Religious Responses to Modernity

Edited by Yohanan Friedmann
and Christoph Markschies

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Table of Contents

Johannes Zachhuber

Individual and Community in Modern Debates about Religion and Secularism

Introduction

Many scholars view the individualization or privatization of religion as one of the chief religious responses to modernity.[1] If, herein, I sound a somewhat dissenting note with regard to this well-established view, that is not because I think it is altogether wrong. The phenomena and trends scholars from different fields have observed and summarized under the heading of "individualization" do exist and are significant. In important ways, religion has become a matter of personal decision; it is seen as properly a concern of the individual. This growing conviction is perhaps most impressively seen in the rise of "religious freedom" as a fundamental – some would argue the most fundamental[2] – human right, but one could equally point to the increasing disconnect between membership in religious institutions and professed beliefs and practices to illustrate the same tendency.[3] It is certainly plausible to trace these elements of the contemporary religious landscape back to earlier Western developments, the very ones that are usually identified with the rise of modernity.[4]

Yet if this narrative has some claim to be true, I would nevertheless maintain that it represents only one part of the story. We do not fully understand the relationship between religion and modernity unless we perceive that alongside and together with a concern for religious individualism, there has also been a powerful dynamic at work that ties religion to the cohesion of communities.[5] We can see this tendency at work in our own age and time, where Orthodox Christianity has been marshalled in aid of collective identity in countries such as Russia or Ukraine,[6] to say nothing of the role political Islam has played in many places

1 Cf., classically, Parsons 1966. Individuation or privatization has also been cited in the context of theories of secularization; cf., e.g., Luckmann 1967; Luhmann 1977 and more recently Bruce 2002. For an overview of the debate and a critique of this line of argument cf. Casanova 1994:35–39.

2 This was the influential argument of Jellinek 1895. Cf. Joas 2011.

3 Cf., e.g., Pew Forum 2008.

4 Casanova 1994:37–38.

5 Zachhuber 2020.

6 Leustean 2014; Fagan 2012.

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around the world. The same principle is applied, albeit in a less aggressive, more inclusive way, by the defenders of religious establishment, the unique association of a nation with one specific Church, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.[7]

Furthermore, it seems evident that this latter line of thought has its own history, accompanying modernity as much as the narrative of individualization. It is a story in which concern about the loss of social cohesion is closely aligned with the observation of religious transformation: first the fracturing of the *Corpus Christianum* across Europe, then the toleration of a plurality of Christian churches within individual countries, followed by Jewish emancipation, the full embrace of religious pluralism, and finally secularism.

The obvious rejoinder to the construction of this "response" to modernity is that it describes not a modern response to religion, but the defensive reaction of those to whom modernity is unpalatable. The appeal to the communal dimension of religion as a remedy against society's tendency to disintegrate, it will be said, has been the characteristic strategy of the foes of the modern age, from the theorists of the French Restoration, such as de Maistre,[8] and romantics, such as Novalis,[9] to the Catholic opponents of modernism at the turn of the twentieth century, to the intellectual conservatives of our own time, such as Brad Gregory, who, in *The Unintended Reformation*, traces the fragmented nature of contemporary Western society (and practically all its other unpleasant features) back to the breakup of Europe's religious unity in the sixteenth century.[10]

This objection, however, overlooks two important facts. First, the notion that religion functions as a social bond tying together the members of a community is by no means restricted to conservative critics of modernity; it is shared by progressive thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim, the last arguably the most influential theorist of religion along these lines since the early twentieth century. Second, a conception of modernity that excludes the "anti-modernists" is undialectical and simplistic, insofar as skepticism and hostility toward modernity are very much part of its history, regardless of when we let that history begin.[11] Contrary to some genealogical narratives, there never was a time when modernity was simply embraced, or when people were universally optimistic or enthusiastic about impending changes. Rather,

7 Biggar 2014.

8 Cf. Berlin 2003:131–154.

9 Novalis 1968; Garrard 2004:55-63.

10 Gregory 2015.

11 The classic argument for this position it to be found in Horkheimer and Adorno 1997, but cf. Spaemann 1998.

any conception of modernity – and I readily admit that there is no agreed definition, to put it mildly – cannot do without the notion of fundamental change and transformation, and, consequently, the recognition that such developments always generated both optimism and pessimism, feelings of pride, achievement and, occasionally, hubris, but equally a lingering sense of loss, lack of orientation and even despair. Simply put, modernity was never just celebrated or just condemned, never simply affirmed or simply rejected. Its assessment was and remains ambivalent.

This ambivalence has by no means been restricted to the relationship between individual and society; one could easily describe attitudes toward technological progress or material wealth analogously. Yet there can be no doubt that this particular pair of polarities has provided one of the main arenas in which the conflict over the meaning and significance of modernity has played out. In this paper, I will therefore argue that a better understanding of religious responses to modernity is achieved if, instead of focussing exclusively on individualization, we examine the characterization of religion's role in the tension between the individual and society.

Political Theology in Antiquity: Varro and Augustine

To substantiate my thesis about religion in modernity, I begin with the celebrated critique by Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) of the Roman author Marcus Terentius Varro's (116–27 BCE) exposition of political theology as one of three kinds of theology. The doctrine of the three genera of theology was, it seems, of Stoic origin, but most of our knowledge about it derives from Varro's treatise, which, in its turn, is principally known to us from Augustine's *City of God*.[12] Varro distinguished political theology from mythical theology, on the one hand, and physical or natural theology, on the other. However, we must not think that *theologia* in this context means what "theology" has come to denote in our own time – a discipline or field of enquiry. Rather, we need to take it literally, as signifying a discourse about God or the gods. The threefold division, then, seems initially not much more than the recognition that there are different contexts in which the gods are invoked, namely, the theater, philosophy and the state. This raises the question of how these contexts are related, and Varro's account, in a mix of the descriptive and the normative, sought to provide an answer to that question. Political theology, he suggested, partook in both the mythical and the philosophical. It had to, in

12 Augustine 1998:246–251; Rüpke 2005.

order to fulfil its role for the state: It appeals to public emotions by drawing on the gods of popular imagination, while preventing untoward consequences for the commonwealth by a moral adjudication of mythical religion, which is ultimately dependent on the natural theology of philosophers.[13]

The Christian apologist Augustine categorically rejected this line of reasoning. According to him, the pagan theory failed because, by its own admission, it depended on a system of myths that Varro himself acknowledged to be embarrassingly mendacious:

> The mythical theology, then – that of the theatrical performances, full of unworthiness and vileness – is referred back to the political: The whole of the mythical theology, rightly judged worthy of condemnation and rejection, is part of the political theology, which is deemed [sc. by Varro] worthy to be cultivated and observed.[14]

Augustine's alternative proposal is not without significance for my argument, and I shall briefly return to it at the end of this paper. For the moment, however, something else is more important: Neither he nor – from what we can gather – his pagan predecessor was primarily concerned with religion as a glue for societies, preventing them from disintegrating. While internal strife may well have been a possible source of political decline, it was certainly not in any way singled out as the one crucial danger to the polity, and political theology – whatever it may be – is therefore not primarily introduced as an ideology to guarantee social and political cohesion in the first instance.

Instead, the underlying concept is much broader, geared toward an understanding of the politician as someone informed by philosophers but capable of communicating with the population at large. Political theology is inscribed precisely into this mediating space and is deemed necessary because religion holds such strong affective power over people. It can therefore mislead the masses, but it is also capable of giving them moral direction. This tension calls for resolution, and on this the pagan and the Christian author disagree: Whereas Varro accepts the dichotomy between "immoral" popular religion and philosophical theology and therefore ascribes to the politician the art of bridging this divide, Augustine protests that without a unitary religion underlying all its various manifestations, no such harmony could ever obtain.

13 Augustine 1998:248–249.

14 Augustine 1998:251 (with changes).

Political Theology in the Early Modern Period and the Fear of Political Disintegration

Varro's threefold scheme was an important point of reference for early modern discussions of natural and political theology, but the kind of concern these authors had for political theology was very different.[15] In the context of the religious wars and the emergence of modern nation states, the fear of political disintegration and the question of the public role of religion had emerged as closely related problems. To all early modern theorists, from Hobbes and Spinoza to Locke and Rousseau, the most fundamental conceptual difficulty to be solved was how human beings as individuals could form a stable political community. However much their responses differed, all these thinkers agreed on an anthropology for which the tension between human individuality and community cohesion was an unquestionable fact. It was this tension that led the "authoritarian" school, from Thomas Hobbes to Carl Schmitt, to endorse a powerful state with wide-ranging sovereignty over its citizens; but the same anthropology also inspired liberals who advocated individual freedom and individual human rights as protections of the citizen against the overweening authority of the government.

It goes beyond the purview of the present paper to argue in detail that these two traditions of political thought were two sides of the same coin, as has sometimes been claimed, but it is crucial for my purpose to observe that both linked the philosophical polarity of individual and community with the experience of social and political turmoil in the two centuries after the Reformation. This same combination, I believe, explains how religion was added to the mix. Once again, responses differed sharply. Some argued that religion had to be removed from the political realm, because it was religious disagreement that had previously led to violent conflict. As religious division apparently could not be overcome, it had to be prevented from undermining political peace and stability. This was the argument that eventually led to the idea of the privatization of religion.

This line of thought was expressed with aplomb in the so-called *Political Testament* of the Prussian king Frederick the Great. First published in 1752, the text describes Frederick's religious policies as follows:

> Lutherans, Catholics, Reformed, Jews and many other Christian sects live in Prussia, and they coexist peacefully. If the ruler had the idea, out of misplaced zeal, to favour one of them, at once there would be parties, and rows would erupt ...

15 Stroumsa 2010:152. On modern political theology cf. also: Schmitt 1970 and 1979; Kantorowicz 1957; Arendt 1958; Vega 2017.

> For politics it is altogether unimportant whether the ruler is religious or not. If one gets to the bottom of any religion, they are all founded on a more or less irrational system of fables. ... However, one must be careful not to hurt the religious feelings of the big masses whatever their religion.
> I am, so to speak, the pope of the Lutherans and the ecclesiastical head of the reformed. All the other Christian sects are tolerated in Prussia. The first one trying to unleash a civil war must at once be silenced, and the teachings of the would-be reformer will be exposed to ridicule.[16]

Here, a plurality of religions is acknowledged and accepted as a social reality. Potentially negative consequences for political stability are staved off by ruthless state control imposed on religious groups. At the same time, the state is technically "secular," as Frederick makes clear through his rather astonishing claim that the personal religion of the monarch is irrelevant.

Yet it was not difficult to argue, based on the same concern for political stability, that a unified religion was needed after all, as without it an integrated polity was impossible to attain. Frederick, of course, represents Enlightenment principles. Throughout the seventeenth and for much of the eighteenth century, however, most of the early modern nation states followed the alternative approach, so much so that one may well ask to what extent their policy of religious homogenization was a response to the horrors of the religious wars, or whether the latter rather provided a convenient pretext for a policy aimed at the consolidation of national power.[17] But that is not my topic here.

My concern instead is the conceptualization of religion that emerged in this situation. As in the case of political theory, it is arguable that radically divergent responses shared an underlying theoretical consensus. In the case of religion, this consensus emphasized the significance of the polarity of individual and community. Confusingly, religion appeared as both individual and communal; it could therefore both stabilize and destabilize a society. The political theologian had to explain this state of affairs and offer a solution to the conundrum it created. It is this constellation, I would argue, that gave rise to the specifically modern link posited between religion and community cohesion. In what follows, I shall show how major thinkers since the eighteenth century developed this idea in rather different ways.

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16 Frederick the Great 1974:44–45. My translation from the German – J.Z.

17 Cavanaugh 2009.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Apolitical Christianity and the Need for a Political Religion

Jean-Jacques Rousseau discusses the significance of religion for the state in a rightly famous chapter of *The Social Contract*.[18] He sought to resolve the paradox of religion as a source of both stability and instability by distinguishing between different types of religion. According to him, it was the emergence of Judeo-Christian monotheism that fatally undermined the political function of religion. As long as every city and country had its own god, there were no religious wars – even though, technically, every war was also "theological" (p. 143) – because in the polytheistic system there was no distinction between the nation and its religion. Therefore, Rousseau argued, men did not so much fight for the gods; rather, the gods fought for men (p. 144). This was reversed with the emergence of a novel type of religion that was primarily based not on national identity but on universal truth:

> It was in these circumstances that Jesus came to establish a Spiritual Kingdom on earth; which, by separating the theological from the political system, led to the State's ceasing to be one, and caused the intestine divisions which have never ceased to convulse Christian peoples. (*ibid.*)

Christianity is therefore wholly unsuited as a national religion. Yet, and this is crucial, Rousseau continued to affirm the political need for universal religiosity: "It matters very much to the community that each citizen should have a religion; that will make him love his duty" (p. 150). For this reason, he advocated the introduction of a civil religion that would, among other things, demand religious toleration, so that in such a state all religions can peacefully coexist – provided, of course, that they foreswear political ambitions.

Crucial for my purpose here, however, is the precise function ascribed by Rousseau to political religion as he conceives it. Given the overall structure of his political thought, with its insistence on the necessity and centrality of the *volonté générale*, the general will,[19] the primacy he assigns to social cohesion should not surprise us. He repeatedly emphasizes the "bond of union" (p. 148) that religion is supposed to provide: the "great bond of particular societies" (p. 147). Yet he also judges religion anti-social, because "everything which destroys social unity is worthless" (*ibid.*) – a judgment that applies in particular to Roman Catholicism, a type of religion that "is so manifestly bad that it is a waste of time

18 Rousseau 1997:142–151. Cf. Karant 2016; Beiner 2012:11–16 (and *passim*).

19 Rousseau 1997:xx–xxii; 57–60.

to amuse oneself demonstrating that it is" (*ibid.*). It is both transnational and a state-like institution, and it therefore inevitably generates a rival claim to the citizens' loyalty.

At first sight, it could appear that Rousseau was merely pleading for a restoration of the pre-Christian, pagan acceptance of political religion as more or less separate from the people's religion, which must be tolerated in its plurality. Yet this would miss something rather important: Rousseau's distinction between civil and natural religion is almost entirely driven by his dichotomy of individual and society. He accepts the need for religion to underwrite social unity and cohesion while maintaining that ideal Christianity, which he believes is identical with natural religion, is entirely unsuited for this purpose. For this reason, the latter becomes a private affair, while the need for communal identity makes necessary a novel entity, civil religion.

Catholicism and Political Stability in Restoration Thought

Moving from Rousseau into the nineteenth century, we find Catholic opponents of the French Revolution presenting a vision of society that, at first sight, is the exact opposite of Rousseau's program. The so-called Catholic Restoration, represented by individuals such as Joseph de Maistre,[20] Louis de Bonald[21] and Félicité de Lamennais,[22] aimed to reconstitute society on the basis of religion, more specifically Catholic Christianity. The reason for this is perhaps simple enough: Society's rebellion against the traditional order had led to chaos and terrible suffering; its underlying maxim therefore had to be reversed. On closer inspection, however, these thinkers are not nearly as categorically opposed to Rousseau as might first appear. An investigation of de Maistre and de Bonald will show that they share with their forerunner the assumption that religion is connected to communal cohesion. In fact, they radicalized this view.

Joseph de Maistre

In his *Considérations sur la France*,[23] written in 1797, Joseph de Maistre railed against the "Decree on Religious Liberty" adopted by the Convention on February

20 On de Maistre cf. Berlin 2003:131–154. Berlin's one-sided account has been challenged by Armenteros 2011 and Hedley 2011.

21 On de Bonald cf. Spaemann 1998.

22 On Lamennais cf. Derré 1962; Oldfield 1973; Armenteros 2011:232 ff.

23 De Maistre 1831.

21, 1795, which stipulated the separation of church and state (p. 68). Such an idea, he argued, had never in the history of the world been promulgated, and with good reason: "All imaginable institutions rest on a religious idea, or they must pass away" (*ibid.*). Institutions are stable only to the extent that they are "divinized" (*divinisées*). Human intellectual endeavour and secular philosophy are not merely unable to substitute for those divine foundations; they are essentially a force of division and instability.

What "institutions" does the author have in mind? De Maistre takes a broad view, including the whole "chain of human establishments" from the grandest to the smallest, from empires to brotherhoods (*ibid.*, p. 70). In all these instances, he observes, "religion mixes itself with everything, it animates and sustains everything" (*ibid.*). While historically these institutions were founded by human individuals, their founders could not but somehow ally themselves with God in order to make their institutions stable and permanent. Try as they may, he argues, secular rulers could not even command their people to assemble regularly each year in a particular place to perform a dance. They would fail in such an endeavour, de Maistre writes, while the humble Christian missionary of the first millennium succeeded in inspiring religious festivals that continue two thousand years later.

This is de Maistre's challenge to the French Revolution, which in its "anti-religious character" is, as he put it, truly "satanic" (p. 67). By attacking the religious foundation of society, the revolutionaries took away what makes society into society. They removed the bond that holds people together, thus threatening not one particular form of government or one particular type of social organization, but society as such. The reason, de Maistre intimates, is that human beings are transient and therefore incapable of creating something that lasts. Their power is limited; even the mightiest monarch or the most extraordinary genius cannot institute a form of sociality without invoking divine help.

These insights, Maistre insists, are not specifically related to his own or anyone's religious faith:

> These reflections are addressed to everyone, believer and sceptic alike. I state a fact; I do not advance a hypothesis. Whether one laughs at these ideas or whether one worships them; rightly or wrongly they form the unique basis of all durable institutions. (p. 69)[24]

24 "Ces réflexions s'adressent à tout le monde, au croyant comme au sceptique; c'est un fait que j'avance et non une thèse." My translation – J.Z.

This is crucial. Whatever de Maistre's religious convictions, his argument does not appeal to them, nor is it explicitly meant to be theological. "The whole of history," he insists, teaches that institutions need a religious basis to succeed and become stable (pp. 69–70). Studying our European institutions "in depth" (*approfondir*) demonstrates that they are all "Christianized" (*christianisées*).

In keeping with the early modern tradition, then, de Maistre thinks of religion as fundamental to social cohesion and stability. In his response to the French Revolution, he especially emphasizes the connection between religion and social institutions. Two observations, however, set him apart from earlier reflections. First, his outlook is entirely historical. Institutions are considered in terms of their foundation, their growth and their endurance; religion is consistently inscribed into this historicist framework. Second, the religious character of institutions is aligned with the personal authority of the founder. It is always a person who allies himself with the divinity and is thus empowered to create a stable and durable institution (pp. 71–72).

These two specific aspects of de Maistre's view help explain his theoretical steps beyond the argument in the *Considérations*. Notwithstanding his generic references to a diversity of religions in his attack on the "satanic" Revolution, de Maistre by no means thought that all religions were created equal when it came to their social function. Ultimately, there was one religion perfectly suited to this role: Roman Catholicism. This tenet was the basis of de Maistre's case for Ultramontanism in his 1819 book *Du pape*.[25] Here, the author asserts that "the Christian religion is the only institution which knows no decay, because it alone is divine" (p. 22 [I 5]).[26] It is easy to see how this is simply an extension of the more universal principle for which he argued in his earlier work. Institutions can only have stability if their foundation is connected with God. Christianity alone is "divine," so it is the one institution that has eternal endurance.

There is, moreover, an important precondition for this institutional success: the papacy:

> Without the Pope, there is no true Christianity; – without the Pope, the Divine institution loses its power, its Divine character, and its converting influence; – without the Pope, it is nothing better than a system, a human belief, incapable of penetrating and modifying the

25 De Maistre 1850.

26 There is a tension between de Maistre's argument here that the Church is "always the same," unlike human institutions that have "their infancy, their manhood, their old age, and their end," and his subsequent insistence (in defence of the unseemly beginnings of the papacy) that "everything that exists legitimately and for ages, exists at first in germ, and is developed successively," *ibid*.:24 (I 6).

> heart, to render man susceptible of a higher degree of science, of morality and civilization. (p. 295 [III 8])

We saw before how, for de Maistre, the religious quality of any institution was explained in terms of a founder who aligned himself ("se mettant en rapport" – *Considérations*, p. 69) with God. This emphasis on the necessarily personal dimension of institutional cohesion – as opposed to Rousseau's impersonal *volontée générale* – is carried over from the political to the religious sphere without much ado:

> When every species of criticism has been exhausted, and when have been thrown, as is reasonable, into the other scale of the balance, all the advantages of monarchy, what is the final result? *It is the best, the most durable of governments, and the most natural to men*. Let the court of Rome be judged in the same way. It is a monarchy, the only possible form of government for ruling the Catholic Church. (*The Pope*, p. 298 [III 8])

Of course, not even de Maistre would argue that St. Peter was the founder of Christianity, but the parallel is evident nonetheless. Religion can ultimately provide its social benefits only if it is truly divine and represented by an institution ideally suited to the preservation of its social impulse.

De Maistre's theory was developed in conscious opposition to Rousseau, "l'homme du monde peut-être qui s'est le plus trompé" (*Considérations*, p. 69). And yet, if it was simplistic to see Rousseau as returning to a pre-Christian model of political theology, it would be equally facile to find in the opponent of the Revolution a mere antagonist of the political thought of his forebear. While it is true that de Maistre adopted the very model of religious affiliation that had seemed to Rousseau the most pernicious – Roman Catholicism – their most fundamental intuitions are remarkably similar. Both consider societies from the point of view of their risk of disintegration and their corresponding need for stability. Both likewise ascribe to religion a major part in this dialectic. Religion can and should contribute to social and political stability, but it can also have the opposite effect. Finally, neither of them conceals that their assessment of individual religions, or indeed of specific versions of Christianity, is primarily conditioned by the potential of those faiths to hinder or promote political and social integration.

L.G.A. de Bonald

L.G.A. de Bonald is usually seen as following in the footsteps of de Maistre's line of thought; de Maistre himself acknowledged as much.[27] Yet the details of his sys-

27 Spaemann 1998:83. My reconstruction of de Bonald's role in this story is strongly indebted to Spaemann's masterful study.

tem are not always identical with the approach of his celebrated forerunner, and the mode in which he presents his ideas is rather different. Where de Maistre, the brilliant stylist, relished the paradoxical *bon mot*, de Bonald preferred the precise and dry language of the scholar. Like de Maistre, de Bonald identified the Revolution with both social anarchy and atheism. The collapse of political order, in his view, was directly related to the undermining of public religion.[28] It is therefore unsurprising that for him, too, religion is closely connected with the purpose of social and communal cohesion.

De Bonald hardly conceals his dependence on Rousseau, despite his equally fundamental criticism of the philosopher from Geneva.[29] Following Rousseau, de Bonald identifies the principle of social and political cohesion as the general will, a volition that is constantly in tension with the desires of individuals.[30] Yet the anti-revolutionary thinker argues that this *volonté générale* cannot be explained "from below," as the product of the infinite plurality of private wills (I, p. 130);[31] it has to be reconstructed as a transcendent reality that is always already present in any human community. Ultimately, then, for de Bonald, the general will is the will of God:

> Therefore, the general will of society, of the social body, of man as a social being; the nature of social being or of society; social will; even the will of God are all synonymous expressions. (I, p. 147)[32]

While de Bonald emphatically does not think that God is a human invention, it is nevertheless clear to him that, apart from His presence in society, God has no reality.[33] Consequently, de Bonald can speak of the "production" and "conservation" of God through society (I, p. 475) and assert that God is really and truly absent from an atheist nation (III, pp. 478–479).

If religion and society are thus perhaps more closely aligned in de Boland than in any previous thinker, this is the direct result of his concern with social and political stability. De Bonald agrees with Hobbes regarding the fragility of the political order (II, p. 13).[34] He pointedly affirms Hobbes's celebrated notion of

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28 In particular through modern philosophy. Cf. de Bonald 1859:3, 29.

29 Spaemann 1998:73.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Cf. *ibid.*:74

32 "Ainsi, volonté générale de la société, du corps social, de l'homme social, nature des êtres sociaux ou de la société, volonté sociale, volonté de Dieu même, sont des expressions synonymes …." My translation – J.Z..

33 Spaemann 1998:119–120.

34 *Ibid.*:104–105.

bellum omnium contra omnes, even if he denies that this was humanity's state of nature (II, p. 33, n. 3).[35] What was natural, he argues, was the opposite state, in which the selfish and destructive energies of human individuality were overcome by the imposition of an order fulfilling humanity's deepest need: self-preservation (III, p. 451).[36] This could only be achieved, however, by a spiritual power aligning human volition with the general will of the state. Thus far, religion and the political system were two sides of the same coin: it was therefore necessary, writes de Bonald, to consider political society from the point of view of religion, and religious society from the point of view of the political government (I, p. 327).[37]

This alignment of political and religious order was not, however, "natural," in the sense of being a universal fact of human history; it required the right institutions in its support. On the political side, it worked best with monarchy,[38] while on the religious side it was ultimately only Christianity, more specifically Roman Catholic Christianity, that perfectly fulfilled this function. De Bonald developed an elaborate political theology to support this contention. It was centered on the Incarnation as the guarantee of God's presence in the world and the Catholic Eucharist as the regular reenactment of Christ's sacrificial act of divine–human reconciliation.[39]

Like de Maistre, de Bonald attempted a philosophical justification of the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. The French Revolution was not merely a political aberration, and a failed one at that; it was also living proof of the falseness of modern philosophy, with its "atheistic" tendencies (III, p. 40).[40] Only a return to the monarchy of the *ancien régime*, with its particularly close connection to French Catholicism, therefore, could heal the damage done to French society by the Revolution. Despite this conservative intention, however, de Bonald's position was much more ambiguous. As Robert Spaemann masterfully showed more than sixty years ago,[41] de Bonald's political theology paradoxically gave birth to sociology and thus to a much more radically secular approach to society and religion than had been broached by any eighteenth-century thinker. In many ways,

35 *Ibid.*:106.

36 "La société la plus civilisée est donc la société la plus naturelle, comme l'homme le plus perfectionné est l'homme le plus naturel." Cf. Spaeman 1998:67–68.

37 "Il faut [...] considérer la société politique sous le point de vue de la religion, et la société religieuse sous le point de vue du gouvernement politique."

38 Spaemann 1998:79–80.

39 *Ibid.*:121–122.

40 *Ibid.*:21–22.

41 *Ibid.* The title of Spaemann's study sums up his interpretation: the birth of sociology from the spirit of the Restoration.

de Bonald is a vital, albeit ironic, link between Hobbes and Rousseau, on the one hand, and Comte and Durkheim, on the other.[42]

To a large extent, this was a consequence of de Bonald's intuitive identification of religion as instrumental for social cohesion. As we have seen, he inherited this notion from a particular early modern constellation, which he both accepted and radicalized. Why, he wondered, could a disaster such as the French Revolution ever have happened? Despite his admiration for the *ancien régime* and his contempt for the Revolution, he believed that there was an insight that could be gained from his post-Revolution vantage point. Observing in real time how the application of the "atheistic" philosophy of the Enlightenment was able radically to undermine the old social and political order allowed one to perceive *for the first time* the intimate nature of the connection between religion and society (III, p. 447).[43]

Rousseau had seen in Christianity a radically other-worldly religion unsuitable for the political integration of the state. De Bonald went to the opposite extreme, so to speak, by closely aligning Christianity with the principle of social and political unity and integration. In the process, he turned religion into a function of society, albeit its most fundamental function. The reality of God is collapsed into the totality of society, whose unitive and rational principle He becomes. While de Bonald believed this to be a vindication of Roman Catholicism in its traditional alliance with the Bourbon throne, it does not take much to see that the same tenets could easily be conscripted into the service of a rather different philosophy as well.

Religion and Social Cohesion: The Secular Version

The direction in which my narrative is tending is perhaps by now becoming clear. If religion is taken to be so closely aligned with the cohesion of a community, a nation or a society, then its failure to deliver this result becomes its failure *qua* religion. One might argue that the thinkers of the Catholic Restoration were in a way setting themselves up for failure, insofar as the society in which they existed was

42 For this argument cf. also Milbank 2006:55–60.

43 De Bonald uses the powerful metaphor of a storm to illustrate "cette commotion universelle, [...] ce renversement du monde sociale, qui, mettant a découvert le fond même de la société." It is "semblable à ces tempêtes violentes qui soulèvent l'Océan jusque dans les plus profonds abîmes, et laissent voir les bancs énormes de roche qui en supportent et en contiennent les eaux." Cf. Spaemann 1998:39–40.

simply unwilling to embrace Catholicism as unanimously as their theory seemed to require. It is therefore not difficult to see how their ultra-conservative theory could, by a further ironic twist, give rise to a theory of secularization. All that was needed at that point was the assumption, empirical in a way, that Catholic Christianity had in fact lost its sway over the population at large.

This modification seems first to have been proposed by Henri de Saint-Simon. In his *Introduction aux travaux scientifiques du dix-neuvième siècle*,[44] he declared himself full of admiration for de Bonald's writings, "the most estimable productions that have been brought to light in many years" (I, p. 211). He explicitly endorsed de Bonald's emphasis on what he calls the "utility of a unitive system" that can hold society together. Yet he was unconvinced that this unity could be provided by the traditional idea of God (*déisme*). In a rapid historical overview, Saint-Simon described modern Western history as a story in which Christianity increasingly found itself intellectually on the back foot, unable in particular to compete with the newly emerging paradigm of science (pp. 208–211). It was science, therefore, in particular Newton's law of gravity, that conceivably could provide the strong unitive bond that Christianity used to offer (p. 212).

This line of thought was subsequently taken up by Auguste Comte in his *Système de politique positive ou traité de sociologie*.[45] Comte's intellectual debt both to Saint-Simon and to the Restoration thinkers, which seems beyond doubt, has been variously interpreted. While Robert Spaemann, Robert Nisbet, John Milbank and, most recently, Carolina Armenteros have proposed a strong albeit paradoxical link between anti-revolutionary thought and later French social science, Pierre Macherey and Anthony Giddens have sought to downplay the connection.[46]

For my present purpose it is not necessary to take sides in this controversy. According to Comte, religion is "the state of full harmony appropriate to human existence" (p. 8). This harmony extends to the two main dualities characteristic of human life: mind and body, and individual and society. It would therefore be too simple to reduce Comte's view to the notion that religion holds society together, but the latter idea undoubtedly plays an important part in his theory. Religion reins in and rallies together (*régler*, *rallier*) individuals, as Comte constantly emphasizes (*ibid.*). In other words, it suppresses selfish impulses while instilling

44 Saint-Simon 1859.

45 Comte 1852.

46 Spaemann 1998:184–185; Nisbet 2004:xii, 57; Milbank 2006:55; Armenteros 2017; Macherey 1991:41–47; Giddens 1972. Giddens' main concern, however, is with Durkheim. He expressly concedes that "Comte drew upon the ideas of the 'conservative' Catholic apologists" and especially so in the *Positive Polity* (*ibid.*:363); "but it was Comte's *Positive Philosophy* which particularly influenced Durkheim" (*ibid.*).

into individuals a real desire to serve the whole. For this reason, it has to work on both the heart and the mind, by including doctrine as well as cult.

Historical religions, Comte argued, had a mixed record with regard to these functions. He eschewed the neat evolutionism found in the thinking of some of his contemporaries and notably believed that monotheism had a dangerous tendency towards the doctrinal, making it overly intellectual and ultimately egotistical and sectarian.[47] This adverse potential of monotheistic religion became most pronounced, he thought, in Protestantism, probably the faith he detested more than any other.[48] Catholicism, by contrast, came closest to perfection, partly because it retained salutary elements of polytheism and fetishism, such as the cult of saints and, notably, the veneration of the Virgin Mary (p. 134).[49] Catholicism was also most advanced in its hierarchical structure, which was necessary because religion was geared towards social unity.

Ultimately, none of the historical religions succeeded in realizing its full potential, however. This only became possible on the basis of scientific insight elucidating the deep connections between humanity's physical, biological and psychological constitutions. The key to this unity, Comte believed, lay in a new field, for which he famously coined the term "social science" (pp. 52–53). Elucidating the laws governing this reality, which he himself had discovered, would finally be able to replace traditional theology as the queen of sciences, engineering a society in a state of perfect harmony. For this project, Comte coined the phrase "religion of humanity."[50]

Despite the idiosyncrasies of his thought, it is easy to see how Comte fits into the narrative of my paper and also extends it. Like de Maistre and de Bonald, he wrote in the shadow of the French Revolution, deeply worried about the breakdown of social and political order.[51] Added to this trauma is his awareness of the social disruptions of early capitalism.[52] Like Rousseau, he saw Christianity as ambiguous in its political and social consequences, but he followed the Restoration theorists *against* the early modern consensus, espoused by Rousseau, in his assessment of the relative merits of Catholicism. Like Saint-Simon, finally, he combined an appreciation of the socially stabilizing character of the Catholic sys-

47 Lubac 1995:183–186; Wernick 2004:110–111, with nn. 61–62.

48 Lubac 1995:204–205.

49 "Le catholicisme, qu'on pourrait justement nommer le polythéisme du moyen âge ...." Cf. Lubac 1995:197–198.

50 Cf. Wernick 2004. The full title of Comte's 1852 work is *Système du politique positive, ou Traité de sociologie, Instituant la religion de l'humanité*.

51 Nisbet 2004:57.

52 Wernick 2004:81.

tem with the idea that scientific progress had made even this form of traditional religion untenable.

Of all Comte's ideas, none has earned him more ridicule than his attempt to set up a new religious cult with himself as its head. Despite the abject failure of the cult of humanity as a putative replacement for traditional religion and a scientifically based church for the modern world, however, Comte's project was not without some remarkable effects. Comte himself dreamt of a "holy alliance" between positivists and Catholics,[53] and the same consideration inspired the personally agnostic Charles Maurras in his foundation of the notorious Action Française.[54] In the thick of the Dreyfus affair, Maurras sought to rally together all those willing to recreate a traditional, monarchical France as a "Christian society." By Christian he meant, similarly to Comte, the medieval, Catholic transformation of a religion that in its origins was deeply tainted by anarchic tendencies, which Maurras identified with Judaism. Due to its Jewish origin, the biblical text itself "will always operate in a Jewish manner unless it is interpreted by Rome."[55]

The spirit of the Action Française was, unsurprisingly, alien to Émile Durkheim, son of a rabbi, defender of Colonel Dreyfus and lifelong republican.[56] Yet the notion of religion as the bond that holds society together stands nevertheless at the center of his celebrated sociological theory as well. In fact, the significance of this notion for Durkheim's thought is so evident and so well known that further elaboration on this point seems unnecessary in the present context.[57] It has often been observed that Durkheim's interest in religion dates only from a late period in his career. Much earlier, however, in his works on the division of labor and on suicide, he had mused about what he called *l'anomie*, normlessness, as a radical threat to social cohesion.[58]

Thus far, his later account of religion, as offered in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912),[59] inscribes itself into the trajectory of modern thought, which accorded to religion a crucial role in community cohesion in response to the fear that society would disintegrate. Throughout the extensive analyses by means of which Durkheim sought to establish his view of religion, this broader agenda retreats into the background. Yet it is spelt out with admirable clarity in the rightly

53 Lubac 1995:204–214.
54 Spaemann 1998:186–188.
55 Maurras 1978:24.
56 Giddens 1972:361.
57 Cf., e.g., Hausner 2017.
58 Durkheim 1930a:360–365; 1930b:264–311.
59 Durkheim 1995.

famous words in the book's final chapter in which Durkheim gives expression to his assessment of the religious situation of his own time:

> The great things of the past which filled our fathers with enthusiasm do not excite the same zeal in us, either because they have passed so completely into common custom that we lose awareness of them or because they no longer suit our aspirations. Meanwhile no replacement to them has as yet been created. [...] In short, the former gods are growing old or dying, and others have not been born. This is what voided Comte's attempt to organize a religion using old historical memories, artificially revived. It is life itself, and not a dead past, that can produce a living cult. But that state of uncertitude and confused anxiety cannot last forever. A day will come when our societies once again will know hours of creative effervescence, during which new ideas will again spring forth and new formulas emerge to guide humanity for a time. (p. 429)

Here, the view of religion as community cohesion has, *faute de mieux*, mutated into a theory of secularization. Note the reference to Comte, surely not coincidentally inserted into this key passage. It is hard not to read it dialectically as expressing a sense of solidarity with the earlier theorist, alongside the overt criticism. Comte, Durkheim seems to say, was right to identify the retreat of religion as a severe problem; he was right, moreover, to diagnose the state of traditional Christianity as one of advanced decay. Yet he erred in his belief that it was the task of the theorist to remedy this situation, because ultimately "it is [only] life itself [...] that can produce a living cult." The modern predicament is thus understood as indicating a profoundly theological "absence of God," for whose return humanity can only wait. Secularization, then, will not last forever, but it is the current reality, to which the reader of the book is prompted to acquiesce.

While this religious diagnosis appears only as an afterthought to Durkheim's actual, scientific analysis in the *Elementary Forms*, the core of his theory of religion is – just as it was in Rousseau and in the thinkers of the Catholic Restoration – the idea that religion is what binds society together. As a matter of fact, Durkheim adopts the more radical view, adumbrated by de Bonald and Comte, according to which religion *is* society in its integrated state. To that extent, Durkheim's diagnosis of the religious situation in France's Third Republic is yet another response to the deeply engrained fear of social destabilization, which, throughout the modern period, was the backdrop to theories emphasizing the socially and politically stabilizing role of religion.

Conclusion: Augustine and the Problem of Religious Diversity

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to follow the trajectory of the early modern alignment of religious unity and social and political stability. By starting from

Varro's notion of political theology, I showed how pre-Christian antiquity saw the problematic relationship between religion and politics in a characteristically different light. The political theologian had to mediate between the powerfully affective but superstitious religion of the masses and the philosophical religion of the elite. This theory responded to tensions between types of religion, each suitable for a different social sphere. While it would be wrong to say that the perception reflected in Varro's theory was entirely absent from later Western political thought, it is fundamentally incompatible with the principles of Christianity. As Augustine clearly articulated, the Christian faith, in this regard following the example of biblical Judaism, could not tolerate a duality of elite and popular religion.

When this unified theological vision came under strain in early modernity, the fault line was no longer the duality of folk religion and philosophical religion. Instead, in line with the predominant theoretical concern about the integration and disintegration of societies, it was asked what role religion had to play in this connection. Consequently, religion was inscribed into the tension between individuality and community, and the question to be answered was whether it contributed to social stability or led to fragmentation. This then led to a strand of theorists seeking to understand religion specifically in its cohesive function for societies.

As I have shown, this line of thought served very different purposes – from Rousseau's liberal Enlightenment perspective to the conservatism of the Catholic Restoration to Durkheim's theory of secularization. None of them, it seems to me, well captures the particular way in which religion is a matter of the individual in community with others. Instead, religion is forced into a procrustean bed fashioned by the foundational concern of modern political and social theory with social stability and cohesion. As religion had been crucial to the political and social upheavals of early modernity, this perspective is perhaps not surprising, but from our historical distance, its limitations are nonetheless striking.

Understanding religions in this way subordinated them to the strategies of politicians and nationalist activists. It made the messages of religions indistinguishable from the founding myths of states and nations. Religious minorities – Jews, French Protestants, German Catholics – fared even worse, as their faiths in this perspective looked not merely theologically erroneous but like perversions of religion. Religious minorities were not only wrong but dangerous; their very existence inevitably called into question the stability and durability of the social and political commonwealth. Ultimately, the association of religion with communal cohesion was also pragmatically self-defeating. The empirical increase in religious diversity and the nostalgic longing for religious homogeneity became intertwined elements of a narrative that with some logic led to the view that, due to

the absence of a unified church, modernity spelt the end of religion. Durkheim's affirmation of secularization *in this regard* seems entirely plausible.

Is this problematic, then, exclusively a result of the idiosyncrasies of Western modernity? I think such a conclusion might ultimately be too simplistic. Let us recall why Augustine thought he could reject Varro's plurality of theologies. By providing a single narrative and a single theory encompassing equivalents of all three "theologies," Christianity promised a more durable and reliable foundation for the existence of the commonwealth than Varro's Roman ideology ever could. From the outset, then, Christian political theology was much more ambitious than that of Roman paganism, in combining popular imagination, political functionality and philosophical reflection into one. Where Varro's politician mediated between ultimately incommunicable visions of popular and philosophical religion, Augustine's project entailed the need for the philosopher-theologian to educate not only the prince, but also the population at large.

This argument undoubtedly is powerful, yet there is no denying that its success largely depended on the sociologically unifying power of the Christian Church – and in practice that meant the Church's close collaboration with the state. While Varro's system accepted the irreducible diversity and plurality of popular religion as a built-in assumption, in Augustine's alternative proposal, religious division became a political problem.

This does not make all these modern theorists Augustinians, but, in viewing a single, shared religion as the key for political unity, they all grappled with a problem bequeathed to Western political thought by the bishop of Hippo. It was the demise of his unified vision over the course of modernity that seemed to call for compensation. Perhaps ironically, the end result of these compensatory theories turned out to be rather detrimental to religion.

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