

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_canadian-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php)

# New Creeds for Old in Nineteenth-Century France<sup>1</sup>

D. G. CHARLTON

## I

NINETEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT in France, as elsewhere in Europe, is commonly regarded as being in the first place predominantly scientific and in the second predominantly critical and destructive of established creeds. And so in many ways it was. This was the age of industrialization, railways, and greatly improved surgery; the age of scientists such as Ampère and Carnot, Cuvier and Lamarck, Berthelot, Pasteur, and Claude Bernard; the age too in which far-reaching attempts were made to establish beside the natural sciences new "human sciences"—sociology, psychology, a more scientific history, and anthropology. Furthermore, the nineteenth century was indeed a critical and destructive age. It saw the mounting of an exhaustive attack upon Christian belief in particular and supernaturalism in general, an attack, based upon scientific discoveries, that went far beyond the primarily rationalist scepticism of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*. In political thought too this is a period of revolutions, of opposition—often violent—to monarchy, paternalistic government, and laissez-faire economics.

Yet these scientific and critical aspects of the century's thought are only a part of an ambivalent whole. No less important, this was also a period of remarkable constructive enterprise in the non-scientific intellectual realm—more so, one is tempted to say, than any century since the Renaissance. It gave birth to the vast metaphysical systems of Hegel and other German Idealists, soon popularized in France, to the "positive philosophy" of Comte, to the widely-ranging social theories of Saint-Simon and his disciples, to the socialistic ideas of Fourier, Proudhon, Leroux, Louis Blanc, and numerous others in France alone. It is too rarely emphasized that the nineteenth century was an age that longed for infallibility—and found it, whether in the papal infallibility alleged in France by Bonald, Maistre, and Lamennais and later proclaimed by the Pope himself, or in the infallibility attributed to science by Saint-Simon, Comte, and other adherents of "scientism," or in the metaphysical infallibility of Hegelian absolutism, or in the infallibility of historical evolution as expounded by Marx and a hundred other believers in metaphysical philosophies of progress. From right-wing to left-wing, from Catholics to atheists, one meets in countless thinkers the same affection for

1. The material in this article is drawn from a forthcoming book, *Philosophical Prophets in France, 1815–1870*, to be published shortly by the Oxford University Press. I am grateful for permission to utilize it here.

the big, all-inclusive, high-flown abstractions—History, the Absolute, Science, the Ideal, the “Great All” so beloved of the pantheists. Again and again any mood of scientific caution yielded to prophetic fervour, and any destructive intent stemmed not from our present-day attitudes of sceptical interrogation but from a deeply sincere desire to build anew upon cleared foundations, to erect new philosophies—new religions, indeed—to replace the old, “pre-scientific” creeds of the past.

Nor was this true only in the fields of philosophy and political and social theory. In France it was no less true of the realm of religious thought. Most secular thinkers of the century, though bitterly anti-Catholic, were far from being irreligious, hard-hearted materialists, as has sometimes been implied. This is evidenced even by the very reluctance with which many unbelievers abandoned Christianity; the eighteenth century, not the nineteenth, was the time of joyous, aggressive unbelief. Regret for lost faith, the barrenness of religious scepticism—these were almost commonplaces in French literature and philosophy alike at this time, from Romantics such as Musset, Lamartine, and Hugo to Parnassian poets such as Leconte de Lisle, Louise Ackermann, and Sully Prudhomme and novelists such as Flaubert and Loti, and in thinkers from Jouffroy and the young Quinet to Renan and Scherer. “I was unbelieving but I hated unbelief”—this remark of Jouffroy is typical of a time which Nerval once called “sceptical rather than unbelieving.”<sup>2</sup> For thinkers were in general keenly aware of both the moral and the social utility of religious faith and also its personal consolations. Durkheim’s acknowledgment later of religion’s social value and William James’s stress on its psychological value were foreshadowed throughout the century. Thinkers of every colour prized religion as a necessary basis for political stability and order, as a barrier against moral scepticism and an essential means to spur the masses to ethical action.

Catholics such as Maistre and Chateaubriand; social reformers such as Comte, the Saint-Simonians, and Leroux; Eclectic Liberals such as Cousin—all regarded the anarchy and horrors of the French Revolution as a warning against irreligion. All of them, too, were highly sensitive to the disruptions threatened by the rapid, industrial, economic, and social changes of these years; they were almost obsessed, indeed, by the dangers of historical development. Hence they sought not merely to reconstruct on the political level but also, since they believed that ideas govern history, to reconstruct first of all—and indispensably in their view—philosophically, religiously. Furthermore, they also recognized man’s personal need for belief, and many of them expressed repeatedly their respect for man’s “religious sentiment”—“a fundamental law of our nature,” as Benjamin Constant puts it<sup>3</sup>—for man’s sense of reverence and awed elevation as he surveys the wonders and immensities of Nature, of “the starry heavens without and the moral law

2. T. Jouffroy, *Nouveaux mélanges philosophiques* (3rd ed., Paris: Hachette, 1872), p. 85; G. de Nerval, *Les Filles du feu* (2 vols., Paris: Champion, 1931), Vol. I, p. 290.

3. B. Constant, *De la religion*, liv. I, ch. i, in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 1400.

within." Michelet, for example, following Constant and numerous other disciples of Rousseau's Savoyard Vicar, can say that religion is born "almost always out of a true need of the heart."<sup>4</sup> A scientist like Claude Bernard can declare: "One must seek not to extinguish metaphysics or the religious sentiment of man but to enlighten it and lead it to greater heights."<sup>5</sup> Renan can maintain (after his loss of Christian faith): "What belongs to mankind, what will thus be eternal like mankind, is the religious need, the religious faculty."<sup>6</sup> These men and many others could agree with Musset when in *Rolla* he attacked Voltairian scepticism and spoke with dismay of "the sterile milk of impiety."

Consequently, whether for political or for personal reasons or for both, the conviction spread that either the old religion must be restored or else a new synthesis must replace it. Amongst the Christians, some stood for Catholic orthodoxy linked with a strong monarchy; this is the position that Balzac, for instance, took over from Maistre. Others tried to rejuvenate Christianity by an infusion of illuminist and occultist notions; this group includes Ballanche, the French Swedenborgians, and other minor eccentrics. And a few—Christian Socialists such as Lamennais, Buchez, and the Fourierist Catholics—sought to infuse greater social concern into the Church. But many other thinkers agreed with Stendhal (in 1822) that the Catholic Church had only some twenty-five years to live, that it was past saving. Nor did Protestantism seem to most of them to offer a viable compromise between the intransigence of Rome and agnostic free-thought. Herder could stay within the German Protestant communion; Matthew Arnold could remain within the Church of England; not so a French counterpart such as Renan. Whereas in England the story of honest doubt is in good part one of attempts to revise and adapt Protestant Christianity, the comparable story in France chiefly concerns men's attempts to replace Catholic Christianity. Hence it is in France that one sees the most vigorous proliferation of substitutes for the Christian faith—not merely adaptations such as Unitarianism and other Nonconformist doctrines in Britain, but new creeds with new deities, new churches and rites, new concepts of immortality. "Without as well as within beliefs in conflict, consciences in travail; new religions . . . ; old religions growing new skins"—this is Hugo's description of the scene in 1831, typical of numerous others throughout the period.<sup>7</sup>

The growing preoccupation with religion was expressed in many ways. There was a keen, if short-lived, curiosity about Catholicism itself, provoked first by the apologetics of Chateaubriand and the Traditionalists and later by such Liberal Catholics as Lacordaire, whose lectures in 1835 packed Notre Dame to overflowing. Amongst intellectuals one meets warm enthusiasm for pantheism and for the metaphysical creeds of Spinoza, Hegel, and others; it is at this time in France that Spinoza is first presented as a religious, not an atheist thinker. In less rationalist circles one sees the spread of

4. J. Michelet, *La Bible de l'humanité* (Paris: Flammarion, n.d.), p. 45.

5. C. Bernard, *Pensées, Notes détachées* (Paris: Baillière, 1937), p. 64.

6. E. Renan, *L'Avenir de la science* (23rd ed., Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1929), p. 483.

7. V. Hugo, *Les Feuilles d'automne* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), p. 1.

freemasonry and of occultism and illuminism. These latter not only markedly influenced literature but also gave rise to numerous religious sects, ranging from the Swedenborgians, the cult of the *Mapah*, and Turreil's "fusionist" creed in the 1840's to the theosophists, followers of Isis, and Essenians (who held that Christ was an Essene), who were thriving in the 1890's.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it was at this time that the cults of science, of history and progress, and of the nation took on the apocalyptic significance they still retain today in many quarters.

Of all the many non-Christian creeds devised at this time, some merely borrowed the terminology of religion in order to give a vague aroma of the infinite to creeds that were essentially ethical and nothing more. Two examples may suffice here. Vigny, writing about "the universal shipwreck of beliefs," finds one "faith" intact, "a last lamp in a ruined temple," his own stoicism, and without any sense of linguistic strain he goes on to baptize this ethical code as the "religion of honour."<sup>9</sup> Michelet, propounding an ethic of French patriotism in *Le Peuple* in 1846, speaks the same language. France itself is elevated as "a religion of fraternity," as a "new Pontiff," as a "first Gospel." We should embrace "France as faith and as religion"; "my country can alone save the world." Here, however, we shall ignore this kind of purely ethical creed in order to concentrate on a limited but representative selection of those systems which attempt a thoroughgoing replacement of the Christian religion, offering a new deity for our worship as well as a new morality. Some of these substitute-religions are primarily social, concerned above all with inspiring man in his role as citizen; such are the "new Christianity" of Saint-Simon and his disciples, the "religion of humanity" of Comte, the creeds of Leroux, Fourier, and Pecqueur, and the communistic "true Christianity" of Cabet and his "Icarians" who went to the U.S.A. Some are metaphysical in type, born in the philosopher's study and offering as deity an explicitly metaphysical concept; examples are the natural religion of Cousin and his Eclectic disciples, Vacherot's "theology of the ideal," and Renan's "religion of the ideal." Yet other thinkers turned to the non-Christian world-religions and the ancient mythologies, which were being studied intensively at this time by historians and philologists. Some admired a single creed, in particular Buddhism—as witness Senancour, Lamartine at certain moments, Leconte de Lisle, the young Brunetière, Amiel, and others. Some aspired to a form of religious syncretism—Musset and Nerval, for example, amongst the men of letters; Michelet, Ménard, and Ravaisson amongst the thinkers. But whether the starting-point be social, metaphysical, or "neo-pagan," all or almost all are agreed that religion is of vital import to man and that the old Christianity must be not merely rejected but also replaced.

8. On these, cf. in particular A. Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les illuminés de son temps* (2nd ed., Montreal: Éditions de l'Arbre, 1943); A. Erdan, *La France mystique* (2 vols., Paris: Coulon-Pineau, [1856]); and J. Bois, *Les Petites Religions de Paris* (Paris: Chaillé, 1894). For a study of parallel tendencies in political and social thought, cf. J. L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960).

9. A. de Vigny, *Servitude et grandeur militaires* (Paris: Conard, 1914), p. 250.

## II

Choice is difficult, but three of the new divinities proposed were especially popular and must be considered even in a rapid survey. Comte's celebrated positivist religion is perhaps the best example of those cults that deify *humanity*, and in terms of durability it has proved the most successful of all these nineteenth-century substitutes. It is indeed typical of them all in many ways and thus warrants fairly detailed treatment.

The first half of Comte's career was devoted to the working-out of his "positive philosophy" and his theory of social science; on these his reputation still rests. But the second half of his life was given up to devising his religion of humanity.<sup>10</sup> As he himself declares, in his first career, a new Aristotle, he transformed science into philosophy; in his second, a new Saint Paul, he will transform philosophy into religion. Comte wishes to replace "revealed religion" by "proven religion"; he therefore substitutes for the supernatural God of the Church the new deity of humanity, now renamed "the Great Being." The advantages are obvious to him. Man no longer worships a God who is apart from this world and human society but one whose very "preservation and development" depend upon our loving service. Hence the religious life and the everyday life are harmonized. Whereas other cults have divided them and encouraged mysticism and other-worldliness, in future our thoughts will be purposefully devoted to knowledge of humanity, our affections to love of her, our actions to her service. Science, poetry, and morality will be consecrated to the study, the praise, and the love of humanity, and life will become a continuous and intense act of worship.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, Comte's creed satisfies the intellect as well as the emotions since, instead of an imaginary deity who has never been observed, it gives us a god that unquestionably exists in the real world. If anyone protests that humanity is merely an abstract noun, Comte's answer is clear, like Saint-Simon's before him and Marx's after him: "Individual man, strictly speaking, exists only in the too abstract brains of modern metaphysicians. At bottom only humanity is real."<sup>12</sup>

What ethic follows? Comte replies that love of mankind is henceforth to be the principle of all moral action, and thereby we may hope that at long last politics will be subordinated to morals. He grants that at present our selfish instincts are naturally stronger than our unselfish, but he hopes to reverse this situation in a number of ways: by means of didactic art and literature; by means of a strong family life based on indissoluble marriage, in which women—the original source of all moral influence, in his view—will be preponderant; by means of a political reorganization in which duties will take the place of rights—"no one henceforth has any right save that of

10. The most useful brief statement of his religious ideas is in *Discours préliminaire sur l'ensemble du positivisme, Conclusion*, in *Système de politique positive* (4 vols., Paris: Mathias, Carilian-Goeury et Dalmont, 1851-54), Vol. I.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 330, 332.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

always doing his duty.”<sup>13</sup> The growth of the working classes may also help; Comte shares Rousseau’s faith that they are “better disposed than their employers to broad views and generous sympathies.”<sup>14</sup> Above all, however, Comte will rely upon the impact of a new church and a new worship, whose organization he lays down with his usual mania for precise systematization. There is to be a hierarchy of priests, their salaries rising by a neat mathematical progression up to the position of High Priest, which Comte himself will occupy. The “church of humanity,” like the Roman, will also have its holy festivals, celebrating now the “fundamental social relations”—the marital, the paternal, the filial, and the fraternal relations, for example—now the “preparatory states” of man’s religious development—fetishism, for instance, with Festivals of Fire, the Sun, and Iron—now the “normal functions” of priesthood, of womanhood, of the proletariat, and even of the capitalist, whom Comte calls the “patriciate.” He is even careful to provide for the extra day in leap years with a “General Festival of Holy Women.” Again, there will be “social sacraments”—nine of them, beginning with “presentation” (the equivalent of baptism) and ending with “transformation” (i.e., burial) and, seven years after death, “incorporation” into the great body of the “holy dead.” Yet again, finally, Comte devises a new calendar with months named after great men like Aristotle and Archimedes and starting from 1788.

What of immortality? Comte is quite free of the occultist notions which appealed to many utopian socialists of his day—ideas of metempsychosis, interstellar migration, and the like. Man lives on only in those who follow him, by virtue of his thoughts and actions. Our “objective” bodily life is followed by a “subjective” existence in the “hearts and minds of others,” and Comte especially stressed the commemoration of the dead in his provision of festivals. It may also be noted that this “noble immortality,” as Comte calls it, is confined to the “true servants” of humanity, and he believes an extra moral impetus will come from our desire to win this “subjective” immortality. This, indeed, is the desire expressed in George Eliot’s famous positivist hymn:

O may I join the choir invisible  
 Of those immortal dead who live again  
 In minds made better by their presence; live  
 In pulses stirred to generosity,  
 In deeds of daring rectitude. . . .

For John Stuart Mill, earlier a deep admirer of Comte, “an irresistible air of ridicule” surrounds Comte’s religion; “others may laugh, but we could far rather weep at this melancholy decadence of a great intellect.”<sup>15</sup> He, Littré, and others rejected this creed, and even Pierre Laffitte, Comte’s successor as leader of the French Positivists, was lukewarm about it. Yet for a

13. *Ibid.*, p. 361.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 326

15. J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (2nd ed., London: Trübner, 1866), pp. 153, 199.

considerable period the Church of Humanity prospered—in France, Sweden, North America, and especially Brazil, where Positivism became virtually the state religion and to this day influences educational practice. In England too Comtism thrived, winning the support of academics in London and Oxford—at Wadham College in particular—and other intellectuals such as Harriet Martineau, G. H. Lewes (both of them translators of Comte), and also George Eliot.<sup>16</sup> Not all of these were adherents of the Church itself. Some, like Martineau, joined the Unitarians. Others, like Frederic Harrison, leader of the London Positivist Society, stressed Comte's social and ethical teaching rather than his religious. But others, led by Richard Congreve, were to found churches in London, Liverpool, Newcastle, Sunderland, Leicester, and elsewhere, and in the hands of these English believers Positivism took on something at least of the dignity and emotional appeal we normally associate with Christianity, as emerges even now when one reads their books of services, hymns, and anthems.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, some Christian hymns were taken over as they stood. Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light" proved acceptable, perhaps since, "angel faces" apart, it contains no explicitly Christian reference. Charles Wesley's "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown," presumably qualified by its final line: "Thy Nature and thy Name is love." "These Things Shall Be! A Loftier Race" is another, less surprising inclusion. Many others were adapted, as when "Now Thank We All Our God" becomes:

Now, come with joyful heart  
To sing aloud in chorus,  
The tale of all that Love  
Hath won and suffered for us. . . .

Yet others were newly written—an "Ave Clotilda," for instance, in memory of Comte's platonic mistress, Clotilde de Vaux, or a hymn "To Auguste Comte," beginning "Great prophet and revealer, First of the holy Dead. . . ." As for the Comtist service, a single set prayer used in Liverpool—that just preceding the benediction—must serve to illustrate the language employed and the emotional values that can be given to Comte's dogmas. After the sermon and final hymn, the congregation prays:

Praising thee, Holy Humanity, as is most meet, for all the blessings thy past has accumulated for us; for the rich treasures of knowledge, beauty, and wisdom it has handed down; for its long roll of great exemplars, our cloud of witnesses, which ministers comfort, support, and guidance in our need, and in particular for Auguste Comte, who, under the inspiration of Clotilde, has interpreted thy past, taught us to use its treasures, rightly to honour its examples; lastly, as we are here in England more especially bound to do, for

16. On the fortunes of Comtism in North America, cf. R. L. Hawkins, *Auguste Comte and the United States* (2 vols., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936-38), and in Britain, cf. J. E. McGee, *A Crusade for Humanity* (London: Watts, 1931).

17. The following quotations are from books used in the Liverpool Temple of Humanity. I am indebted to Dr. C. Baier of the University of Hull for allowing me to consult copies in his possession.



the full liberty to speak and act which we enjoy: we pray that we may not be found unworthy of such benefits, but that day by day, in all humility and singleness of purpose, with all boldness and yet tenderness for others, we may magnify thee, and attain for ourselves, and help others to attain the great blessings communion with thee will give: Union, Unity, Continuity. *Amen.*

The Temple at which this prayer was used was the last English Positivist Church, which closed as recently as the end of the Second World War.

For the present-day reader, however, the Comtian faith is of interest less for its direct influence—which was comparatively slight—than as an embodiment of a common nineteenth-century ambition: to satisfy religious aspiration by deifying mankind, to redirect the hopes and devotion hitherto turned away from this world towards the creation of a happier and more moral society on earth. Here is a far from ignoble ideal; it is the quintessence of much that was best in nineteenth-century secular thought. Unfortunately, we may think today that mankind has feet of clay ill becoming a divinity. Comte claims that humanity is a Being who is “real, accessible and sympathetic, because she is of the same nature as her worshippers, though *superior* to any one of them.”<sup>18</sup> But quantity is not quality, and to think of the follies and crimes of humanity is to doubt its qualifications to serve as the object of religious worship. Comte would have been undisturbed by this; “the Great Being” is to be identified in particular with the best part of mankind (though strictly it is “the whole body of human beings”). And Comte is in reality more interested in practical service than in worship of a wholly perfect deity. Yet this underlines the fact that his creed lacks in large measure what for many people is the essence of religion—the sense of the holy, awe before the infinitely good. As a consequence, although the positivist faith did inspire and satisfy a small group of intellectuals, it seems ill-fitted to answer the religious longing of a wider group in society and therefore humanity as god is unlikely to command the allegiance of most men in their lives as citizens—which means that Comtism fails in its basically social purpose. What, however, of Comte’s erection of the moral principle of love? One may perhaps feel that Comte rather seeks to exploit neighbourly love in the interests of social progress, but, more serious than that, one may well be sceptical when Comte alleges that the human heart can rapidly be “trained” (his own word) to put “social feeling” above “innate self-love”—rapidly and without any need, of course, of supernatural grace. In reality, Comte holds that, however corrupt the intellect may be, yet the emotions of man are at bottom sound; he even says that in his system “spontaneous morality” is restored to its due place.<sup>19</sup> Here again, as in his deity, Comte is typical of his age. Dig deep enough, he is saying, beneath the superstitions, prejudices, and vices fostered by our present society, and educate men out of their less sociable attitudes, and you will uncover in the human heat an innate and uncorrupted goodness. This contention, inherited from Rousseau and the later

18. *Système*, Vol. I, p. 394, my italics.

19. *Ibid.*

*philosophes*, can never be disproved conclusively, despite all the apparent evidence to the contrary. Yet it is perhaps no coincidence that both Rousseau's "civil religion" and Comte's new church are authoritarian, that both have to seek in the end to force men to be good.

We may pass very rapidly over the second type of deity to whose worship men were bidden during these years—namely, the Ideal, the abstract notion of moral perfection. Cousin calls on us to revere "the true, the beautiful and the good," and Vacherot tells us that "the Perfect is the God of pure thought," a god whose "only throne is in man's mind."<sup>20</sup> Yet these doctrines, like deism, have an intellectual abstractness and a spiritual and poetic poverty about them that discouraged less metaphysical souls; their god has the perfection that Comte's lacks, but it is without substance or concreteness. Can an ethic alone provide a religion—except by a misuse of language? Can we love so remote a divinity as theirs? And even if we could, is their god not so vaguely described that we should not know what we loved? These rationalist bones may satisfy austere professors of philosophy, but for lesser men—more human men—the bones lack flesh and animation. Significantly these doctrines of the Ideal make little or no provision for worship; it is hard not to agree with Vigny when he comments on Cousin: "A religion without worship would be like a love affair without caresses, in which one said: I love you; let us say no more about it."<sup>21</sup>

Probably the most popular substitute divinity of the century was Nature, in one form or another. Surprisingly, we still lack a thorough study of nineteenth-century French pantheism—surprisingly, since so many avenues of thought at that time led in this direction. Even in Christian circles, marked emphasis was being given to God's immanence; the Creation was seen less as a series of acts at the beginning of time than as a gradual evolution, still incomplete, in which God was at work. Christians also held fast, however, to the counterbalancing doctrine of God's transcendence; but not so the many unbelievers who doubted precisely the reality of any transcendental realm. And as the century advances, one finds a mounting concern in Christian circles about the spread of pantheism in one form or another.

This concern was well-founded. Romanticism, German metaphysics, occultism, the neo-pagan creeds referred to earlier, and science—all of these, or rather certain tendencies within them, converge on the pantheist position. This is apparent, first, in the Romantics with their belief in the goodness of Nature and their concept of "God within us." Yet in Lamartine, Hugo, Nerval, and others we meet only a vague, diffuse pantheism, not unlike that of Wordsworth. Pantheism becomes far more emphatic and powerful under the influence of Spinoza and especially Hegel. The world, and particularly human history, constitutes a vast, implacably determined unity moving towards the realization of the Absolute. Moreover, the criterion of historical

20. Cf. V. Cousin, *Du vrai, du beau et du bien* (Paris: Hachette, 1836), and E. Vacherot, *La Métaphysique et la science* (2 vols., Paris: Chamerot, 1858).

21. A. de Vigny, *Le Journal d'un poète*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: N.R.F., 1960), p. 991.

necessity gives us a criterion of moral value: whatever is (as a long-term trend) is right. Here are the metaphysical suppositions which made possible the divinization of history, of progress and evolution, especially when reinforced by other more empirical ideas about progress drawn from the French *philosophes*. History is seen as manifesting a single design, as the product of a motive force far transcending man, a force that impels (it is often claimed) the whole of Nature, not mankind alone. Renan's "religion of the ideal"—the creed he devised after he lost his Christian faith—offers one good example amongst others. He alleges that a scientific study of universal history reveals a gradual but inevitable progression towards complete mental consciousness. This final goal he terms the Absolute or the Ideal or—just as readily—"God." For the moment "God" exists in an "ideal state," but our moral duty is to work to bring "God" into full reality, to achieve the final end to which all history is moving. Here are the rudiments which Renan then movingly embroiders with equivalents of a non-supernatural kind of the principal notions of Christianity—prayer, priesthood, the communion of all believers, and others. And Renan himself makes clear that this cult rests upon a pantheistic belief that all in Nature is good. "Evil is to revolt against Nature. . . . Its goal is good; let us will what Nature wills."<sup>22</sup> Other thinkers begin not from Romantic emotion or Germanic intellection but from science—from science's postulation of the unity and the determined interrelationship of the whole natural order. They then overlook the fact that this is merely a working assumption for the true scientist and proceed to erect a theory of the world as a determined unity that is no less metaphysical and all-embracing in its claims than the Hegelian theory. Add to this the belief that Nature is good, and one has the pantheism of the Saint-Simonians and of Taine later, expressed in an organized religion in the former case, and given religious overtones even in the latter, as when this arch-scientist writes to a friend: "How right you are to find science mystical. Nature is God, the true God . . . perfectly beautiful, eternally living, absolutely one and necessary."<sup>23</sup>

This age-old doctrine is not to be dismissed lightly. Most of us can feel something of pantheism's awe before the vastness and beauty of Nature and something of its sense of man's ephemerality compared with the celestial galaxies. Yet unless Nature is in fact morally perfect, pantheism defies merely what is biggest—"the Great All." Can a reasonable man regard Nature as morally perfect? For certain of the metaphysicians mentioned above the answer to this question is an affirmative, but an affirmative based upon a tautology, since their very criterion of the perfect is what happens—for instance in the long-term trends of history. Yet it is surely an odd moral conscience that can find certain at least of the tendencies of human history morally good. A similar difficulty confronts those who claim on empirical

22. E. Renan, *Dialogues et fragments philosophiques* (12th ed., Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1925, p. 46.

23. *Hippolyte Taine, sa vie et sa correspondance* (4 vols., Paris: Hachette, 1902-07), Vol. I, p. 150.

grounds that Nature is good—like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who claimed that melons grew with segments for more convenient eating *en famille*, or Diderot, who thought storms at sea were good since they purified the ocean's waters. Furthermore, if Darwin and his precursors created intellectual difficulties for the Christian, they posed no fewer problems for the nineteenth-century pantheist. Far more realistic than the pantheists are writers like Vigny, Leconte de Lisle, or T. H. Huxley, when they note the harsh neutrality of Nature. And turning specifically to human nature, we may sympathize with the dream, entertained by many ardent idealists at this time, of a "natural life," without vice or frustration, away from the corruptions of urban society, a life in which virtue would become (in Taine's words) the "fruit of free instinct" and in which a harmony of body and spirit would flower in conditions of freedom and sunshine. Here was a dream that brought the followers of Fourier and Cabet and others out to North America to found model communities, to bring "heaven to earth."<sup>24</sup> Yet these communities swiftly broke down, and to think more generally of human hatred, egotism, and pride is to doubt any claim that the human portion of "Nature" is entirely good. This is not the only weakness of these pantheistic creeds, though it seems a major one, especially in those which purport to be based upon scientific data. Nineteenth-century critics were repelled also by the fatalism of the pantheist position and its tendency to deny the ultimate reality of the individual; here again we seem to meet unverifiable metaphysical assertions. Moreover, there is not uncommonly an unresolved contradiction between fatalism and a trumpet-call of moral exhortation. Renan, for example, tells us that we cannot but follow the movement of universal evolution towards the Ideal; Nature will always triumph over us and use us for its ends. But if we must obey Nature, Renan's frequent injunctions that we ought to obey it lose their meaning.

Little or nothing remains today of the substitute religions discussed here, and of the others—syncretist, Buddhist, illuminist—which have had to be omitted. What now survives of all the schismatic churches and ardent sects that flourished in France a century ago or of the religious enthusiasts who sought Utopia in the United States? Only Comtism managed to keep alive in our own century, and even that with a much diminished following. Their failure stems from various sources, I would suggest. They failed in part because some of them were authoritarian in a period of growing liberalism; they offered (as T. H. Huxley said of Comtism) "Catholicism minus Christianity." In part they failed because they lacked the emotional appeal of distant, time-misted origins and an ancient tradition, and in part because they competed so publicly and stridently with each other, wrangling like all-too-human activists as they offered their various divinities. But above all they failed, for all their noble idealism, because what they attempted to do was,

24. For a brief account of these communities, cf. M. Holloway, *Heavens on Earth: Utopian Communities in America, 1660-1880* (London: Turnstile Press, 1951).

if not impossible, certainly harder than they realized. For most of these secular thinkers the very starting-point of their religious quest was the conviction that there is no supernatural God and that any acceptable creed must be rational and scientifically based. Well might one unbeliever, Scherer, ask whether any religion worth the name can be confined within the rational! Indeed, these experiments insistently pose a question that retains its contemporary relevance: what are the minimum requirements for a "religion" that can both satisfy the individual heart and bind together the corporate body of society?

A recent philosopher writes that there is "no single definition of religion in terms of content," and he reminds us that much of Buddhism is agnostic and yet surely religious.<sup>25</sup> How can this be? Is it, as some have argued, that religion is in essence no more than "morality touched with emotion"? Others may say that the definition of "religion" must finally be a personal matter, that religion is, in Whitehead's words, "what a man does with his solitariness"—though this view seems markedly to ignore religion's social aspect. Yet others, like Otto, have claimed that the heart of religion lies in the awareness of a "mystery" beyond human grasping, in a sense of the holy, of the numinous.<sup>26</sup> But if one adopts this definition, it is to be feared that the honest doubter, today as in the nineteenth century, is still faced with Scherer's question. How much of mystery can remain if mystery, to be acceptable to the seeker, must be scientifically verified and rationally understood?

25. N. Smart, *Reasons and Faiths* (London: Routledge, 1958), p. 197.

26. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (4th ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 12ff.