something exterior even to the self-sustaining totality, and the second is founded upon the first. He calls this foundation religious. And he is right, even if it is no more than the immanence of humanity or of the Great-Being in itself."²¹ Working for the benefit of humanity in a spirit of fraternity became the basis of the positivist morality.

In an age preoccupied with the ability of the sciences to transform the world, he reminded people of the ethical dimensions of

¹⁷ Gérard Cholvy, *Etre chrétien en France au XIX^e siècle, 1790–1914* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 29, 30, 168.

¹⁸ Naomi J. Andrews, *Socialism's Muse: Gender in the Intellectual Landscape of French Romantic Socialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Lexington Books, 2006), 17.

¹⁹ Paul Bénichou, *Le Temps des Prophètes: Doctrines de l'âge romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 269.

²⁰ K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 6.

²¹ Michel Serres, "Paris 1800," in *A History of Scientific Thought: Elements of a History of Science*, ed. Michele Serres (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 453.

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their employment. Comte might have been impressed by the sciences, which helped us explain the world on rational, demonstrable grounds, but he was adamant about recognizing the limits of their power. Thus contrary to the opinion expressed in *Human Events*, he asserted that we need to adjust to an age of diminished expectations because he realized there was a great deal that individuals could *not* change, as Houellebecq pointed out. Although he seemed to uphold the importance of the individual as a contributor to civilization, he worried about rampant individualism, as many republican socialists did as well.²² To him, egoism was the typical nineteenth-century disease – a disease that had to be overcome by altruism.

Struck by the alienating effects of the Industrial Revolution on workers and the new imperialistic drives of his fellow Europeans, whose exuberant nationalism he found disturbing, Comte seemed to be among the few nineteenth-century thinkers eager to promote cosmopolitanism and what Daniel Gordon calls the “culture of sociability,” which was prominent in the eighteenth century. The philosopher Paul Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach, for example, wanted the feeling of humanity to be universal.²³ Comte condemned individualism, specialization, liberalism, unregulated capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism because he believed that they diminished sociability or the sentiment of our common humanity. Although a prophet of progress, he seemed dismayed by the future direction of the world. According to him, people were too enamored of rationality and had forgotten the importance of the emotions and of human connections. More than other political theorists, such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu, he attempted to find ways to bring people together on an affective plane.²⁴

His emphasis on the interconnectedness of individuals reflects the new forms of civil society that were emerging after the French Revolution. Comte sought to channel the growing impulses toward sociability that appeared in the bourgeoisie’s exclusive reading clubs, salons, and *cercles* as well as in the vibrant voluntary associations and clubs that grew up among workers in the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁵ He wanted to accelerate and direct this proliferation of new social organizations by fostering positivist salons, clubs, temples, and so forth. Andrew Wernick recently criticized Comte not only for creating a system where people seemed connected mainly by their devotion to Humanity but also for not exploring different types of

²² Vincent, *Proudhon*, 6.

²³ Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 42, 66.

²⁴ On these philosophers, see Hunt, *Family Romance*, 4.

²⁵ Maurice Agulhon, “Working Class and Sociability in France before 1848,” in *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbaum*, ed. Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick, and Roderick Floud (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 51, 58–9.

loving, face-to-face ties between people; Comte's notion of the social, according to Wernick, was surprisingly not very deep.²⁶ There is some truth to Wernick's criticism. Nevertheless, Comte did try to foster familial relationships and relationships in the workplace. He organized society in an almost maniacal way to create spaces where sociability could blossom.

Comte endeavored above all to create a tightly knit positivist movement. Deeply affected by the Revolution of 1848, he wished to participate more actively in the new political culture that was evolving at the time. He longed to be a respected leader. He yearned for disciples. Inspired by the clubs that were proliferating in Paris, he launched the Positivist Society in March 1848 to promote his ideas and prepare for the positivist takeover of power. Volumes two and three represent the first study of his movement, focusing on the means he used to attract, affect, and shape his disciples. These volumes are based on almost thirty years of research, many of them spent in the archives of Comte's former apartment in Paris, which contain his large correspondence, and in archives in other places in France, Britain, and the United States. They look in depth at Comte's followers, friends, and enemies to see what was attractive and offensive about his philosophy and his personality, which were intertwined. His tendency toward manic-depression often led him to tweak his ideas in sometimes off-putting directions and to alienate potential followers and friends.

Comte made a point of exposing his private life to public scrutiny to show that he was transparent and thus pure. This appearance of transparency was a pose of the revolutionaries, such as Maximilien Robespierre, who likewise sought legitimacy in virtuous self-representations to assert their authority. Indeed, Comte's life is a series of poses. The scholar Kali Israel recently mocked the whole biographical enterprise for being a "refuge from postmodernity, a haven in an epistemologically unsettled world." By presenting individuals as "coherent and continuous subjects," biographies offer "a reassuring faith in the knowability of past subjective experience and the existence of unified, if mobile and adventurous, selves." Israel challenged biographers to recognize that they can never know their subjects because "selves are made and remade and unstable and discontinuous."²⁷ It is indeed hard to "know" Comte because he was constantly refashioning himself to appeal to many different audiences: workers, women, aristocrats, conservatives, and so forth. A kind of nineteenth-century drama queen, he was as inventive with regard

²⁶ Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 216–20, 263.

²⁷ Kali Israel, *Names and Stories: Emilia Dilke and Victorian Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

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to his own person as to his doctrine. He simply loved melodrama, which was deeply embedded in nineteenth-century French culture. The story of his life lends itself perfectly to the postmodern or “new” biography, which, according to Jo Burr Margadant, looks at “an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the variety of ways that others seek to represent that person.”²⁸

This volume covers ten years of Comte’s life, from 1842 to approximately 1852. In 1852, shortly after the coup d’état of Louis Napoleon, Comte increasingly accentuated the conservative strain of his thought, which had begun to emerge in 1850, flummoxing many of his followers. His pursuit of new disciples, especially among conservatives, during the last five years of his life will be the subject of volume three. Volume two highlights his efforts to reforge his identity after the disappointments stemming from the poor reception of the *Cours de philosophie positive* and his failed marriage. During the ten-year period from 1842 to 1852, Comte was very productive, partly because unpredictable encounters and events enriched his doctrine. His relationships with new women, particularly Sarah Austin and Clotilde de Vaux; his mentorship of young men in need of guidance both professionally and spiritually; his interest in the working class; his commitment to an intellectual elite to replace the traditional clergy; and his excitement regarding the Revolution of 1848 encouraged the transformation of his doctrine into a religion and a political movement that vied with leftist reformers in attempting to solve the “social question.” Comte would elaborate on his religious and political ideas in the *Système de politique positive*, published in four volumes between 1851 and 1854. This work, which many scholars regard as his second masterpiece after the *Cours de philosophie positive*, will be analyzed in volume three. Before writing it, Comte composed four shorter works on both the sciences and on his philosophy, which will be discussed in volume two.

The first two chapters of this volume discuss the works that Comte published after the *Cours de philosophie positive*, the problems he faced at work, and his tense personal relationships. The *Cours* (1830–42) consisted of six volumes covering the major sciences, including the new one, sociology. It presented a unified system of knowledge. Comte was convinced that if people had common ideas, derived from demonstrable scientific explanations, and if they learned to think in a similar, rational fashion, social unity would be enhanced. Inculcating these common ideas, education was one of the

²⁸ Jo Burr Margadant, introduction to *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Jo Burr Margadant (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 7.

keys to the regeneration of society. In 1843 and 1844, he published the *Traité élémentaire de géométrie analytique*, a textbook on geometry; the *Traité philosophique d'astronomie populaire*, which derived from the astronomy course that he had given to workers and others since 1831; and the *Discours sur l'esprit positif*, which contained the philosophical preamble to that course in 1843 and summed up the tenets of positivism. Anticipating the religion that he would found several years later, he insisted in the *Discours* that knowledge be unified around Humanity and its needs and that it was time to reorganize morality. These chapters also investigate the challenges he faced at the Ecole Polytechnique, where he had worked since 1832. He was an admissions examiner and a *répétiteur*, that is, teaching assistant, for one of the two courses in analysis and mechanics. Despite Comte's claim to be an expert on educational matters, the administrators at the Ecole Polytechnique were not pleased by his performance. In 1844, he was fired from his job of admissions examiner, although he was allowed to remain a teaching assistant. Based on archival work at the Ecole Polytechnique, these chapters treat Comte's tense relationship with the faculty and administration, pinpointing weaknesses in his claim that his enemies were out to starve him into oblivion in revenge for his attacks on the scientific regime in the *Cours*. Many of their complaints about his methods and outside publications, which went against school rules, had a solid foundation. Minutes of the faculty meetings underscore the fairness of the professors in dealing with the obdurate founder of positivism. These chapters also shed light on Comte's relationships with his old friend, Pierre Valat; his wife, Caroline Massin, from whom he separated in mid-1842; John Stuart Mill, with whom he had been corresponding since 1841; and Sarah Austin and her husband, who were friends of Mill. All of these relationships foundered. Chapter two discusses at length the effect of Comte's friendship with Mill on the evolution of both men's thoughts. One subject that was a frequent source of friction between the two men was "the woman question." Their arguments over woman's equality led the exasperated Mill to write *The Subjection of Women* (1869), where he indirectly condemned Comte's misogynist position, which originated partly in wrangling with the decidedly insubordinate Caroline Massin, his wife. Sarah Austin, a famous translator whom Comte met in 1843, was similar to Massin in that she was an intelligent, independent woman who stood up to Comte and refused to accept his patronizing attitude. Nevertheless, frustrated by her reclusive husband, she enjoyed Comte's company. Despite her constant scolding, Comte liked to be with her because he encountered few women after his wife left him. Their friendship ended when she fled France in 1848.

Chapters three and four focus on one of the most dramatic episodes of Comte's life: his unconsummated affair with Clotilde de Vaux, a young woman who died in 1846, shortly after they met.