The Mystical Body of Society:
Religion and Association in Nineteenth-Century
French Political Thought

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"It is not the case," Alasdair MacIntyre once wrote, "that men first stopped believing in God and in the authority of the Church, and then subsequently started behaving differently. It seems clear that men first of all lost any overall social agreement as to the right ways to live together, and so ceased to be able to make sense of any claims to moral authority."[1] Religious faith and moral order thrive, MacIntyre tells us, on robust social bonds. This insight rests upon an implicit premise: to believe in religion—"in God and in the authority of the Church"—is to believe in society—that is, an "overall social agreement as to the right ways to live together." Though MacIntyre states this claim with particular succinctness, he is far from alone in making it. His fellow communitarians, who value religion for fostering social cohesion, frequently endorse normative versions of this argument, while sociologists of religion have employed it to explain, for instance, the

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 54.

impact of social differentiation on religious belief. Yet this assimilation of religion with its social function belongs to a much longer intellectual tradition—one in which the history of modern France has played a leading part. During the revolutionary decade that closed the eighteenth century, theocrats such as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald excoriated the Jacobins' brazen anticlericalism, ridiculing the blindness with which they felled the pillar of faith upon which the social edifice rests. That conservatives daunted by revolution's satanic specter would insist that society—that is to say, *their* society, the estate-based order of the *ancien régime*—could not survive an assault on religion—in other words, *their* religion, Roman Catholicism—is understandable. The eagerness with which certain republicans and socialists, their most obdurate ideological opponents, emphasized the intimate bond between religion and the social order is, however, more puzzling.[2] Yet in the 1830s, one finds, for example, Pierre Leroux, a philosopher of impeccable republican pedigree, lamenting, in terms that echo MacIntyre's, that "religious atheism has brought about social atheism."[3] Over the course of the long nineteenth century, the Catholic republican Philippe-Joseph-Benjamin Buchez, the philosopher and moralist Jean-Marie Guyau, and Emile Durkheim, the founder of sociology, made similar pronouncements. While generally sympathetic towards republican institutions, these thinkers nonetheless occupied a distinct ideological space on the French left, defined by the conviction that republicanism required a far denser conception of society than that which could be elicited from the social contract or individual rights alone. Leroux and Buchez, for example, unrelentingly proselytized for the idea of "association," while Guyau and Durkheim concurred in placing solidarity at the heart of their understanding of the social order. The belief that republicanism was in need of a sociological correction thus defines the identity of these thinkers as much as their efforts to persuade mainstream republicans to give religion a second look.[4]

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[2] The few scholars who have addressed this problem include: Jonathan Beecher, "Fourierism and Christianity," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 22 (1994): 391–403; Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830–1852* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Frank Paul Bowman, *Le Christ des barricades, 1789–1848* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987); and Gareth Stedman Jones, "Utopian Socialism Reconsidered," in *People's History and Socialist Theory,* ed. Raphael Samuel (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 138–45.

[3] Pierre Leroux, *D'une religion nationale, ou du culte* (Boussac: Imprimerie de Pierre Leroux, 1846), 90.

[4] On this current, see Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français: la société civile contre le jacobinisme* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 265–75, and William Logue, *From Philosophy to Sociology: The Evolution of French Liberalism, 1870–1914* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983).

Viewed together, their arguments reveal an alternative religious tradition within French republicanism, distinct from the anticlericalism embraced by many of their contemporaries, one deeply concerned with religion's modern fate—provided, however, that religion was grasped as a primordially social phenomenon.

Why were these social republicans so eager to conflate "society" and "association" with "religion"? These concepts, I argue, provided a vocabulary for conceptualizing the nature of social cohesion in a post-revolutionary world. In the social imaginary of the old regime, religion had been harnessed to the concepts of order and *corps*, a connection that underpinned its vision of society as an organism formed by unequal yet complementary estates. This organicism invoked the traditional Christian belief that Christ, in addition to a physical body, possessed a mystical body, a *corpus mysticum* constituted by the Catholic Church. Once the concepts of order, *corps*, and religion were unharnessed from one another by revolutionaries striving to build a new social order, a different vocabulary was needed to articulate the ideal of a cohesive society. The social republicans' examinations of the ways in which religion and society mutually constitute one another belong to this search for a new political language. What this language lacked, however, was fixed grammatical rules: whereas the old regime had established specific connections between the church and the social order, the precise relationship between religion and society—as well as the very meaning of these terms—was, in a post-revolutionary world, a matter of vociferous debate.

These explorations of the nexus between religion and society serve to contextualize what was arguably the greatest achievement of republicanism's intellectual engagement with the sacred: the religious sociology of Emile Durkheim. While scholars have situated Durkheim's intellectual project in the crosscurrents of neo-Kantianism, republicanism, *fin-de-siècle* sacrificial discourse, and Third Republican sexual politics,[5] they have insufficiently acknowledged its affinities with a longer post-revolutionary tradi-

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[5] See, notably, Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim, his Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Dominick LaCapra, *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972); Robert Alun Jones, *The Development of Durkheim's Social Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

tion of conceptualizing society as a religious phenomenon.[6] Many of Durkheim's most innovative insights, including the claim that "the idea of society is the soul of religion,"[7] his argument concerning the dualism of human life, and the assertion that individualism is a modern religion, were responses to the same questions that had obsessed lesser-known nineteenth-century thinkers. Examining the work of these thinkers does not so much challenge Durkheim's originality as demonstrate that his religious sociology constitutes an ingenious variation on a broader nineteenth-century theme.

In what follows, I explore the history of the notion that to believe in religion is to believe in society by tracing instances in which, in the discourse of this current within nineteenth-century French republicanism, the term religion entered into the same semantic field as the notions of society and association. These concepts resist simple definitions: my approach will be to register precisely how these authors used them, and to examine the vocabulary and rhetoric they employed to propose correspondences between them. I consider the discourse under discussion to be "political" in the broadest sense of the word, namely, as pertaining to the existence of human beings in collective contexts. My claim that this thought is political is not gainsaid by its exponents' frequent invocation of "society": at this historical juncture, the question of whether the social order inaugurated by the French Revolution, founded on legal equality and the abolition of privilege, could be sustained, governed, and made cohesive was deemed an eminently political concern.

After discussing some of the meanings that the term association assumed in the early nineteenth century, I argue that three problems became intertwined when social republicans sought to fold their understanding of religion into the ideas of society and association: whether associations really exist or are mere abstractions; whether associative life is obligatory or voluntary; and whether individualism is a form of social bond or the negation of social bonds. I then analyze several groups and individuals who sought to define religion by invoking "association" and "society": the Saint-Simonians, P.-J.-B. Buchez, Pierre Leroux, Jean-Marie Guyau, and Emile Durkheim. I conclude by suggesting that this way of thinking about

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[6] Robert A. Nisbet, however, emphasizes the connections between Durkheim's thought and nineteenth-century conservatism and positivism; see *Emile Durkheim* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 23–28. John Bossy examines the early modern shifts in the meaning of "religion" and "society" that made Durkheim's religious sociology possible in "Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim," *Past and Present* 95 (1982): 3–18.
[7] Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960 [1912]), 599.

religion not only illuminates the intellectual context in which Durkheim's religious sociology emerged, but also highlights a distinctly French social imaginary.

THE VARIETIES OF ASSOCIATIVE EXPERIENCE

A distinguishing feature of nineteenth-century reflection on the relationship between religion and society was its implicit invocation of the old regime's corporate order. Both as a reality and as a representation, old regime corporatism provided a model for imagining society as a substantial whole. The French Revolution, however, had launched a full-scale assault on corporatism, most notably with the 1791 Le Chapelier Law, which famously declared: "There is no longer any corporation in the state; there is henceforth only the particular interest of each individual and the general interest."[8] Yet as the prejudice against corporatism itself came under attack during the Restoration, the corporate ideal was recast, in a post-revolutionary mold, in the idea of "association"—a word that launched its career in political discourse around 1820. Some advocates of the associative ideal explicitly opposed the term association to that of corporation. Thus in 1818, Alexandre de la Borde contrasted the "system of isolation or of corporation," in which "a series of marked ranks . . . mutually exclude one another," to the "system of association," in which "ranks [are] ceaselessly intersecting and lending one another mutual support."[9] This idea of association was, however, as ambiguous as it was pervasive. It could refer to the transcendent goal around which a group was formed, as well as to the individuals pursuing it; it could be conceived as a break placed on the atomizing force of individualism, or as a necessary consequence of post-revolutionary egoism; it could be imagined as both a bulwark of the existing social order, or as a conspiratorial menace.

The imperative of conceptualizing a post-revolutionary social order that lacked a visible principle of cohesion led social republican thinkers to reflect upon religion, and, moreover, to articulate their understanding of religion in the language of association. In reflecting on the ways in which religion and society mutually constitute one another, these thinkers grap-

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[8] Quoted in Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français*, 29.
[9] Alexandre de La Borde, *De l'esprit d'association dans tous les intérêts de la communauté, ou essai sur le complément du bien-être et de la richesse en France par le complément des institutions* (Paris: Gide fils, 1818), 54.

pled with two distinct yet interrelated propositions. On the one hand, some believed that religion performed a social function—indeed, that religion was the social function *par excellence,* the institution that made social bonds possible. On the other hand, many believed that human society was of divine institution, or, at the very least, of profound religious significance, whether because it realized a providential plan or because the formation of a unity out of a plurality of individuals constituted a kind of transcendence. Both these propositions, which often overlapped in practice, drew on religion to define society as a substantive being. This need to invoke religion to define society sheds light on the inner recesses of what might be called the "social imaginary" of the French left. In a recent work, Charles Taylor defined social imaginary as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[10] The social imaginary that revealed itself in these efforts to locate religion's truth in human associative practices can be seen as a response to three questions that were critical to defining post-revolutionary society.

The first question asks: *are associations (and, by extension, society) real beings, or are they abstractions?* This interrogation places the medieval Quarrel of the Universals on sociological terrain, opposing its own set of realists and nominalists (as I will call them). Realists see associations as actual beings, distinct from the people who form them. For nominalists, however, "association" is simply conceptual shorthand for describing an assembly of individuals having no reality distinguishable from the persons who constitute it. The realist position harks back to old regime corporatism, notably the idea that *corps* are moral persons, as well as to the Catholic notion of the *corpus mysticum*. The nominalist position is rooted in social contract theory: it views political society as an artifice concocted to meet the shared interests of its founders. By the 1820s, the question of the reality of associations dovetailed with the problem of whether religiosity was best exemplified by a cohesive community or by an individual spiritual quest upon which society should be forbidden from impinging.

A second question asks: *are bonds of association (and, by extension, of society) voluntary or obligatory?* This question explicitly raises the question of power in associations. In the voluntarist conception, associations are self-governing and autonomous. Voluntarism posits, in Rousseau's cele-

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[10] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

brated phrase, a "form of association . . . by means of which each, uniting with all, nonetheless obeys only himself."[11] The view of associations as obligatory, however, assumes that demands made in the collectivity's name are incommensurable with those to which its members willingly submit. Whether grounded on the claim that humans are inherently sociable or on the assertion that social life belongs to a providential plan, this argument declares that obligation is inevitable because society is not the work of human art. Michael Walzer, a contemporary advocate of this position, contends, *pace* the modern conviction "that we, as individuals, have had a hand in making" society, that even membership in allegedly voluntary associations is overdetermined by involuntary belongings.[12] In grappling with society's ultimate nature, the problem of the voluntary or obligatory character of social bonds overlaps with that of society's reality.

The final question deals less with associations themselves than with the individuals who constitute them. It asks: *is individualism a rejection of social bonds or a kind of social bond?* In post-revolutionary France, the timeless problem of whether humans are fundamentally egotistical or altruistic took on a distinctly political coloring. The concept of individualism, as Koenraad Swart notes, was "introduced by its critics," who equated the political legacy of the French Revolution with unbridled egotism.[13] At stake in these debates was the question of whether the political emancipation of the individual was compatible with a cohesive social order. Individual and society, as Pierre Leroux trenchantly observed in 1833, appear in the pantheon of revolutionary values as "two pistols loaded against one another."[14] While the thinkers examined here largely endorsed the revolutionary conception of individualism, their approval was frequently conditional: they embraced individualism only insofar as it solidified social bonds. To resolve this apparent tension, some distinguished between two types of individualism: one, typically called "egoism," negated social bonds through the reckless pursuit of self-interest; another generated solidarity by emphasizing the individual human being's inherent dignity. This dualist account of individualism can be found in P.-J.-B. Buchez and Emile Durkheim (as well as in

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[11] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1992), 39.

[12] Michael Walzer, "Involuntary Association," in *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 2.

[13] Koenraad W. Swart, "'Individualism' in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826–1860)," *JHI* 23 (1962): 78.

[14] Leroux, "De l'individualisme et du socialisme," in *Aux philosophes, aux artistes, aux politiques: trois discours et autres textes*, ed. Jean-Pierre Lacassagne (Paris: Payot, 1994), 249.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who belongs to a different tradition). The challenge faced by the proponents of this approach was to explain how "bad" individualism could yield to "good" individualism. These questions, moreover, could easily assume a religious dimension, since religion's essence was often considered to lie in its bond-making function—a claim bolstered by its apologists' invocation of the specious Latin etymology of religion as *religare* (literally, "to re-tie" or "to re-bind"). Religion thus provided the ground upon which the conflict between individuality and society could be adjudicated.

These three questions thus define the ideal-typical problems that led the thinkers that I shall examine to engage with religion. Not all of them articulated the problems in precisely these terms, nor did each accord equal weight to all three problems. Even so, this framework captures their shared concerns. Moreover, laying out these questions brings into focus the inner dynamic through which they become intertwined in each body of thought. What one made of the reality of associations, for instance, could shape one's position on whether social bonds are obligatory or voluntary. In this way, these questions unveil the social imaginary that underpinned the French left's religious interrogations.

SOCIETY INCARNATE? SAINT-SIMONIANISM AND ITS CRITICS

The template of this tradition of thinking about religion was forged by Saint-Simonianism. Founded in 1825 by a group of bourgeois youths, many of whom had attended the Ecole Polytechnique, the Saint-Simonian movement sought a social theory that would define an alternative to the moral egoism, intellectual anarchy, and economic injustice that they believed characterized their times.[15] Inspired by the visionary aristocrat Henri de Saint-Simon, they held that history was a progressive process, oscillating between "organic" periods of social cohesion and "critical" periods of atomized chaos. Interpreting their age as the culmination of the critical era inaugurated by the Protestant Reformation and radicalized by the French Revolution, the Saint-Simonians took it upon themselves to usher in a new organic era—a task, they maintained, that required a new religion.

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[15] See Sébastien Charléty, *Histoire du saint-simonisme (1825–1864)* (Paris: Editions Gonthier, 1965 [1931]); and Robert Carlisle, *The Proffered Crown: Saint-Simonianism and the Doctrine of Hope* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

Defining the principle of the new organic era as that of "universal association," the Saint-Simonians staunchly defended a realist vision of society. Saint-Simon himself had written:

> Society is not simply an agglomeration of living beings, the actions of which have no other cause than the arbitrariness of individual wills, nor any other consequence than ephemeral or unimportant accidents. . . . The gathering of men constitutes a true BEING, the existence of which is more or less vigorous or unsteady depending on whether its organs perform the functions entrusted to them.[16]

Saint-Simon's contention was structured around a set of antonyms frequently invoked by his successors: "agglomeration" or "aggregation" referred to society understood in the nominalist sense of a gathering of isolated individuals, while "society" proper implied a real entity, subsisting independently of its constituent components. The salient trait of society, as opposed to aggregation, was its religious character. When presenting their doctrine, the Saint-Simonians contrasted the "series of hypotheses" that are "*order, religion, association,* [and] *self-sacrifice*" to those of "*disorder, atheism, individualism, egoism*."[17] This perspective challenged the authenticity of any religion not predicated on society's reality, notably the interior religiosity popularized by Romanticism. Thus while the Saint-Simonians declared that "society has always had *religion* as a condition of existence,"[18] they nonetheless scorned those "more or less mystical contemplations that absorb, at humanity's expense, a few individuals who have made beliefs for *themselves*," charging that because they "tend rather to *separate* [such individuals] from society than to *bind* them to it," these "so-called *religious* beliefs" amount to "veritable atheism."[19] Where genuine religion revealed society's reality, religious individualism reduced it to an intangible abstraction.

Society's reality meant, for the Saint-Simonians, that authority was en-

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[16] Henri de Saint-Simon, "La physiologie sociale appliquée à l'amélioration des institutions sociales," in *Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin, publiées par les membres du conseil institué par Enfantin pour l'exécution de ses dernières volontés* (Aalen: Otto Zeller, 1964 [1875]), 39–40: 177.

[17] *Doctrine de Saint-Simon. Exposition. Première année. 1828–1829*, 3d ed. (Paris: Au bureau du *Globe* et de *l'Organisateur*, 1831), 393.

[18] Eugène Rodrigues, *Lettres sur la religion et la politique, 1829; suivies de l'Education du genre humain, traduit de l'allemand, de Lessing* (Paris: Au bureau de *l'Organisateur*, 1831), 34.

[19] *Doctrine de Saint-Simon*, 346, 347.

veloped in its very nature. Because disunity is their natural condition, aggregations can only have political order imposed on them from without; genuine associations, on the contrary, are peaceful because order arises naturally from the textured social relations that constitute them. The argument for society's reality is thus founded on the assumption that only hierarchical relations can establish social cohesion:

> For us, any true SOCIETY is a HIERARCHY. We believe that the more the SOCIAL HIERARCHY is complete, the more it is powerful, and the more there is society; that where there is no hierarchy, there is no *society*, but only an aggregation of individuals.[20]

Rather than a society constituted by legally equal individuals, the Saint-Simonians advocated organic cohesion, which they maintained could be achieved by classifying individuals according to three distinct yet complementary functions: that of the industrialist, the scientist, and the "artist-priest," representing respectively the social virtues of work, knowledge, and love. Having posed the articulation of differences as the condition of social unity, the Saint-Simonians assigned the artist-priest the task of ensuring the cohesion of the whole. Because it had been called upon "to BIND" and "to ASSOCIATE," the priesthood would be the linchpin of the social edifice.[21] Moreover, the claim that social difference could only be harmonized by a religious function gave the lie to voluntarist conceptions of the social order. As the Saint-Simonians noted: "The *contract of society*, in the search of which Rousseau went astray, has always been sealed by a divine hand, which alone could make it obligatory."[22]

Finally, the Saint-Simonians' social realism was bolstered by their claim that given human nature's essentially emotional character, individuals are always potentially sociable. According to the Saint-Simonian doctrine, "the impulses of egoism do not proceed from a different faculty than the impulses that lead us to associate our existence with that of our fellows."[23] The love expressing itself in egoism is the same that is conveyed in altruism—it is merely channeled in a socially unproductive direction. Conse-

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[20] *Exposition de la doctrine saint-simonienne (le nouveau christianisme): deuxième année*, in *Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin, publiées par les membres du conseil institué par Enfantin pour l'exécution de ses dernières volontés* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1877), 42: 326.

[21] Ibid., 352.

[22] Rodrigues, *Lettres sur la religion et la politique*, 34.

[23] *Exposition de la doctrine saint-simonienne (le nouveau christianisme)*, 343.

quently, social institutions must be established that deliberately direct our love towards others, for "it is sympathy that creates society."[24] This task of orienting human sentiments towards society belongs to religion. Without religion, the Saint-Simonian Eugène Rodrigues argued, I can only love others "as an extension of my love for *myself*." Religion, however, demonstrates "that men are all reflections of the divinity, sanctified beings, united in the breast of the infinite being, in one and the same *family*." Through religion, "love of the self takes on a respectable character."[25] The fruition of sociable sentiments thus depends on an organic—that is to say, real—society.

What then had the Saint-Simonians achieved? They held that religion revealed society to be, at least in organic eras, a real being. They deemed, moreover, that this reality was predicated on a hierarchy of articulated social functions, existing over and above individual volition. Finally, they believed that individualism could be steered from egoism towards sympathy—a requisite for social harmony—through religious faith.

Because of Saint-Simonianism's hierarchical penchants, its more independent-minded followers soon broke with the movement in disgust. One prominent dissident was P.-J.-B. Buchez (1796–1865), who abandoned the movement to organize a circle of Catholic republicans around his newspaper, *L'Européen*.[26] Buchez had no quarrel with the Saint-Simonians' claims concerning humanity's innate sociability; what he regretted was that they considered society to be more real than its members. As one Buchez disciple argued, the Saint-Simonians "confounded all individualities in the conception of a single, self-same being, equal to itself, and always similar in all of its parts," forgetting that "man is not the member of a being, a part of a unity, but . . . is himself a true unity."[27]

Spurning a monistic conception of society that crushed individuality under the weight of its reality, Buchez envisioned society in resolutely dualistic terms. While he too maintained that religion's truth is lodged within the ideas of association and society, Buchez located society's reality in the unwavering goal that an association strives to achieve, rather than in hier-

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[24] Ibid., 315.
[25] Rodrigues, *Lettres sur la religion et la politique*, 10, 11.
[26] See François-André Isambert, *De la charbonnerie au saint-simonisme: étude sur la jeunesse de Buchez* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1966); and Isambert, *Politique, religion et science de l'homme chez Philippe Buchez (1796–1865)* (Paris: Cujas, 1967).
[27] P. C. R...x [Prosper-Charles Roux], *Science nouvelle. Lettre d'un disciple de la science nouvelle aux religionnaires prétendus saint-simoniens, de l'Organisateur, et du Globe* (Paris: Librairie générale de Capelle, 1831), 7, 33.

archical social relations. On this basis, he proposed a compelling reinterpretation of the nature of associations. Associations, he suggested, are neither cohesive wholes nor aggregations of egotistical interests. Rather, they consist of two dimensions: a foundational social doctrine that initially unifies a group of individuals, and a complex process through which individuals tease out the doctrine's manifold implications. Buchez described the foundational dogma as the "*a priori*" dimension of associations, and the individual elaborations of it as an "*a posteriori*" development. This vocabulary provided the conceptual underpinning of Buchez's fusion of Catholicism and republicanism. The revolutionary doctrines of human rights and popular sovereignty, he argued, are, far from being anti-religious, merely *a posteriori* derivations of an *a priori* Christian foundation. By rejecting Saint-Simonian monism (according to which associations are either organic or non-existent) in favor of a dualistic theory positing that associations alternate between *a priori* and *a posteriori* moments, Buchez merged the realist and nominalist positions into a single theory of society.

Buchez's two-dimensional theory of society suggested, moreover, how obligation and voluntarism could be united in the political realm. His argument rested upon a creative use of Christian theology. The only power that is truly sovereign, and thus truly obligatory, Buchez contended, is God: "Absolute sovereignty is God himself; it is nowhere else."[28] With absolute authority invested solely in God, none remains to be meted out among human sovereigns. Consequently, since human political authority can make no plausible claim to being absolute, it must seek legitimacy in the most reliable of fallible arrangements: popular sovereignty. Buchez made similar use of the medieval Christian distinction between spiritual and temporal power, arguing that the existence of the papacy as an independent spiritual power preempts the claims of temporal sovereigns to incarnate religious authority. Whereas the Saint-Simonians had imagined a priestly caste deriving its political authority from its bond-making skills, Buchez employed the temporal-spiritual distinction to restrict political power: "The separation of two powers," he observed, "is thus very much the indispensable condition, not only of individual liberty, but even of political life."[29] Because God exists, and because spiritual power is incommensurable with political

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[28] Philippe-Joseph-Benjamin Buchez, "Souveraineté. Extrait de la dix-huitième livraison de l'*Encyclopédie du XIXe siècle*" (Paris: Imprimerie de Cosson, 1844), 1.

[29] Buchez and Auguste Ott, "Pouvoir," *Encyclopédie du dix-neuvième siècle, répertoire universel des sciences, des lettres et des arts, avec la biographie des hommes célèbres* (Paris: Au bureau de l'Encyclopédie du dix-neuvième siècle, 1846), 20: 286.

power, the voluntary consent of the governed is the only acceptable criteria for establishing political legitimacy.

Buchez's dialectic between *a priori* and *a posteriori* phases enabled him, finally, to assess the social virtues of individualism in a considerably more positive light than had the Saint-Simonians. As a counterpart to his dualist account of society, Buchez proposes a dualist account of the individual's social function. Self-centered tendencies, he claimed, have a negative form, which he calls "egoism," as well as a positive form, which he labels "individualism." In keeping with his doctrine of the social goal, Buchez condemns egoism, which he defines as regard for oneself at the expense of others, since humans must recognize that "they have an end that lies elsewhere than in their own personality."[30] Yet he also argues that individuals must be free to satisfy their basic moral and physical needs—a right that he explicitly names "individualism."[31] To this extent, "men are sovereign masters of their actions."[32] Moreover, it is precisely free will that sets the mechanisms of historical progress into motion: the fact that many choose to indulge their egotistical interests provides others with occasions to devote themselves to building a social order conducive to the individual needs of all. Only once the social goal has accommodated the legitimate demands of individualism can cohesive bonds be formed between all members of society.

By reconfiguring the Saint-Simonian system, Buchez thus proposed a thoroughly dualistic understanding of associations. Associations, he argued, are real, but pass through alternating phases of doctrinal centralization and individualizing appropriation. The obligatory yet transcendent nature of spiritual power means that there can be no legitimate alternative to temporal authority resting on popular sovereignty. Consequently, individualism must not be condemned as egotistical, but understood rather as the means whereby social goals are tailored to individual needs. Because of the dualisms structuring its theology, Catholicism, Buchez believed, provided the most secure basis upon which social cohesion could be conceptualized without succumbing to Saint-Simonian monism.

A different interpretation of the Saint-Simonian legacy was proposed by another of its apostates: Pierre Leroux (1797–1871).[33] Leroux cast his

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[30] Buchez, *Introduction à la science de l'histoire, ou science du développement de l'humanité* (Paris: Paulin, 1833), 116.

[31] Buchez, *Traité de politique et de science sociale,* ed. L. Cerise and A. Ott (Paris: Amyot, 1866), 1: 234–37.

[32] Buchez, *Introduction à la science de l'histoire*, 117.

[33] See Armelle Le Bras-Chopard, *De l'égalité dans la différence: le socialisme de Pierre Leroux* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1986); Vincent

theory as a response to the dual shortcomings of what he called "individualism" and "socialism." Individualists (notably liberals), Leroux maintained, claim that "society is but . . . an aggregation of individuals," thus legitimating the antagonistic social relations of mid-nineteenth-century society. Yet socialists (particularly the Saint-Simonians) fare no better: viewing society as a "large animal of which we would be the molecules, the parts, [and] the members" rather than as a site of "the free and spontaneous life of all those who composed it," they had taken an authoritarian turn that was incompatible with the revolution's emancipatory legacy.[34] Liberalism and socialism both rest, Leroux suggested, on a flawed conception of society. They collude in considering society as a mechanism for *governing* individuals—leading socialists to embrace the concept, and liberals to reject it. What this definition ignores is the unstructured interaction between individuals *outside* of political relations—in family life, in friendship and in love, and in the intricate web of relationships spun in civil society. In seeking to incarnate society, socialists reduce this teeming multiplicity of real relationships to a lifeless abstraction. Leroux sought a conception of society that acknowledged the reality of these bonds without impugning the reality of the very individuals who formed them. Rejecting the claim that society is a body, Leroux held that society is rather a kind of space—or, as he put it, a "*milieu*":

> Society is not a being, in the same sense in which we are beings. Society is a *milieu,* which we organize from generation to generation in order to live in it. Society taking the place of the individual, rather than being the *milieu* to which the individual consents in order to develop in it—society, I say, thus understood is a monstrosity in opposition to all divine laws.[35]

Society's corporeality had to be grasped, in other words, in precisely the way in which Christian theology has understood the church—as a mystical rather than a physical body. Leroux declared in 1833: "Yes, society is a body, but it is a mystical body, and we are not its limbs, but we live within it."[36]

Peillon, *Pierre Leroux et le socialisme républicain: une tradition philosophique* (Latresne: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2003); and Warren Breckman, "Politics in a Symbolic Key: Pierre Leroux, Romantic Socialism, and the Schelling Affair," *Modern Intellectual History* 2 (2005): 61–86.

[34] Leroux, "De l'individualisme et du socialisme," 245–46.

[35] Leroux, *D'une religion nationale*, 106.

[36] Leroux, "De l'individualisme et du socialisme," 250.

By defining society as a *milieu* in which individualism and socialism were reconciled, Leroux also found a way to balance the rival claims of voluntarism and obligation to be the legitimate basis of the political order. This task requires identifying the precise point at which society's fashioning of the individual (i.e., obligation) intersects with individuals' constitution of society (i.e., voluntarism). This point can be found in the human lifespan itself: humans enter life as helpless children, with unformed personalities that will be largely shaped by the society into which they are born; yet, by the onset of maturity, they have typically acquired enough autonomy to reach independent judgments about their society, and, on this basis, to recognize and even to correct its shortcomings. Children develop into autonomous adults by submitting to an obligatory authority; such an authority, however, is only legitimate to the extent that it rests on the consent of autonomous adults. It follows, Leroux reasoned, that an ideal republic would be endowed with two indispensable institutions. A "national religion" would guarantee that the intellectual and moral tools required to become an effective citizen were inculcated into all children. This religion, however, would be complemented by democratic assemblies, which would ensure the right of all citizens, upon reaching adulthood, to govern themselves freely, to participate in the constant recreation of society, and even to revise the very dogmas through which they were first socialized. In making this distinction, Leroux was not confining religion solely to the functional task of instilling the republic's values in the minds of children. For the task of collective self-determination carried out in democratic assemblies was also, in Leroux's estimation, religious. To take part in the formulation of a society's core doctrines is ultimately an act of faith in society itself, so that even atheists and free-thinkers, when they devote themselves to this task, participate in the "religious government of society."[37] Thus, when a national religion fulfills society's need for moral integration, even as democratic assemblies guarantee that the will of each is respected, obligation and voluntarism enter a state of perfect equilibrium.

Leroux's belief that society exists as a network of relations rather than as a corporeal being led him to see individualism as enabling social bonds rather than stunting them. "The life of man," Leroux postulated, is "an incessant communication with his fellows and with the universe."[38] The

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[37] Leroux, *D'une religion nationale*, 118–19.
[38] Leroux, *De l'humanité, de son principe et de son avenir, où se trouve exposée la vraie définition de la religion et où l'on explique le sens, la suite et l'enchaînement du Mosaïsme et du Christianisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1985 [1840]), 129.

irreducible individuality of human existence makes relations with others essential: only through social interaction can selfhood be grasped in all its fullness. For the individual "to exist and to feel his existence," there must be "a certain number of beings grouped and harmonized with him in a certain way, so that the *self* that constitutes him [becomes] incarnate, as it were, in these beings to whom he is united."[39] Yet while our need for such relations makes property, the family, and the nation anthropological necessities, these very institutions run the risk of suppressing individuality, particularly when they isolate individuals from one another instead of fostering their interdependence. The same is true of Christianity: the Eucharist, in making communion contingent on the transformation of god into a material object that humans divide up and devour amongst themselves, testifies to Christianity's failure to establish deeper spiritual bonds, capable of bringing individuals out of their ontological isolation.[40] True religion, Leroux claims, rests on the principle of solidarity, which affirms that "as soon as the *self* is legitimate, the different modes of communion of this *self* with men and with nature are legitimate."[41] In loving others as extensions of our own selves, we bypass the need for an external god, and come to love humanity as a divine entity.

Through his disincarnated conception of society, Leroux thus proposed a resolution of Saint-Simonianism's antinomies that differs substantially from Buchez's. If society is a *milieu* providing resources for self-realization rather than a body confining the individual to a functional role, the tension between obligation and voluntarism can be overcome: obligatory social institutions provide children with tools to achieve autonomy, while democratic assemblies enable autonomous adults, making free use of their reason, to ensure these institutions' effectiveness. Meanwhile, the atomizing threat of individualism is mitigated by the insight that individual flourishing requires solidarity—that is, the very resources that the *milieu* makes available.

TOWARDS DURKHEIM: SOCIETY DISINCARNATED AND REINCARNATED

In the 1880s, the social theory of religion found a new spokesperson in the philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau (1854–88). By then, the political context

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[39] Ibid., 130.
[40] Ibid., 167.
[41] Ibid., 171.

had changed considerably since the Saint-Simonians' time. The failure of the 1848 revolution, brought to an ignominious end by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's 1851 coup, sparked a systematic critique on the left of the religiously-tinged politics that many republicans and socialists had embraced. The historian Edgar Quinet, for instance, derided republicans who clung to "imaginary Vaticans," "shapeless mixture[s]" of religion and politics amounting to a "bastardization of one and the other."[42] During the Second Empire, Napoleon III's ties with the Catholic Church fueled the republican opposition's increasingly anticlerical sentiments. After Napoleon III's abdication, the Paris Commune, and a botched monarchical coup, a new and (relatively) stable republic was finally established. During the early Third Republic (as it became known), Guyau began to burnish his philosophical reputation. He had been raised by a pair of somewhat unorthodox republicans: his mother, Augustine Fouillée,[43] was the pseudonymous author of textbooks enjoying immense popularity in the state schools created by Jules Ferry, particularly *Le Tour de France par deux enfants* (1877), which has been dubbed the Third Republic's "little red book,"[44] while his stepfather, the philosopher Alfred Fouillée, was a prolific exponent of the Third Republican doctrine known as solidarism. During his intensely productive career, brought to an abrupt end by his untimely death at age thirty-three, Guyau rarely wrote explicitly about politics. This silence has allowed sympathetic readers of varying ideological stripes to claim him as their own, be it as a socialist, an anarchist, or a liberal in the tradition of John Stuart Mill.[45] Yet, though he was disinclined to flaunt his politics, Guyau's work clearly betrays broadly republican sympathies: he praised

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[42] Edgar Quinet, "Illusions," in *Œuvres complètes d'Edgar Quinet* 14: *L'Enseignement du peuple. Œuvres politiques avant l'exil* (Paris: Hachette, 1876), 39, 40.

[43] Born Augustine Tuillerie, she had Guyau with an abusive first husband, from whom she was subsequently separated, then divorced, allowing her to marry Alfred Fouillée.

[44] Jacques and Mona Ozouf, "*Le tour de France par deux enfants*: le petit livre rouge de la République," in *Les lieux de mémoire* 1: *La république*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). According to the Ozoufs, the republicanism of the Fouillée-Guyau family was "above all a rejection of the Empire" (312). They also see Augustine Fouillée as implicitly endorsing the fledgling regime in her famous textbook by presenting "the self-evident fact of a present far superior to the past" (314).

[45] Thus Eugène Fournière considers Guyau a proto-socialist; see "La Morale d'après Guyau," in *Questions de morale, leçons professées au Collège libre des sciences sociales* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1900), 284. Peter Kropotkin describes him as "unconsciously anarchist"; see his essay "Anarchist Morality," in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* ed. Roger N. Baldwin (New York and London: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 108. Geoffrey C. Fidler compares Guyau to Mill in "On Jean-Marie Guyau, Immoraliste," *JHI* 55 (1994): 95.

the French Revolution,[46] saluted the republican government's promotion of civic and moral education,[47] described voting as a "duty,"[48] and argued—cautiously—that democracy created propitious conditions for artistic creation.[49] But even more than his overt political pronouncements, it is Guyau's fascination with the relationship between society, individuality, and religion that binds him to the tradition under consideration.

At the precocious age of nineteen, Guyau launched his scholarly career with a history of Epicurean thought from the ancient Greeks to British utilitarianism. What fascinated Guyau about the Epicurean tradition was the circuitous route by which a philosophy rooted in egotistical pleasure (aimed at attaining *ataraxia,* a form of self-mastery) found itself compelled, without abandoning its initial premises, to sanction actions oriented towards others. From the premise that self-interest was the foundation of all moral thought, Jeremy Bentham derived the principle that the greatest happiness of the greatest number was the highest moral good—one that could even require sacrificing self-interest narrowly construed. Guyau discerned a Freudian-like structure in the tension between utilitarianism's premises and its conclusions: the British school embraces a "conscious altruism," relegating egoism to "the sphere of the unconscious."[50] Utilitarianism's mistake, Guyau concluded, lay in its assumption that altruism could never escape its egotistical origins. The utilitarians blinded themselves to the ways in which the very idea of sympathy could transform the hitherto egotistical self. Though it may be self-interest that leads me to sympathy (when I recognize that caring for others yields useful rewards), the experience of this feeling can prove so overwhelming that it forces me to revise my initial motivations. "Rendering myself disinterested," Guyau writes, "is not a habit that I acquire, but a second nature that I must give myself."[51] An explanation for this apparent paradox—self-interest's disinterested renunciation of itself—could be gleaned from Charles Darwin's discoveries. In Guyau's reading, evolution demonstrates that the most elemental human desire, more basic even than pleasure, is "the instinctive effort to maintain and enlarge

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[46] Jean-Marie Guyau, *La morale d'Epicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1886), 15.

[47] Guyau, *Education et hérédité. Etude sociologique* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1889), 136–37.

[48] Guyau, *La première année de lecture courante* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1906), 314–16.

[49] Guyau, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1884), 107.

[50] Guyau, *La morale anglaise contemporaine. Morale de l'utilité et de l'évolution* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1879), 385, 386

[51] Ibid., 416.

life."[52] While the impulse to live is deeply individual, it simultaneously compels us to perpetuate our life-force through creative interactions with others. Guyau remarks: "the expenditure for others which social life demands is not—everything taken into account—a loss for the individual; it is a desirable enlargement, and even a necessity."[53] For Guyau, the relationship between individualism and sociability was not a zero sum game: the evolutionary self, in seeking to expend of its own vital energies, was naturally inclined to altruism.

These insights into the dialectic between self and sociability enabled Guyau to propose a provocative reformulation of the social interpretation of religion. Whereas in the Saint-Simonian tradition, conflating religion and society was an argument for social realism, Guyau harnessed the truth of religion to a purely nominalist conception of society. In *The Non-Religion of the Future* (1887), Guyau argues that science, by wielding the "faculty of disassociation" against "unconscious and obscure associations [of ideas]" that breed superstition, does not so much destroy religion as clear the way for religious forms more adapted to the human need to propagate vital energies.[54] Guyau names this condition in which science has freed individuals to fashion creeds according to their own consciences "religious anomie."[55] In an earlier work, he had coined the term "anomie" (or "lawlessness") to describe in favorable terms a morality "without obligation or sanction," motivated solely by the satisfaction of vital instincts. In religious terms, anomie referred to "the emancipation of the individual, . . . the redemption of his thought, which is more precious than his life, [and] . . . the suppression of dogmatic faith in whatever form that it hides."[56] In a telling metaphor, Guyau conjectured that while traditional faith resembles "a nest of thought" in which one "hides one's head under a protective wing, in the warm and soft darkness," in the future, "if someone feels the need for a nest in which to place his hope, he will construct it himself, twig by twig,

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[52] Guyau, *A Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction*, trans. Gertrude Kapteyn (London: Watts & Co., 1898), 75; Guyau, *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1921 [1885]), 87.

[53] Ibid., 86–87 (trans.); 101.

[54] Guyau, *L'irréligion de l'avenir. Etude sociologique* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1887), 312.

[55] Guyau is generally credited with introducing the concept of *anomie*, which Durkheim would later make central to his own work, into modern sociological discourse. See Marco Orru, "The Ethics of Anomie: Jean-Marie Guyau and Emile Durkheim," *The British Journal of Sociology* 34 (1983): 499–518, and Philippe Besnard, *L'anomie: ses usages et ses fonctions dans la discipline sociologique depuis Durkheim* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987).

[56] Guyau, *L'irréligion*, 323.

in the freedom of the air, leaving it when he becomes weary of it, only to rebuild it each spring, with each renewal of his thought."[57] Religion's destiny, like that of society itself, was to become entirely the outcome of the voluntary choices of individuals, as society reorganizes itself on a fully nominalistic basis.

Yet the voluntarism and nominalism that Guyau embraced in his religious thought did not require him to spurn sociability—quite the contrary. Even as energies fenced in by positive dogmas are liberated and stagnant creeds are replaced with endless metaphysical experimentation, association, Guyau asserted, would remain the "most practical ideal to be found lying within the religious spirit."[58] While religions have always had good reason "to call themselves *associations* and *churches* [*églises*] (that is to say, assemblies)," they will, as their doctrines unravel, be recast for the first time as voluntary associations, acknowledging "the complete freedom accorded to individuals to conceive of the eternal enigma in their own way, and to associate with those who share the same hypothetical conceptions."[59] Yet why would anomic individuals pursuing their own spiritual quests need to associate at all? The reason is that voluntary associations, by providing contexts in which personality can be cultivated, foster the development of individual uniqueness. Whereas traditional religions see individuals as "wax figures copied from the same pattern," modern religiosity will promote associations in which "different kinds of minds might come together and rank one another—under the sole condition of preserving their complete independence, in no way altering the freedom of their beliefs by the act of placing them in common."[60] Future religions will thus instantiate the principle that "the more one is united, the more one must be independent; all must be shared, even as nothing is alienated."[61] Guyau's feat was to change the values of Saint-Simonianism's terms: the key to understanding religion, he suggests, does indeed lie in the idea of society—providing, that is, that society is grasped as a voluntary and nominalist rather than as an obligatory and realist phenomenon.

Yet one might wonder if Guyau had stretched the equation of religion and association too thin. This is ultimately the charge leveled against him by his earliest and most profound critic. In 1887, a twenty-nine year old

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 339.
[59] Ibid., 340.
[60] Ibid., 341.
[61] Ibid.

instructor at the Bordeaux Faculty of Letters published a review of Guyau's work on religion for *La Revue Philosophique*. In it, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) saluted Guyau's work for embracing the "new idea" that "religion is in its totality or in a large part a sociological phenomenon," dispelling the view that "Robinson on his island could have . . . made himself a religion."[62] Yet if Guyau was right to understand religion as a social phenomenon, Durkheim argued, he had seriously erred on another matter: the proper definition of society itself. In his eagerness to defend voluntary associations, Durkheim contended, Guyau had overlooked the fact that there are two types of "social sentiments." The first, "interindividual" or "intrasocial" sentiments "bind each individual to the person of his fellow citizens." The second, however, "attach me to the social being taken in its totality."[63] In these two sentiments, the distinction between social nominalism and social realism is easily discernible. Each of these sentiments, Durkheim maintains, illuminates a particular dimension of social existence. Guyau situates religion exclusively within society's nominalist dimension, dismissing the existence of an independent "social being." Consequently, he fails to see that religious bonds transcend merely interindividual relations. Humans do not treat their gods as fellow tribesmen, with whom they interact on a reciprocal and familiar basis; they place their gods in a different society altogether. Reading Guyau, Durkheim honed one of the critical insights of his career: that society exists in two dimensions, both as an aggregation of individuals and as a *sui generis* totality. Durkheim's early encounter with Guyau thus presages the argument of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), published some twenty-five years later. By this time, however, Durkheim had a clearer understanding of exactly what kind of being society is. Society—the "social being taken in its totality," as he had put it in the Guyau review—really exists, but it exists in an ideal mode, as a collective representation. Durkheim writes:

> Ideal society is not outside of real society; it belongs to it. Far from being pulled between them as between two poles that push each other away, one cannot hold onto one without holding onto the other. For a society is not simply constituted by the mass of individuals that compose it . . . but, above all, by the idea that it makes of itself.[64]

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[62] Durkheim, "*De l'irréligion de l'avenir*" in *Textes* 2: *Religion, morale, anomie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1975), 159, 160.

[63] Ibid., 162.

[64] Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 604.

While Buchez and Leroux had also struggled to merge social realism with social nominalism, Durkheim proposed an inspired solution to the same quandary: society exists, he asserts, but as a representation in the minds of individuals. His remarkable achievement consisted in enveloping society's nominalist dimension (i.e., individuals with their collective representations) into its realist one (i.e., the representations themselves), while preserving the tension between them.

Moreover, Durkheim averred that only a realist account of society could explain the phenomenon of obligation. It is true that voluntary associations—the basis, in Guyau's fantasy, of all future religiosity—"take little from my independence," insofar as they are founded on interindividual relations. But Guyau could make such vast claims for voluntarism only because he ignored the other dimension of social existence, the relation to social being as such. From this perspective, "I am no more than a part of a whole, the movements of which I follow and to the pressure of which I submit."[65] Religion, as an expression of the social being, reveals society to be both a *sui generis* entity and an obligatory force prevailing over the voluntary facets of interindividual relations. In his lectures on socialism, this position led Durkheim to criticize the Saint-Simonians for failing to create an obligatory force sufficiently independent from interindividual bonds. While the Saint-Simonians may have recognized society's reality, their pantheism undermined the force of this insight by conflating divinity with the immanent world of human relations. For "if God is indistinguishable from the world, as we dominate the world as much as the world dominates us, and as the world by itself is not a moral force, we are placed on the same level as the divinity, and, consequently, it is not from it that indispensable discipline can come."[66] For Durkheim, religion was the vantage point from which the reality of society overlaps with the origin of obligation. Thus, while his social realism harkens back to Saint-Simonianism, Durkheim's claim that the social being and the obligations it generates constitute a *separate* dimension of social existence (which he would later call "sacred"), *distinct* from merely interindividual (or "profane") relations, represents a clear innovation.

Moreover, Durkheim further argued *contra* the Saint-Simonians that if religion illuminates the bond between society and obligation, it is not essential to this connection. The reality of the social being and its obligatory

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[65] Durkheim, "*De l'irréligion de l'avenir*," 163.
[66] Durkheim, *Le socialisme: sa définition, ses débuts, la doctrine saint-simonienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992 [1928]), 258.

force *may* exist without religion—a point that he made clear in his 1902–3 course of moral education. Moral obligation arises not from religion *per se*, but from society, understood as "a *sui generis* being that has a special nature, distinct from that of its members, and its own personality, distinct from that of individual personalities."[67] While moral codes have typically entered the historical stage dressed in religious garb, one would be mistaken to assume that their force derives from these accoutrements. Durkheim writes: "From the moment one forbids oneself from having recourse to theological notions, there exists, above the individual, only one empirically observable moral being: it is the one that individuals form in associating with one another; it is society. One must choose."[68] In revealing that the existence of society is coterminous with obligation, religion simultaneously displays its own inessentiality. What matters is the reality of society itself.

Finally, Durkheim's views on society and obligation made him regard individualism as a social bond rather than as a threat to the social order. This is particularly apparent in his famous essay from 1898, written in the midst of the Dreyfus Affair, entitled "On Individualism and the Intellectuals." Responding to a conservative writer's charge that the intellectuals who invoked human rights in defending the accused captain were "individualists," Durkheim differentiated between two forms of individualism, which dovetail perfectly with the two social sentiments he had identified in the Guyau review. There is a purely utilitarian individualism, oriented towards the satisfaction of egotistical interests; but there is also the individualism of human rights, which, far from celebrating self-interest, values "man *in abstracto*."[69] Conservatives try to attack the latter "under cover of the former," ignoring the fact that they are incommensurable—as different, one might say, as the nominalist conception of society is from the realist one. Far from being a cause of social dissolution, the individualism of human rights is in fact the linchpin of social cohesion in modern society. The "religion of the individual," as he calls it, arises when society becomes so large, diverse, and mobile (a process he described in *The Division of Labor in Society*) that the sole common denominator shared by its members is their sheer quality of being human. Conservatives rightly say that society cannot exist without religion; yet they utterly fail to recognize that "the only possible one is this religion of humanity of which the individualist morality is

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[67] Durkheim, *L'éducation morale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 52.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Durkheim, "L'individualisme et les intellectuels," in *La science sociale et l'action* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), 263.

the rational expression.''[70] Individualism is difficult to grasp as a religion because it seems to be grounded in a mundane reality of profane existence—the fact that everyone is an individual. Yet as Durkheim notes, the fact that this religion is "not outside us (by virtue of being human) does not prevent it from dominating us."[71] And dominate us it does: for individualism is *not* the creation of individuals, but of society. In a crucial passage, Durkheim observes: "A verbal similarity has made it possible to believe that *individualism* derived necessarily from *individual*, hence egotistical, sentiments. In reality, the religion of the individual is socially instituted"—as are, he adds, "all known religions."[72] Durkheim thus ingeniously mobilizes sociology's conceptual tools to prove that, contrary to appearances, individualism is *effectively* a religion. The "religion of the individual" is no mere metaphor; it is meaningful only on the assumption that society is an ideal being (which can be filled, as it were, by values such as individualism) and that this being is a transcendent source of moral obligation.

CONCLUSION

The French Revolution's abolition of the old regime's corporate order bequeathed to post-revolutionary political thought a lingering question: how, as Pierre Rosanvallon has put it, could a measure of "organicity" be injected into "a society of individuals"?[73] This question was particularly troubling for social republicans, precisely because they simultaneously embraced the revolution's emancipatory heritage and feared the centrifugal forces of individualism that it had unleashed. Because Catholicism had been so deeply imbricated in the old regime's corporate structure, they held religion to be an indispensable tool for theorizing social cohesion, even as they claimed that association had replaced corporation as the defining concept of the post-revolutionary order. From this perspective, Durkheim shares a deep intellectual affinity with the Saint-Simonians, Buchez, Leroux, and Guyau. Deftly resolving the tensions that riddled his predecessors' thought, Durkheim maintained that society is real, but that its reality is located in the minds of equally real individuals; that society is endowed with an oblig-

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[70] Ibid., 271.
[71] Ibid., 268.
[72] Ibid., 275.
[73] Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français*, 46.

atory force, of which religion is a historically important but sociologically contingent form; and that individualism need not threaten the social order, precisely because it is above all a social doctrine. Durkheim's signal achievement was to reformulate, albeit in a strikingly original way, the terms of a longstanding preoccupation concerning the nature of post-revolutionary society.

The left's conflation of religion with society throws into relief, moreover, a conceit that even today pervades French political discourse: the idea that democratic society can and should render individualism compatible with social solidarity. Thus in 1986, the political philosopher Marcel Gauchet spoke in terms that the nineteenth-century figures discussed above would immediately have understood:

> The social bond is, in general, the result in our society of a compromise between the dimension of obligation and the dimension of the autonomy of persons . . . The problem is to make it more visible and more conscious. This requires, from a theoretical point of view, a methodical critique of the artificialism inherited from the eighteenth century, according to which the social bond is the creation of men. The social bond is "natural." But this does not prevent men from consciously intervening on its terms . . . One must think together, in a sense, Rousseau and Bonald, while refuting both.[74]

Many on the French left continue to deplore liberalism's—not to mention neoliberalism's—nominalist tendencies, as they defend a social model that embeds individual rights in an understanding of society as a being transcending its component parts—a body, as Leroux put it, but a mystical one. This idea constitutes a distinctly French contribution to the modern social imaginary. Whether it represents a compelling vision or a problematic sleight of hand is, however, beyond the scope of this essay.

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[74] Marcel Gauchet, "La nature du lien social," *La cité: revue de la nouvelle citoyenneté* 12 (1986): 16. On the relationship between Gauchet and this essay's themes, see Michael Behrent, "Religion, Republicanism, and Depoliticization: Two Intellectual Itineraries—Régis Debray and Marcel Gauchet," in *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*, ed. Julian Bourg (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 325–49.