RELIGION of HUMANITY REVISITED

*Kemal ATAMAN**

SUMMARY

Auguste Comte is known not only as the founder of sociology, positivism, and history of science, he is also responsible for founding of a new religion: Religion of Humanity. Some scholars have argued that the Religion of Humanity was but a biographical accident resulting from Comte's platonic love for Clotilde de Vaux. Against these assertions, this article hopes to show that it is misleading to reduce the emergence of a new movement to a single cause. The Religion of Humanity, therefore, is closely related to history, culture, and socio-political background of Europe in general but of French society in particular.

ÖZET

İnsanlık Dini'ne Yeni Bir Bakış

Sosyoloji, pozitivizm ve bilim tarihinin kurucusu olarak bilinen Auguste Comte aynı zamanda bir din icat etmiştir: İnsanlık Dini. Bazı bilim adamları, İnsanlık Dini'nin Comte'un Clotilde de Vaux'a olan platonik aşkından kaynaklanan biyografik bir kazadan başka bir şey olmadığını iddia edegelmişlerdir. Bu iddialara karşılık bu makale, yeni bir hareketin ortaya çıkışını tek bir nedene bağlamanın yanıltıcı olacağını; bu nedenle İnsanlık Dini'nin genelde Avrupa'nın, özelde de Fransız toplumunun tarih, kültür ve sosyo-politik arka planı ile yakından ilintili olduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

---

* Arş. Gör., U.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Din Sosyolojisi Anabilim Dalı

Introduction

As the founder of sociology, positivism, and history of science, Isadore Auguste François Comte (1798-1857) was arguably one of the most important nineteenth-century French philosophers.

Scholars have tended to believe that Comte's writing falls into two distinguishable phases, which we might call scientific and Messianic. In the first, initiated in a series of programmatic essays in the 1820s and culminating in the *Course de philosophie positive* (1830-42), he presented his new science of sociology and a plan for the intellectual, moral, and political reconstruction of Europe in general but France in particular.[1] It is with the second phase that we see the emergence of a new religion: Religion of Humanity. Comte's ideas regarding this phase are embodied in the *System of Positive Polity* (1851-54).

While considerable attention has been given to the first phase, the second one has been treated only superficially. Although the problem is a multifaceted one, the question to which this article hopes to find a possible answer is a very specific one, namely: What was/were the motive or motives that led Comte constitute a *new* religion? In pursuing the subject, I will argue that Comte was the child of his society and culture, and his ideas were shaped by the conditions in which he lived. The so-called Religion of Humanity was not a "biographical accident" but the inevitable result of the conditions that surrounded him.

Life and context

Comte was born on the twentieth day of January in 1798 in Montpellier, France. In those days people suffered harshly from cold winters, bad harvests, famine, poverty and increasing conscription and requisitions for the war effort. Comte's father was a minor civil servant; both parents were conservatives in politics and devoted Catholics in religion, despite the revolutionary spirit of those years.[2]

Comte began his education at a lycee in his hometown where he did well, especially in mathematics. During the spring of 1816, however, he was involved in a student protest that began as a complaint against the teaching methods of one geometry instructor. This would be the end of his educational career, for the government responded simply but forcefully; it closed

---

[1] Samuel J. Preus, *Explaining Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p.107.

[2] Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 7-10.

the school and dismissed all the students.[3] That incident meant that he was not going to have any academic degree that would ease his way in that chaotic world.

His marriage life was another serious problem in his life; According to Comte, he had made "the only capital error of his whole life"[4] by marrying to, the so-called prostitute, Caroline Masson. They separated four time altogether, first, in 1826, and finally in 1842, after which she constantly threatened him with returning if he failed to provide her with financial support.[5]

His relationship with Clotilde lasted only one year before her death in April 1846 at the age of thirty. Even in that short period their relationship reveals some of the emotional problems that destroyed his marriage.[6] It should not come as a surprise to see how Comte's platonic love for Clotilde played a significant role as the source of inspiration in creating and shaping the Religion of Humanity. It seems that Comte's love for her could only thrive after her death, when she became transfigured into his guardian angel and later even the Goddess of Humanity. Professor Raymond Aron goes even further by suggesting "Auguste Comte would probably not have conceived the Religion of Humanity if he had not been in love with Clotilde de Vaux."[7] According to Aron, " we are, therefore free to regard his religion as a biographical accident"[8] With all due respect to Professor Aron, I am of the opinion that to accept his assertion as the only reason for the rise of the religion of humanity, and to call it a biographical accident may be misleading. However, it can be regarded as one of the motives among others that this paper hopes to sort out. I hope that the following lines will support my argument with regard to this particular subject.

Like all the other philosophers, Comte, too, was influenced by many prominent philosophers such as Hume, Kant, Blaise Pascal, Charles Montesquieu, Jacques Turgot, Saint-Simon and so on. Whereas Montesquieu's and Turgot's influence is obvious, particularly, in Comte's idea of progress, Saint-Simon's influence can be discerned in Comte's idea of the Religion of Humanity. That is to say, the idea of establishing the Religion of Humanity was neither a biographical accident nor was it an invention that solely belongs to Comte. On the one hand it would be clearly misleading to claim that

---

[3] Charles D. Cashdollar, *The Transformation of Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 7.

[4] Ted R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 13.

[5] Ibid., p. 14.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, trans. Richard Howard & Helen Weaver (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), vol. I, p. 104.

[8] Ibid.

Comte did no more than elaborate systematically what Saint-Simon had already sketched out, on the other hand we should not ignore Saint-Simon's role in Comte's philosophy. The following quotation will show clearly how deep Simon's influence is on Comte's program. Like Comte, Simon too believed that history is composed of critical organic periods:

> The Middle Ages was an organic civilization in which there was a harmonious social, moral, and intellectual integration held together by a religious faith...there was a hierarchy that was not oppressive. It gave coherence and organic unity to the whole.

> The eighteenth century on the other hand was a critical period...no institution, no authority, no revered belief was spared. What the nineteenth century suffered was, in a word, *anarchy: religious anarchy, moral anarchy, social anarchy, and political anarchy.*[9] (Italics mine)

It was the task of philosopher to devise a system that would overcome the anarchy in the society. Interestingly, both Saint-Simon and Comte (who was his secretary for several years) realized that glue or a bond was necessary to accomplish this, that glue was religion although neither of them believed in God.[10] For Simon, this religion should be a revised Christianity. In this context, he sees himself as the biblical authority for this revised new Christianity. By revising Christianity, Simon "reduced the whole of Christianity to brotherly love, i.e., a religion of fraternity, or a religion of man."[11] Thus, whereas Saint Simon poses as the prophet of a *new Christianity*, Comte was going to be the prophet and/or the pope of his Religion of Humanity.

But most important of the entire context within which the Religion of Humanity should be understood, however, is the French Revolution and its outcomes, for it raised the paradoxical issue of religion. On the one hand, by making the Church the enemy of the Revolution, the revolutionaries strengthened the anticlerical tradition in France. Religious practices and religious education were severely hampered, and all classes experienced the loss of belief."[12] A new secularism was particularly widespread in Comte's generation. Comte's lack of belief, in fact his pride in having lost his belief in his early youth reflected this situation. On the other hand, "the counter-revolution revealed the extent of the people's loyalty to the Catholic Church.[13] Growing up in Montpellier, where the civil war was particularly

---

[9] Emmet Kennedy, "The French Revolution and the Genesis of Religion of Man," in *Modernity and Religion*. ed. Ralph Mcinery (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p.75.

[10] Ibid., p. 76.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Pickering, *Auguste Comte*, p.11.

[13] Ibid.

bitter, Comte must have felt the immense strength of religion. And though an unbeliever, he was neither irreligious nor comfortable with atheism: his predicament, therefore, was peculiarly "modern."

In responding to this dilemma, Comte was also influenced by the pattern set by the revolutionaries who found changing the social and political order insufficient and demanded a corresponding transformation in the religious and moral order.[14] The revolutionaries must have been aware of the role of religion, for they regarded it as a means in furnishing a government with moral support and in building a social consensus. However, since the revolutionaries failed to create a new reliable religion for a new era, Comte inherited the problem.

Having drawn the picture of Comte's life and the context in which his thoughts were shaped, it is time to move on to the next step; the birth of the Religion of Humanity.

Comte: Observer and Social Reformer

Born in the midst of the civil war, Comte would spend most of his life fighting with the problems produced by the revolution- problems that troubled the nation throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the principle challenges bequeathed by the revolution to this generation was that of creating a social consensus for the modern era.

In order to create a new social consensus, Comte wished first to observe the society. His observations eventually led him to believe that a certain type of society was dying; another was being born in his eyes. The dying type was characterized by two adjectives: theological and military. Medieval society was united by transcendent faith as expounded by the Catholic Church. In "Considerations On the Spiritual Power" he states that:

> The decline of theological philosophy and the corresponding spiritual power has left society without any moral discipline. Individuals with the best of purposes are continually weakening the efforts of each other. Powerful persons are crushing the weak. The defeated are conning against the strong. [15]

It was apparent for Comte that there was anarchy in every domain of social life in society. But the question still remains: What was/were the cause/causes of this anarchy? The possible answer to

---

[14] Ibid.,p. 15.

[15] Auguste Comte, "Considerations On the Spiritual Power," in *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: The Early Essays of Auguste Comte.* ed. Ronald Fletcher, trans. H. D. Hutton, 1877 (London: Heineman Educational Books, 1974), pp. 220-2.

this question can be found in one of his earlier writings, "Philosophical Considerations On the Sciences and Savants," as follows:

> ...Society, regarded from a moral point of view, is in a condition of real profound anarchy, acknowledged by all observers, whatever may be their speculative opinions. This anarchy results, in the last resort, from the *absence of any preponderating system, capable of uniting all minds in a communion of ideas.* [16] (Italics mine)

Note the similarities between Saint-Simon and Comte as to what causes a society decline in their respective claims.

The other reason can be explained by looking at the well-known *Law of Human Development* or the *Law of Three Stages*, which was originated by Turgot and popularized in Saint-Simon's day by those persons like Burdin and the others. According to this law, "The human mind, by its nature, employs in its progress three methods of philosophizing, the character of which is essentially different, and even radically opposed: viz., the theological method, the metaphysical, and the positive...each of which exclude the other.[17]

Comte regards the first stage as the "necessary departure of human understanding; and the third is its fixed and definite state. The second is merely a state of transition."[18] He then explains each state in detail. Before the positive method was developed, philosophers, using the metaphysical method, had recourse to abstract forces to explain all natural phenomena; before the metaphysical method, they had recourse to theological modes of explanation in search for absolute truth.

Although the positive way of philosophizing is, according to Comte, the highest accomplishment of the human mind, the most fundamental of the three methods remains the theological, for "it is the necessary point of departure of human understanding."[19]

In the light of the Law of Three Stages it is possible to identify one more reason for social chaos: The conflicts of different social systems and mental anarchy. Comte continues:

> In our day three different systems coexist in the heart of society: theological-feudal system, the scientific-industrial system, and lastly the mongrel and transitional system of metaphysicians, and law-

---

[16] Auguste Comte, "Philosophical Considerations On the Sciences and Savants, " in *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: The Early Essays of Auguste Comte*. ed. Ronald Fletcher, trans. H. D. Hutton, 1877 (London: Heineman Educational Books, 1974), p. 199.

[17] Auguste Comte, *Positive Philosophy*. trans. Harried Martineau (New York: William Gowans, 1868), p. 25.

[18] Ibid., p. 26.

[19] Ibid., pp. 26-27.

yers. In the midst of such confusion it is entirely beyond the grasp of the human mind to make a clear and exact analysis...[20]

After identifying the motives that caused the social anarchy in the society, Comte had to find the most suitable prescription to cure the social illness. As it is stated above, having been influenced mostly by Saint-Simon, Comte was convinced, like revolutionaries, that the only glue and prescription that would provide unity and integrity with society, was religion.[21] Thus it is 'safe to assert that Comte tried to explain religion and its possible functions in society. He went even further in this regard, suggesting, "every society, including that of the future, must have at least *functional equivalent* of religion."[22]

Religion of Humanity

Simply naming religion as a binding power did not eliminate the obstacles to unity and integrity in the society, for there was already a religion with all its institutions and long history, namely Christianity. Thus, the question was: What kind of religion to be followed? Comte did not accept even Saint-Simon's so-called *revised Christianity* that we mentioned earlier, for he wanted to eliminate the last traces of the theological spirit of Christianity. That does not necessarily mean, however, that Comte denied the functions and the services of the religious traditions of the past. Quite the contrary, he appreciates them, for Comte, they played a significant role in the evolution of the society and human mind. But they should take their places in history.

By eliminating the last traces of religion of any kind, Comte was looking for truths acquired once and for all, never again to be brought into question, for only in this way could the controversies of the age be ended and the current disorganization and demoralization be overcome. Comte believed that once social life was reorganized according to this truths-positive principles- an order of timeless harmony would emerge based upon the fullest satisfaction of man's true needs.[23] Comte emphasized that the truths and

---

[20] Auguste Comte, "Plan for Reorganizing Society," In *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: The early Essays of Auguste Comte*. ed. Ronald Fletcher, trans. H. D. Hutton, 1877 (London: Heineman Educational Books, 1974), p. 152.

[21] I am hesitant to use the term *religion* in this context, for in his earlier writings Comte does not use it directly. He prefers the term *positive philosophy* instead. In his later works, however, he uses the two terms alternately as is the case in the following statement: "...Thus positivism becomes, in the true sense of the word, a *religion*: the only religion that is real and complete; destined, therefore, to replace all imperfect and provisional systems resting on the primitive basis of theology." See Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, trans. J.H. Bridges (London: Reeves&Turner, 1880), p. 243.

[22] Preus, *Explaining Religion*, p. 109.

[23] Comte, "Plan For Reorganizing Society," p. 156.

the timeless harmony be obtainable only by use of the positive method. Therefore, "the religion of our age may and must be of a positivist inspiration. It can no longer be the religion of the past, for the latter presupposes a way of thinking that is outmoded."[24] Since we are living in an age of science, it follows, then, that our religion, too, must be resting upon scientific truths, for "the man of scientific mind can no longer believe in revelation, and in catechism of the Church, or in divinity according to the traditional conception."[25] It is crucial to realize that in rejection the theological and metaphysical states, Comte was abandoning all hope of absolute knowledge.

From what has been said thus far one can deduce the following: On the one hand people needs religion because it teaches them to love something greater than themselves, on the other, society needs religion because it needs spiritual power. Therefore, the religion that could answer all these perpetual needs of humanity in search of unity and love would be the religion of Humanity.

How does this new religion differ from other religions? What is unique in this religion? Like the other traditional religions it, too, had a *Great Being* that can be conceived as God. Unlike the others, however, it was far from being a *Metaphysical Being;* rather, it was "humanity itself –in the form of Great Being-which was composed of conscious elements, namely, people."[26] Comte's religion may be regarded as an austere teaching in which theological questions-questions about meaning and purpose- has no place.

One other aspect of the new religion is that it is a complete way of life, for it asks us to be the devotees of positivism, which must shape our thoughts and direct every aspect of our lives, individual or collective.[27] There was no separation of the sacred and the profane. While humanity was serving as Great Being, Comte posed, as mentioned, as the prophet or high priest of the new religion.[28] Another characteristic is its concept of worship. In this context the term *worship* takes on a new meaning. "The true believer of positivism," Comte writes:

---

[24] Aron, *Main Currents*, vol. I. p.103.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Comte, *A general View of Positivism*, p.243.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Comte explains his theory of the Religion of Humanity in detail in his latest work *The Catechism of Positive Religion*. The book represents an attempt to popularize positivism. A suitably submissive woman asks a confident priest to explain first the *General View of Religion* and then various aspects of worship, the doctrine, regime and so on. See Auguste Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans. R. Congreve (London: J. Chapman, 1858).

...regards life as a continuous and earnest act of worship; worship which will elevate and purify our feelings, enlarge and enlighten our thoughts, ennoble and invigorate our actions.[29]

Comte suggests that we, as the believers, must spend all our time and energy for the sake of religion, if we are wishing to secure society from the deadly chaos, for "it (religion) supplies a direct solution, so far as a solution is possible, of the great problems of the Middle Ages, the subordination of politics to Morals."[30]

Conclusion

The Religion of Humanity, which Comte attempted to found, turned out to be a dismal failure; and instead of becoming a first positivist Pope, he died in extreme poverty in 1857. The question why his attempt turned out to be a failure is a multifaceted one.

First of all, Comte was unlucky in that, he tried to produce a catechism without supernatural beliefs. "The problem with Comte's positive religion is that" writes Emmet, "few people with religion would want one without God and few people without God want a religion, as John Stuart Mill wryly observed.[31]

Secondly, Comte failed to keep up with developments in science, refusing to follow the new literature in the interest of mental hygiene. He goes one step further in this respect, and wishes to select only one hundred books for his positivist society and burn all the rest. [32]

Thirdly, even a superficial analysis will reveal that the Religion of Humanity is full of obligations and worship-regulations that it was next to impossible to be a good believer. Again, the Religion of Humanity celebrates the insignificance of the individual and gives much more attention to the duties than to rights. In this connection, according to Emmet, Mill regards Comte's system as *spiritual despotism*. *Despotism*, because Comte, the high priest of the Religion of Humanity, regulated every part of the day with spiritual exercise as would a monastery.[33]

Fourthly, Comte contradicted his own theory of progress, for by searching for truths once and for all; he had unintentionally closed the door of progress and evolution, which is one of the most significant elements of his religion. According to Comte, there is now only one state- the state upon

---

[29] Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, p. 245.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Emmet, "Religion of Man," p. 79.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., p.80.

which we are dwelling; the positive state, there will be neither fourth nor fifth ones.

It is obvious that Comte is offering us religion or the equivalent of religion as a unifying and spiritual power. That is to say, his theory of religion is strictly functional and utilitarian. In this sense, "religion or spiritual power became the name of anything that fulfills these functions."[34]

And finally, like Hume and others, Comte tried to explain religion. Unlike Hume, however, explaining it did not mean explaining it away; on the contrary for him, religion as *function* must endure. The following lines will summarize Comte's entire project about religion. "...It (religion) must be cultivated, promoted and if necessary reinvented. Comte thus gives a new twist to Voltaire's wisdom about God: if religion did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it."[35]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aron, Raymond. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. 2vols. Translated by Richard Howard & Helen Weaver. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965.

Cashdollar, Charles D. *The Transformation of Theology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Kennedy, Empty. "The French Revolution and the Genesis of Religion of Man." In *Modernity and Religion*. Edited by Ralph Mcinery. Notre Dame Press, 1994.

Pickering, Mary. *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Preus, J. S. *Explaining Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Wright, Ted R. *The Religion of Humanity*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

COMTE

Comte, Auguste. "Plan For Reorganizing Society." In *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: The Early Essays of Auguste Comte*. Edited by Ronald Fletcher. Translated by H.D. Hutton, 1877. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974.

---------. "Considerations On the Spiritual Power." In *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization: The Early Essays of Auguste Comte*. Edited by Ronald

---

[34] Preus, *Explaining Religion*, p. 127.
[35] Ibid., p. 130.

Fletcher. Translated by H.D. Hutton, 1877. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974.

----------. "Philosophical Considerations On the Sciences and Savants." In *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization*: The Early Essays of Auguste Comte. Edited by Ronald Fletcher. Translated by. H.D. Hutton, 1877. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974.

----------. *A General View of Positivism*. Translated by J.H. Bridges. London: Reeves &Turner, 1880.

----------. *The Catechism of Positive Religion*. Translated by R. Congreve. London: Chapman, 1858.

----------. *Positive Philosophy*. Translated by Harried Martineau. New York: William Gowans, 1868.