

‘JESUS THE *SANS-CULOTTE*’ : MARXISM AND RELIGION DURING THE FRENCH *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

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ABSTRACT. *Most historians have assumed a fundamental antagonism between Marxism and theism. In practice, the relationship between the two world-views has been far more complex than simple hostility – a complexity admirably illustrated by the experience of the Marxist Parti Ouvrier Français (POF) between 1882 and 1905. While the Marxists of the POF developed a vicious socialist anti-clericalism that made its own original contribution to France’s long tradition of anti-religious polemic, they none the less experimented with a rudimentary Christian socialism designed to attract the proletarian faithful, and also developed an agnostic programme of religious indifference which sought to insert the circuit-breaker of class conflict into the highly charged link between militant secularism and Catholic clericalism. This article examines the intricate and, in the end, incoherent, pattern of engagement between Marxist socialism and French religion during the fin de siècle, and suggests that this incoherence contributed to the eventual frustration of the Parti Ouvrier’s revolutionary purpose.*

Far from disappearing because of the development of modern science, the religious idea is daily gaining ground. Thus, during the century of Lavoisier and Laplace, during that of Darwin and Edison, we witnessed the birth of entirely new religions. Why? Because, in place of natural phenomena, explained and mastered by man, other phenomena, economic in nature, have appeared which escape man’s control and dominate him. God, chased out one door, enters by another. So long as the productive forces that today overwhelm us have not been mastered in the only way they can be, by socialism, man – prey of misery, plaything of chance – will submit to an *unknown* that victimises him. It is only when economic forces, like natural forces, have been mastered, it is only when society has become a veritable providence for each of its members, that the very idea of a providence beyond the clouds will disappear, because – contrary to the Christian legend of God making man – man will have become God.

‘Jules Guesde à Gand’, *Le socialiste* (23 Jan. 1892)

I

Marxism has incarnated the class war – its social philosophy asserting the all-importance of class conflict, its meta-historical vision inspiring the conviction that ‘all history is the history of class struggle’. No Marxists, however, deny the

immense significance of non-class identities. How could they? Where such identities have obliterated class consciousness and disrupted class organization, where proletarians have identified themselves above all as Muslims or Christians, as anti-Semites or Jews, as British patriots or Irish nationalists, as patriarchal males or militant feminists – there the supporting buttresses of the Marxist citadel have been undermined, and have sometimes crashed into ruin. This sapping of Marxist certainties continues to preoccupy our post-Marxist age, and well warrants intensive scholarly inquiry.¹ For such a study, France during the *fin de siècle* – as one of the first mass democracies, and as a society with a particularly precocious and sophisticated political culture – offers fascinating insight into the origins of the titanic struggle between Marxist class warriors and their enemies that has commanded our century's ideological contention.

The POF embodied French Marxism during that decisive moment, stubbornly persevering with its proselytizing mission despite official repression, the hostility of 'indigenous' radicalisms, and repeated set-backs that would have obliterated a less messianic movement.² Led by Jules Guesde, a polemicist of genius (hence the term 'Guesdist' applied to the party's militants), the Parti Ouvrier popularized a schematic yet powerful message prophesying capitalism's inevitable self-destruction, preaching the revolutionary mission of the working class, and hymning the radiant socialist future. Week after week, month after month, year after year, the party's newspapers, *L'égalité* and *Le socialiste*, propagated the Marxist gospel throughout working-class France – from the claustrophobic mining villages of the dreary north to the scattered vineyards of the sunny Midi. The Guesdists forged a vibrant political culture that passionately affirmed the proletariat's hegemonic future – an affirmation no sooner proclaimed than apparently confirmed by the socialist seizure of industrial communities from their traditionally dominant bourgeois notables, by the shifting of political debate from questions of constitutional order to those of social hierarchy, and by the consequent panic among the liberal oligarchy that had set the nation's political agenda since the French Revolution. As the POF progressed from sectarian inconsequence during the 1880s to political potency during the 1890s, however, the party confronted popular identities that subverted its class-obsessed politics – identities ranging from the xenophobic nationalism and liberal cosmopolitanism that grappled with each other during the Dreyfus Affair, through the politics of gender equity advocated by a burgeoning feminist movement and resisted by a patriarchal political establishment,³ to the endemic conflict between religious authoritarianism and anti-clerical militancy that had tormented France for generations.

¹ For discussion, see F. Parkin, *Marxism and class theory: a bourgeois critique* (London, 1979), particularly pp. 29–43, and A. Giddens, *A contemporary critique of historical materialism* (London, 1981), particularly pp. 242–3.

² The definitive institutional history of the POF remains Claude Willard's magisterial *Le mouvement socialiste en France (1893–1905): les Guesdistes* (Paris, 1965). For a detailed study of the Guesdists' ideological paradigm, see R. Stuart, *Marxism at work: ideology, class, and French socialism during the Third Republic* (Cambridge, 1992).

³ For a study of the intersection between *fin de siècle* French Marxism and feminism, see

Religious and anti-religious identity-politics erected particularly daunting barriers against the advance of socialism, evoking bewilderment among Marxist theoreticians and sowing frustration among socialist militants.⁴ Why, they have asked themselves, have proletarians accorded their allegiance to authoritarian clerical conservatives or exploitative anti-clerical liberals when socialists offer workers a future freed from both encumbering tradition and contemporary injustice? Should socialists support anti-clerical liberals in their war against the church, where the church served aristocratic reaction? Could socialists align themselves with anti-capitalist clerical movements, even where clerical anti-capitalism aspired to medieval restoration rather than to social revolution?⁵ These questions inevitably obsessed the Marxists of the POF, as militant Christianity and Republican secularism competed vigorously against the Parti Ouvrier in every one of France's mining villages, factory towns, and industrial faubourgs.

How did the Guesdists understand this competition? What did religion mean to the class warriors of the Parti Ouvrier Français? First, the Guesdist understanding of religious faith focused almost exclusively upon Christianity, with 'the Jewish question' presented largely in terms of 'race', and with no significant references to non-European religions (an indication of the movement's unthinking Eurocentrism, and a bias typical of the Marxist ideological tradition).⁶ Indeed, for the POF, religion meant Catholicism. More than two decades of Guesdist polemic generated only a single substantial reference to France's Protestant community, and that merely a biting critique of the Masonic–Jewish–Protestant conspiracy theory disseminated by Catholic ultras.⁷ Secondly, and above all, Guesdists manifested little or no empathy, and certainly no sympathy, for their compatriots' religious convictions, and evinced virtually no insight into religion's fundamental allure – in this obtuseness replicating an affliction that has plagued Marxism from Marx to Marcuse.⁸ This failure of empathy, this unwillingness to engage with the metaphysical tradition on its own terms, disabled Guesdism's theoreticians – blinding French Marxists to the transcendental mysteries explored by religion, just as preoccupation with the transcendent blinded the devout to the secular world so brilliantly illuminated by Marxism.⁹

How could the Parti Ouvrier have been so blind? French Marxists

R. Stuart, "'Calm, with a grave and serious temperament, rather male": French Marxism, gender and feminism, 1882–1905', *International Review of Social History*, 41 (1996), pp. 57–82.

⁴ For the best study of the major Marxist theorists' confused and confusing views on the religious issue, see D. McLellan, *Marxism and religion* (London, 1987). Unfortunately, like other such studies, McLellan's lucid work does not address the important Guesdist instance.

⁵ These questions are elaborated in E. Hobsbawm, 'Religion and the rise of socialism', in *Worlds of labour: further studies in the history of labour* (London, 1984), pp. 33–48.

⁶ According to McLellan, *Marxism and religion*, p. ix.

⁷ J. Phalippou, 'Nouveau péril', *Le socialiste*, 7 Jan. 1899.

⁸ A. MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (London, 1971), p. 82.

⁹ For this Marxist blindness, see G. Girardi, *Marxism and Christianity* (Dublin, 1968), pp. 79–80.

undoubtedly derived a surreptitious sense of the transcendent from their conviction – indeed, their faith – that their movement embodied the future of Humanity, that godhead of modernity.¹⁰ Religious imagery saturated Guesdist rhetoric, as in *Le socialiste's* characterization of Roubaix, the first major city to support the Parti Ouvrier, as ‘a municipality born under a kindly star – the star which has led the people towards their redeemer, socialism’.¹¹ Both Guesde’s acolytes and adversaries characterized him as ‘the apostle of socialism’, and sometimes compared the charismatic socialist to Christ himself.¹² The POF published ‘catéchismes socialistes’ designed to educate ‘believers’ in Guesdist doctrine. And the rituals and practices of French Marxism echoed those of the church: the First of May celebration served socialists as a high holiday; memorialization of the communards created a cult of martyrs; while anthems such as *L'internationale* constituted a Marxist hymnal. The Parti Ouvrier itself played upon these analogies, characterizing its adherents as accepting the Guesdist gospel ‘with truly religious receptiveness’.¹³ Marxism, as an ideology, sought to fulfil the role of a religion: substituting History and Humanity for the Catholic deity, replacing revelation with revolution, supplanting the Christian heaven with a secular utopia. For many of the *fin de siècle* French, however, History and Humanity were not enough. Guesdists very occasionally admitted that ‘very few people could as yet do without religion’.¹⁴ But they never fully understood why.

The French Marxists resembled most other French Leftists in this obtuseness, but, unlike other secular ideologues of their period, Guesdists prided themselves on their indifference to religious faith: not for them, in principle at least, the strident anti-clericalism and militant atheism otherwise so characteristic of the *fin de siècle* Left.¹⁵ Following Marx, French Marxists contended that the intensifying class war between capital and labour reduced both religion and atheism to irrelevance, freeing Guesdists from the superannuated mythology of ‘clerical conspiracy’ that the traditional French Left had used to explain the inequality and iniquity of French society.¹⁶ A POF poster placarded during

¹⁰ For the argument that Marxism plays an essentially religious role for its adherents, see L. Kolakowski, ‘The priest and the jester’, in *Towards a Marxist humanism* (New York, 1968), pp. 9–37. For the suggestion that Guesdists failed to understand traditional religion because they were themselves committed to an alternative modernist religion, see M. Montuclard, *Conscience religieuse et démocratie* (Paris, 1965), pp. 7–8.

¹¹ Anon., ‘Roubaix vengé’, *Le socialiste*, 13 Jan. 1895.

¹² P. Pierrard, *L'église et les ouvriers en France, 1840–1940* (Paris, 1984), p. 320.

¹³ Anon., ‘Dans le Midi’, *Le socialiste*, 15 Aug. 1894.

¹⁴ Dr Z. [Pierre Bonnier], ‘L’adoption nationale’, *Le socialiste*, 8 Sept. 1895.

¹⁵ For this striking difference between the POF and the other socialist factions, see F. Cépède, ‘1891: les socialistes et l’encyclique *Rerum novarum*’, *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 41 (1991), pp. 24–9.

¹⁶ For Marx’s views, see N. Lobkowicz, ‘Karl Marx’s attitude to religion’, *Review of Politics*, 26 (1964), pp. 319–52, and D. McKown, *The classical Marxist critiques of religion: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kautsky* (The Hague, 1975), particularly pp. 20–1. It is indicative that decades of Parti Ouvrier invective generated hardly a reference to the otherwise much-maligned Society of Jesus. One exception was a reference during the Dreyfus Affair to the influence of the Jesuits in recruitment

Guesde's unsuccessful re-election campaign against the militantly Catholic employer Eugène Motte exemplified this agnostic approach to religion.

Convinced that the WORKING CLASS IS INVINCIBLE SO LONG AS IT REMAINS UNITED, M. EUGENE MOTTE ATTEMPTS TO DIVIDE US... Your response to him will be: RESPECTING FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE, THE PARTI OUVRIER HAS NEVER INQUIRED INTO ITS MEMBERS' RELIGIOUS BELIEFS. It doesn't matter whether you're Catholic, Protestant, or free-thinker, whether you believe in God or the devil. It's enough that you're proletarian, in other words exploited or robbed, to ensure that your place should be in our ranks, in the midst of those who, like us and with us, hope to put an end to the exploitation and robbery of which you're the victims.¹⁷

When Jules Simon, archetypical spokesman of the French bourgeoisie, protested against the forced secularization of French education, crying in anguish: 'seize our property, but leave our consciences alone!', *Le socialiste* commented dryly that the POF intended to follow exactly this programme.¹⁸ Marxism, ideally, was to be not only 'post-theistic', but 'post-atheistic'.¹⁹

How could the Guesdists justify this programme of religious indifference? Why did the Parti Ouvrier advise its followers to ignore the religious question that obsessed the Left? The simplest answer to this question is that Guesdists believed that religion had ceased to matter. Many Guesdist analyses of religion (and of anti-religion) were thoroughly reductionist in the old-fashioned Positivist sense, depicting visions of the transcendent as hallucinatory misrepresentations of the natural world or as illusory translations of mundane human attributes – and thus as antiquated 'false consciousness' without contemporary significance. According to Guesdists operating in this essentially pre-Marxist Feuerbachian²⁰ mode, 'scientific socialism' had to discard any concern with 'God, Justice, Liberty and all the other fantastic bric-a-brac of spiritual idealism'.²¹ Seen from this perspective, tirades against religious iniquity mattered as little to modern France as 'denunciations of the *droit de seigneur*'.²² Although untenable in retrospect, proclamations of 'the death of

to the French officer corps – and even this instance is telling in its isolation during a period of intense Leftist paranoia about this issue. C. Bonnier, 'Scandales cléricaux', *Le socialiste*, 9 Apr. 1899.

¹⁷ *Pas de Division*, in the Fonds Guesde, International Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, item 638/3 (stress in the original). ¹⁸ Anon., 'Accepté', *Le socialiste*, 27 Mar. 1886.

¹⁹ D. Turner, 'Religion: illusions and liberation', in T. Carver, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Marx* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 337.

²⁰ Guesdists distributed Feuerbach's *La religion*, describing it as fundamental to the development of their theses on religion. 'Livres et brochures de propagande', *Le socialiste*, 29 May–5 June 1904.

²¹ P. Lafargue, 'L'idéalisme Marxiste', *Le socialiste*, 21 Jan. 1900.

²² B. [Charles Bonnier], 'Lachez l'amarre', *Le socialiste*, 26 Dec. 1891. Guesde's associate in the leadership of the POF, Paul Lafargue, perhaps because of his positivistic medical training during the heyday of nineteenth-century scientific rationalism, returned continually to this theme. See P. Lafargue, *La religion du capital* (Paris, 1887); P. Lafargue and the Abbé Naudet, *Conférence contradictoire du 28 Novembre 1892, à l'Hippodrome Lillois* (Lille, 1892); P. Lafargue, *Pie IX au paradis* (Lille, 1890); and P. Lafargue, 'Causes de la croyance en Dieu', *La vie socialiste*, 10–11 (1905), pp. 584–601, 640–51.

God' did enjoy a certain credibility at the end of the nineteenth century. The inexorable advance of 'industrial society' had indeed promoted 'dechristianisation' – as the church failed to establish itself in the new manufacturing towns and working-class faubourgs, as thousands of workers abandoned the once universal rituals of baptism, marriage, and burial, as economics replaced morality as the communal imperative.²³ Catholic theologians, after all, agreed with Marxist theoreticians that capitalist industrialism corroded religious belief.²⁴

Guesdists supplemented this argument for socialist indifference towards the 'religious question' with the more Marxist proposition that religious convictions reflected social illiteracy and political impotence no less than – even far more than – scientific ignorance and underdeveloped technology. In this interpretation, modern religion embodied a false consciousness founded not upon misunderstanding of the natural world, but upon capitalism's reified 'economic relations between men'.²⁵ The pre-socialist proletariat – brutalized, benighted, and impoverished – inevitably succumbed to the illusions of religious obscurantism. 'Religion', Guesdists argued, 'survives because of two causes: ignorance and misery, of which the former is merely the consequence of the latter'.²⁶ Given this symbiosis between capitalism – 'the last mystery evoking spiritual explanations'²⁷ – and religion, no amount of scientific 'enlightenment' would free the exploited masses from religious false consciousness. As Guesde put the argument, 'the church will survive all the triumphs of science because, in place of the forces of nature now dominated by man, we suffer from economic forces that continue to dominate him, leaving a place for God and the belief in God'.²⁸

In this formula, Marxism and socialism would banish religious 'superstition' and clerical obscurantism, just as science and technology had banished witchcraft and alchemy. A perplexing ambiguity bedevilled this Guesdist expectation, however. Would religion disappear from the working-class world as soon as enough proletarians, enlightened by Marxism, fully understood their

²³ See J. Moody, 'The dechristianization of the French working class', *Review of Politics*, 20 (1958), p. 55.

²⁴ Y.-M. Hilaire, 'Les ouvriers de la région du Nord devant l'église catholique (XIXe et XXe siècles)', *Mouvement social*, 57 (1966), p. 192.

²⁵ P. Myrens, 'Croyances religieuses', *Le socialiste*, 8–15 Sept. 1901. Guesdists never seem to have imagined that capitalism might survive and religion die, with the 'false consciousness' of the latter replaced by superficial hedonism and commodity fetishism rather than by socialist humanism. For this scenario, see N. Birnbaum, 'Beyond Marx in the sociology of religion?', in C. Glock and P. Hammond, eds. *Beyond the classics? Essays in the scientific study of religion* (New York, 1973), p. 63. ²⁶ J. Martin, 'Cléricalisme et propriété', *Le socialiste*, 21–8 July 1901.

²⁷ A. Delon, 'L'insuffisance radicale', *Le socialiste*, 21 Feb. 1897.

²⁸ J. Guesde, 'Socialisme Chrétien et socialisme scientifique', *Le socialiste*, 31 Jan. 1892 – a fascinating account of a 'conférence contradictoire' (one of the gladiatorial political debates so popular during the *fin de siècle*) between Guesde and the Abbé Naudet. Reports of these occasions are a particularly valuable source for the period's religious mentalities and their associated conflicts. See the discussion in J.-M. Mayeur, 'Les abbés démocrates', *Revue du nord*, 73 (1991), p. 238.

miserable lot – as soon as their minds, if not yet their bodies, had been liberated? The POF appeared to think so, asserting that ideologically liberated modern workers, unlike superstitious medieval peasants, could and would dispense with ‘the supernatural causes that explained the phenomena of their sad milieu’.²⁹ Or would religious faith succumb only to the ultimate triumph of socialist revolution, rather than to the mere spread of socialist enlightenment? Contradicting their more sanguine predictions, Guesdists contended that only the final ‘economic and material emancipation of the proletariat’ would allow ‘intellectual emancipation, the emancipation of consciences’.³⁰ In either case, however, the POF advised proletarians to discard the panaceas and panoplies of anti-clericalism and militant atheism. ‘Eat meat on Friday, and the church won’t give a damn’, Guesdists asserted. But, with the advance of socialism, ‘the church will be lost’.³¹ In their most fundamental understanding of the irrelevance of both religion and atheism, Guesde and his followers fervently believed that ‘we are advancing ... towards a “terrestrial paradise” which will extirpate the very idea of a fake paradise beyond the grave. That will be the end of religion, which will no longer have anything to exploit’.³² In the chiliastic imaginary of Guesde’s Marxism, the impending socialist utopia would even liberate humanity from its oldest and ultimate nightmare: the dank confines of the tomb.

II

This ‘agnostic’ answer to the religious question should have sufficed. Had socialist militants systematically adopted its prescriptions, they would have avoided sterile disputes over a ‘dying’ issue, while welcoming both believers and atheists into the anti-capitalist camp. In practice, however, this strategy of indifference to religion regularly failed, as Guesdists indulged themselves in anti-religious tirades more reminiscent of Marat than Marx.³³ That Guesdist municipalities removed the crucifix from schoolrooms might have reflected mere agnosticism, but their banning of religious processions testified to aggressive anti-clericalism, even to militant atheism.³⁴ Indeed, *L’égalité*, at its most extreme, not only endorsed the banning of ‘religious manifestations, teachings or ceremonies’, but advocated demolition of ‘those ancient cathedrals which speak to the imagination and which preserve the malignant germ of religious sentiment’.³⁵ The revolutionary Paris of the future would

²⁹ P. Lafargue, ‘Réclame et principes éternels’, *Le socialiste*, 20–7 Jan. 1901.

³⁰ A. Zévaès, interpellation of 1 Dec. 1898, *Journal officiel 1898. Chambre des députés: débats parlementaires*.

³¹ A. Delon, ‘Notre anticléricalisme’, *Le socialiste*, 18 Nov. 1900.

³² Report of a speech by Guesde, ‘Jules Guesde dans le Midi’, *Le socialiste*, 10 June 1893.

³³ Some general studies of the religious question in France wrongly assume that the Guesdists did in fact sustain an unequivocal programme of indifference to religion. See, for instance, A. Dansette, *A religious history of modern France* (London, 1961), p. 198.

³⁴ For the removal of crucifixes, see L. Marty, *Chanter pour survivre: culture ouvrière, travail et techniques dans le textile – Roubaix, 1850–1914* (Lille, 1982), p. 108, and for processions, Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 182.

³⁵ G. Deville, ‘La question religieuse’, *L’égalité*, 11 Dec. 1881.

raze the towers of Notre-Dame, as the revolutionary Paris of the past had razed those of the Bastille.

Why did the French Marxists, against their better judgement, so frequently rush headlong into the religious fray – most often as violent adversaries of the church, very occasionally as suitors of the French faithful? Quite simply, because religion was *not* dying. Guesdists would have liked to have believed in the obsolescence of religious faith, but could hardly ignore the manifold signs of its continuing vitality, not least among proletarians. Despite a century of ‘dechristianisation’, many workers still participated in the Christian rites of passage – baptism, marriage and burial – while a substantial minority maintained full Catholic practice.³⁶ As for the population as a whole, at the beginning of the twentieth century more of the French went on pilgrimage to Lourdes than went on strike – hardly proof of the Christian faith’s final defeat by class consciousness.³⁷ *Fin de siècle* politics themselves reflected enduring religious mentalities: adversaries and adherents of clerical intellectual hegemony provoked the ferocious educational debates of the 1880s; the *ralliement* of the 1890s restructured ‘bourgeois’ politics in France; while the embittered separation of church and state during the first years of the twentieth century eventually displaced the ‘social question’ itself as the burning issue of the day. Catholic clericalism and Republican anti-clericalism – both supposedly transcended by socialism – convulsed the *fin de siècle* French political order, sweeping a bemused Parti Ouvrier into the ideological maelstrom of their interminable conflict.

How, then, did the French Marxists understand religious faith, once having been compelled to abandon their abortive strategy of indifference? And why did this understanding so frequently assume the intolerant guise of socialist anti-clericalism? The latter question is particularly worth asking, as the Guesdists might well have adopted a radically different approach. Marx himself had suggested that religious faith among the poor and the downtrodden represented an attempted flight from exploitation and domination into Christ’s millenarian kingdom. He had thereby presented religion as both significant and authentic – as indeed prefiguring the socialist utopia.³⁸ As such, the Christian message offered its adherents not ‘opium, but... dynamite’.³⁹ A few of Marx’s followers have, in fact, argued that only the achievement of socialism will allow realization of the Christian moral vision – although they have rarely admitted that Marxist acceptance of the Christian moral vision enhances the prospects of socialism.⁴⁰ French Marxists, in particular, might have sympathized with this more conciliatory perspective, given the legacy of their nation’s early ‘utopian socialists’, who had believed that socialism embodied

³⁶ R. Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism, 1789–1914* (London, 1989), pp. 163–5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147. ³⁸ Lobkowitz, ‘Karl Marx’s attitude to religion’, pp. 303–7.

³⁹ Leonhard Ragaz, cited in H. Gollwitzer, *The Christian faith and the Marxist criticism of religion* (Edinburgh, 1970), p. 20.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, D. Turner, *Marxism and Christianity* (Oxford, 1983).

Christian ideals far more authentically than did the power-corrupted church.⁴¹ What is more, given the POF's principled internationalism, the British example of close symbiosis between Christianity and social activism, of a 'social gospel' shading into Christian socialism, might well have informed and inspired Guesdist militancy. If developed for the *fin de siècle*,⁴² a sympathetic view of Christian faith as sublimated social rebellion would have annexed some aspects of religious motivation, if not religious belief itself, to the Parti Ouvrier's revolutionary project.⁴³

During their decades of militancy, Guesdists did argue, albeit very occasionally, that only the socialist revolution would realize the Christian message of love and reconciliation. As Guesde put it, once socialism had triumphed, 'then *love one another*, which can be only a lie in a society governed by the law *exploit one another*, will become a reality'.⁴⁴ In developing this argument, the Parti Ouvrier stressed that the essential Christian message of brotherhood and love implied socialist conclusions: religion, in this conception, had been 'only the embryo of the socialist idea throughout the centuries'.⁴⁵ The POF certainly recognized the passion and commitment that millions of peasants and workers devoted to their faith. After all, such passion and commitment could assume a near-insurrectionary intensity directed, as often as not, against the same 'bourgeois Republic' hated by the POF – particularly during the dissolution crisis of 1902, which witnessed a virtual rebellion in western France.⁴⁶ Seeking to tap this elemental force, some Guesdists hoped to align religion with the Parti Ouvrier, or at least neutralize its anti-socialist potential. The Guesdist municipal government of Roubaix, for instance, instituted meatless Fridays when developing its innovative programme of free school meals.⁴⁷ Why alienate Catholic families, when devout Roubaissian workers might someday fight on the barricades alongside their socialist fellows?

The Guesdist press was also remarkably, although not completely, free of the vulgar and often obscene attacks on the priesthood so beloved by traditional French anti-clericals, no doubt because the Parti Ouvrier claimed to have detected a virtual class war between 'commoner priests and the lordly

⁴¹ J. Bruhat, 'Anticléricalisme et mouvement ouvrier en France avant 1914: esquisse d'une problématique', *Mouvement social*, 57 (1966), p. 63.

⁴² As it sometimes was by the more metaphysically inclined of the Guesdists' socialist competitors, above all by the great socialist tribune Jean Jaurès, who appears to have genuinely sympathized with a Christian idealism which paralleled his own secular ideals. M. Rebérioux, 'Socialisme et religion: un inédit de Jaurès (1890)', *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 16 (1961), pp. 1096–120.

⁴³ For this strategy, see I. Fetscher, 'Developments in the Marxist critique of religion', *Concilium*, 6 (1966), pp. 57–68.

⁴⁴ Report of a speech by Guesde, 'Socialisme Chrétien et socialisme scientifique', *Le socialiste*, 31 Jan. 1892.

⁴⁵ Anon., 'Bons apôtres', *Le socialiste*, 30 Nov. 1890.

⁴⁶ C. Bonnier, 'Révolution conservatrice', *Le socialiste*, 3–10 Aug. 1902. For the anti-bourgeois dimension of these events, see C. Ford, 'Religion and the politics of cultural change in provincial France: the resistance of 1902 in Lower Brittany', *Journal of Modern History*, 62 (1990), pp. 1–33.

⁴⁷ A. Zévaès, *Histoire des partis socialistes en France: les Guesdistes* (Paris, 1947), p. 91.

bishop'.⁴⁸ Perhaps priests, too, would become socialists! Seeking to turn confessional passions away from reaction and towards socialism, the POF systematically distinguished between a reactionary hierarchy and a populist lower clergy, between 'clericalism and Christianity'⁴⁹ – the former the enemy of the latter, and the latter the potential ally of the Parti Ouvrier in its revolutionary project. Quoting scripture, Marxists mobilized the Bible and Christ himself behind this strategy. Guesdists frequently cited the Acts of the Apostles, with its quasi-communist advocacy of goods in common, against 'the degenerate Christians'⁵⁰ of the acquisitive present. Paul Lafargue, one of France's greatest pamphleteers, founded his mordant *Pie IX au paradis* upon a cleverly written confrontation in heaven between the intensely reactionary pontiff and (to use an anachronism) a liberation-theology Christ. As for Pius's successor, the Parti Ouvrier delighted in the supposedly socialist implications of Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*, the great social encyclical which French Marxists quoted to the effect that 'labour is the sole source of the wealth of nations' – a papal admission that, Guesdists assumed, 'could only hasten the social revolution'.⁵¹

At a less exalted level, the Parti Ouvrier frequently expressed admiration for the integrity and idealism of Count Albert de Mun – hero of the tiny but intensely militant and increasingly influential Social-Catholic movement.⁵² Anti-clerical Leftists even suspected a covert alliance between the Parti Ouvrier and de Mun's Catholic reactionaries, particularly after Lafargue's inaugural parliamentary address, in which he praised the count for having 'delivered the best socialist speech ever given in this chamber'.⁵³ Guesdist socialists may have sat on the extreme Left of the parliamentary hemicycle, and de Mun's Social Catholics on the extreme Right, but these militant extremes often met in their common revulsion against the flaccid bourgeois centre. Less noted by the Parti Ouvrier's secular enemies than parliamentary co-operation between Marxists and Social Catholics, but if anything more compromising, were the Guesdists' repeated endorsements of the racist but none the less anti-bourgeois diatribes of the Assumptionists' muck-raking *La croix*. 'Bravo!' cheered *Le socialiste*, commenting on its anti-Semitic fellow newspaper. 'Let it continue spreading hatred between bosses and workers, and we'll drain a

⁴⁸ C. Bonnier, 'La démagogie catholique', *Le socialiste*, 24 Jan. 1897. For the prevalence of scurrilous priest-baiting journalism among Leftists apart from those of the POF, see Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, pp. 71–6.

⁴⁹ Chauvin, 'Les socialistes et le clergé', *Le socialiste*, 4 Mar. 1895. For the latent social conflict which indeed divided bishops from their parish priests, see J. McManners, *Church and state in France, 1870–1914* (London, 1972), pp. 109–10. ⁵⁰ 'Correspondance', *Le socialiste*, 15 Aug. 1894.

⁵¹ Anon., 'L'encyclique', *Le socialiste*, 17 June 1891. Lafargue wrote an amusing imaginary news report of the pope's indictment by the French state for 'incitement to the commission of the crimes of pillage and murder' (the same charges brought against Lafargue after the Fourmies massacre). P. Lafargue, 'Le pape poursuivi', *Le socialiste*, 8 July 1891.

⁵² See, for instance, 'Jules Guesde dans le Midi', *Le socialiste*, 10 June 1893.

⁵³ For these events, see F. Codaccioni, 'L'élection de Paul Lafargue en 1891', *Revue du nord*, 56 (1974), pp. 43–7, and W. Cohn, 'Paul Lafargue: Marxist disciple and French revolutionary socialist' (Ph.D. thesis, Wisconsin, 1972), pp. 43–7.

tankard to the honour of *La croix*.⁵⁴ During the French *fin de siècle*, the Marxist courtship of Christianity sanctioned highly embarrassing liaisons.

How did the Parti Ouvrier justify this rudimentary strategy of conciliating the faithful – a strategy not often pursued, but none the less one bitterly criticized by the party's competitors of the anti-clerical Left? Guesdists argued that religion, properly understood, led towards socialism. In their most hard-headed variation on this theme, they suggested that the church had simply realized the inevitability of the coming revolution, and was pursuing its customary strategy of 'jumping on the bandwagon'.⁵⁵ Just as the POF would compromise with religion in order to mobilize the devout, so the pope would assume socialist garb in order to align his church with the triumphant proletariat – as his predecessors had aligned themselves with Roman despots, feudal lords, or bourgeois plutocrats. In the Guesdists' most optimistic scenario, clerical militants worked for socialism even when they organized *against* the POF. Christian-Democratic parties, corporatist labour organizations, Catholic peasant leagues – all would eventually fuel the socialist conflagration as their devout adherents came to understand their revolutionary class interest.⁵⁶ This apparently counterfactual argument made some sense. The ultramontane Catholicism of the *fin de siècle* was indeed profoundly anti-bourgeois – corrosively critical of competitive individualism, unrestrained laissez-faire, and the dominance of finance; unconditionally censorious of the 'ethic' of greed that animated capitalist economics; categorically opposed to the moral nihilism that lurked behind the liberal ideal of 'freedom'. At the same time, the cadres of the French church, recruited largely from the more prosperous peasantry and from the petite bourgeoisie, had few ties, and those uncomfortable ones of patronage and dependency, to the haut-bourgeois establishment which ruled the French Republic.⁵⁷ That Social Catholics might be transfigured as Christian socialists, that the Vatican might hurl anathemas against capital, that priests might flock to the Parti Ouvrier – these were not impossible dreams.

III

Yet they were dreams seldom dreamt by Guesdists. Why did the Parti Ouvrier neglect what was surely, at least in retrospect, a promising strategy? Why not elaborate the imagery of 'Jesus the *sans-culotte*'?⁵⁸ Might 'liberation theology' have invaded France during the 1890s, rather than during the 1960s? Instead,

⁵⁴ Anon., untitled, p. 3, columns 3–4 of *Le socialiste*, 3 Oct. 1891. The frequency with which *Le socialiste* commented on material in *La croix* indicates how intently and seriously the Guesdist editors followed that journal.

⁵⁵ Z., 'Trop tard!', *Le socialiste*, 21 Feb. 1892.

⁵⁶ Anon., 'Réforme bourgeoise', *Le socialiste*, 19 Sept. 1891.

⁵⁷ For the anti-bourgeois themes in French Catholicism of the period, see Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, pp. 210–11, and J.-M. Mayeur, 'Catholicism intransigent, catholicisme social, Démocratie Chrétienne', *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 27 (1972), pp. 483–99. The class differences between the clergy and the bourgeoisie are emphasized in C. Heywood, 'The Catholic church and the business community in nineteenth-century France', in F. Tallett and N. Atkin, eds, *Religion, society and politics in France since 1789* (London, 1991), pp. 83–7.

⁵⁸ Anon., 'La semaine', *Le socialiste*, 4 Mar. 1894.

most Guesdist interpretations of religion portrayed faith as an ‘inherent bourgeois illness, like syphilis’,⁵⁹ or as a rotting and poisonous residue of the medieval past, rather than as an authentic, if misguided, response to social oppression and political injustice. Why did Guesdists so frequently lapse into fanatical anti-religious prejudice – thereby thwarting both their strategy of religious indifference, calculated to open their party to believers no less than to atheists, and their alternative strategy of reconciling Christianity with socialism, calculated to conciliate and perhaps even co-opt the Catholic devout?

The simplest answer to this question is that Guesdist militants had been indelibly marked by the political culture of the French Left from which they had emerged, a political culture saturated with anti-clericalism.⁶⁰ Most of the Parti Ouvrier’s leaders had at some time in their lives suffered from the century-old conflict between traditional religion and secular modernity, always as partisans of the latter. Guesde, for instance, as a communard refugee, had been forced to flee his Italian exile because he refused to baptize his son.⁶¹ As a consequence of these traditions and experiences, Guesdist polemic, at its infrequent worst, did descend into the sewers of the priest-baiting mode, where ‘celibate’ clergy preyed upon the young girls (and the young boys) confined to their care, where blind children were purchased from their parents for lucrative exploitation as beggars under clerical patronage in Rome, where the temple prostitution of the Old Testament (Kings 23:7 – Guesdists loving to quote Scripture against religion) legitimized the Catholic church’s covert patronage of contemporary prostitution.⁶² Paul Lafargue, in particular, adored such scurrilous polemic.⁶³ Even when explicating his party’s official programme of treating religion as ‘a private affair of only individual significance’, he could not resist mocking Christian myth with arch sexual innuendo about the Virgin Mary’s relations with the sacred dove of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ No wonder devout Christians resisted the Parti Ouvrier’s advances.

Guesdists supplemented this hoary invective with the classical Enlightenment critique of religious obscurantism. They regularly depicted the religious past as a nightmare of ignorance, superstition, and backwardness. Even the bodily filth of the middle ages could be blamed upon the church’s suppression of the Roman baths!⁶⁵ More conventionally, Guesdists invoked memories of

⁵⁹ P. Lafargue, ‘Le concordat’, *Le socialiste*, 5–12 June 1904.

⁶⁰ For this political culture, see J. Lalouette, ‘Dimensions anticléricales de la culture républicaine (1870–1914)’, *Histoire, économie et société*, 10 (1991), pp. 127–42, and R. Rémond, *Anticléricalisme en France de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris, 1976). Its intersection with socialism is analysed in P. Leveque, ‘Libre pensée et socialisme (1885–1939)’, *Mouvement social*, 57 (1966), pp. 101–42.

⁶¹ Pierrard, *L’église et les ouvriers en France*, p. 319.

⁶² For the first allegation, see ‘La semaine’, *Le socialiste*, 19 Feb. 1899; for the second, Anon., ‘Enfants à vendre’, *Le socialiste*, 23 Jan. 1886; and for the third, P. Lafargue, ‘Prostitution, morale et religion’, *Le socialiste*, 8 Apr. 1891.

⁶³ His *Pie IX au paradis* (Lille, 1890) is a classic instance of vulgar anti-clericalism, scatologically attentive to, among other things, papal haemorrhoids.

⁶⁴ P. Lafargue, ‘Le socialisme chrétien’, *Le socialiste*, 1 Apr. 1891.

⁶⁵ P. Lafargue, ‘Le programme municipal’, *Le socialiste*, 9 Apr. 1892.

the Inquisition, not only to indict religion's bloody historical record, but to remind the Parti Ouvrier's constituency of 'the regime [to which the church] wants to return us'.⁶⁶ Themselves accused of advocating violence, French Marxists turned on their Christian accusers with tales of the Crusades and the religious wars. No socialist, the socialists of the POF contended, could ever, would ever, replicate the abominable cruelty of the church's campaigns against infidels and heretics⁶⁷ – a contention with some credibility, in those years before 1917. Developing this argument, Guesdists asserted that the church had always jealously opposed working-class mobilization: under the Ancien Régime, clerical torture and anathema had supposedly been deployed against assertive workers no less than against recalcitrant Huguenots.⁶⁸ Thus, for Guesdist anti-clericals, social progress and religious faith contradicted each other. Campaigning against Catholic critics of Marxist socialism, Guesdists angrily protested that 'the past belonged to you, entirely, and to you alone. What did you accomplish with it, you Christians? Nothing!'⁶⁹ Guesdists even reiterated the secular prejudice that attributed 'backwardness' in southern Europe to Catholic hegemony: if, in the struggle between socialism and the church, the latter were to prevail, 'France would fall to the rank of Spain, and her historic role would be finished.'⁷⁰

Guesdists noted the spiritual revival of the *belle époque*, and detested its challenge to the rationalism upon which Marxist 'scientific' socialism depended. As masses and black masses enchanted the fashionable, as avant-garde intellectuals embraced Nietzschean irrationalism, as myth, mystery, and magic flourished in the hot-house of the *fin de siècle* sensibility, Guesdists feared for France's sanity, while simultaneously delighting in these signs of capitalist decadence. When Voltairians such as the editor of the prestigious *Revue des deux mondes* succumbed to the baroque beguilement of the Catholic revival, for instance, the Parti Ouvrier gleefully interpreted the outrage as yet further proof of bourgeois senescence.⁷¹ Indeed, the Marxists' meta-historical vision concluded its prehistory-to-the-present panorama by describing the abandonment of rationality by a bourgeoisie that increasingly 'sought refuge in the bosom of that holy mother who in every époque has been so welcoming and so useful to privileged classes'.⁷² As a consequence of this abandonment, France was witnessing, 'as during the Roman decadence', a resurgence of 'faith in miracles, belief in prodigies that contradict the laws of nature'.⁷³ According to Guesdists, the near future would either endure regression into a nightmarish

⁶⁶ 'Variété: histoire des tribunaux de l'Inquisition en France', *Le socialiste*, 29 July 1893.

⁶⁷ Anon., 'Jules Guesde dans le Midi', *Le socialiste*, 3 June 1893.

⁶⁸ H. Ghesquière, 'Corporations et syndicats, 1776–1791–1884', *Le socialiste*, 29 Sept. 1894.

⁶⁹ J. Guesde, *Le socialisme: double réponse à MM. de Mun et Paul Deschanel* (Paris, 1900), p. 11.

⁷⁰ Ch. Brunetière, 'Les nations catholiques', *Le socialiste*, 4 Dec. 1898.

⁷¹ 'Variété – le cas de M. Brunetière', *Le socialiste*, 6 Jan. 1895. For the Catholic revival and its converts, see M. Lagrée, 'Exilés dans leur patrie (1880–1920)', in F. Lebrun, *Histoire des catholiques en France* (Toulouse, 1980), pp. 393–6.

⁷² L. Dubreuilh, 'En Bretagne', *Le socialiste*, 21–8 June 1903.

⁷³ Anon., 'Signes de gâtisme social', *Le socialiste*, 21 Nov. 1891.

capitalist Dark Ages of superstition and ignorance, or would rejoice in a proletarian Enlightenment of all-encompassing science and triumphant humanism. Under these circumstances, the POF linked a failing bourgeoisie to religious backwardness, and the ascendant working class to secular progress. For the Parti Ouvrier, only ‘the liberation of labour’ would lead to ‘the liberation of the mind’, only ‘the fall of the terrestrial despot, the capitalist’, would ‘encompass the fall of his celestial foreman’.⁷⁴ Pending the bankruptcy of capitalism and the shutting down of its heavenly subsidiary, Guesdists demanded suppression of the parochial school system, accused not only of obscurantism, but of inculcating ‘submission towards the ruling class’⁷⁵ – obscurantism and submission thus feeding upon each other, while their malignant intermingling thwarted the Enlightenment pioneered by the bourgeoisie but now embodied in the revolutionary proletariat.

The Parti Ouvrier supplemented these themes with bitter criticism of the cult of self-abnegation, humility, and suffering that underpinned the fossilized Tridentine Catholicism of the *fin de siècle* church.⁷⁶ As applied to the ‘social question’, this variant of Catholic thought insulted any self-respecting proletarian. The church all too often depicted workers’ labour as punishment for their sins – a doctrine well calculated to outrage the skilled workers and socialist militants who conceived of labour as the very essence of humanity.⁷⁷ The ‘labour theory of value’ preached by the POF, if nothing else, awarded labour virtually divine status as the ultimate creative force – a doctrine equally repugnant to parasitic bourgeois and conservative theologians. Worse yet, God, according to the French church, had ordained a coincidence of proletarian poverty and bourgeois wealth as part of His divine plan to encourage humility among the impoverished and charity among the affluent.⁷⁸ This inequality, by the divine dispensation described in one episcopal sermon, ‘offer[ed] to the rich, in the suffering of the poor, the opportunity for more generous sacrifices; and to the poor, in the generosity of the rich, a powerful motive for gratitude and love, and thus...strengthen[ed] the union of human society by the double tie of generosity and need’.⁷⁹ Imagine the grinding of socialist teeth! Thus, when clerical spokesmen such as the Abbé Naudet argued that workers needed the church rather than socialism because they, like other sinners, suffered above all from ‘soul sickness’ (*mal d’âme*), Guesdists riposted that impoverished workers suffered because they were exploited, while the gluttonous bourgeoisie suffered only from stomach ache.⁸⁰ The patronizing *de*

⁷⁴ G. Deville, ‘La question religieuse’, *L’égalité*, 11 Dec. 1881.

⁷⁵ ‘Bulletin municipal – Nantes’, *Le socialiste*, 3 Jan. 1897.

⁷⁶ For this religious mentality and its problems, see Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, pp. 205–6. ⁷⁷ For this glorification of labour, see Stuart, *Marxism at work*, pp. 63–5.

⁷⁸ Bruhat, ‘Anticléricalisme et mouvement ouvrier’, pp. 88–92, and R. Gibson, ‘Why republicans and Catholics couldn’t stand each other in the nineteenth century’, in F. Tallet and N. Atkin, eds., *Religion, society and politics in France since 1789* (London, 1991), p. 111.

⁷⁹ Bishop Astros of Toulouse, cited in Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, p. 205.

⁸⁰ P. Lafargue, ‘Mal d’âme’, *Le socialiste*, 11 Dec. 1892.

haut en bas rhetoric of *fin de siècle* Catholic social doctrine antagonized self-respecting workers as surely as Guesdist innuendo about the Virgin's sex-life alienated the Catholic devout.

Hostility towards charity – the parochial practice consequent upon Catholic social theory – recurs monotonously in Guesdist journalism and pamphleteering. The Parti Ouvrier repeatedly and vehemently affirmed that 'workers shouldn't have to ask for charity, but should simply gain the full value of their labour'.⁸¹ Guesdists angrily contrasted the seriousness of the social ills diagnosed in, for instance, *Rerum novarum* with the inadequacy of the charitable practices proposed to remedy them – highlighting a massive disjuncture between ends and means that supposedly completely discredited religious intervention in the social order.⁸² At times, this sustained hostility to Christian charity replicated the most old-fashioned and vulgar anti-clericalism: charitable institutions supposedly existed only to serve the greed of their organizers, who appropriated the faithful's alms to gratify their priestly self-indulgence.⁸³ More seriously, the Parti Ouvrier suggested that the religious allegiance of many workers endured only because of proletarian dependence upon Catholic 'hospitals, dispensaries, maternity homes, home visitors, and welfare bureaux' – all of which forced workers to submit to the church 'once they were afflicted with unemployment or illness'.⁸⁴ Guesdists even attacked the nursing sisters, despite (or perhaps because of) their almost universal popularity, accusing them of 'speculating on working-class miseries and maladies'.⁸⁵ Indeed, the POF actually urged the summary dissolution of these orders – at a time when even the most fanatical anti-clericals usually assumed their beneficence and indispensability. According to the Parti Ouvrier, the nursing sisters were the most dangerous, rather than the least offensive, of religious organizations, as they enabled the church 'to seize the most disinherited and vulnerable element of the working class in an unbreakable grip'.⁸⁶

Guesdist hostility toward Christian charity undoubtedly resonated with contemporaneous working-class mentalities. The church did indeed employ charity to govern its parishioners – enforcing devout practices and 'respectable' behaviour through the granting and withholding of charitable benefits. And the 'beneficiaries' of clerical largesse frequently resented this intrusive paternalism.⁸⁷ At the same time, the church's focus upon charitable practices led to its characteristic obsession with France's unemployed under-class, rather than with the 'respectable' workers among whom French socialism

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² See, for instance, the report of an address by Lafargue in 'Les réunions de Lille et de Roubaix', *Le socialiste*, 4 Dec. 1892.

⁸³ Anon., 'Les conférences de Lafargue', *Le socialiste*, 2 Apr. 1892.

⁸⁴ P. Grados, 'Le vrai moyen', *Le socialiste*, 14–21 June 1903.

⁸⁵ Bracke, 'A travers la semaine', *Le socialiste*, 8–15 Mar. 1903. For the popularity, and the indispensability, of the nursing sisters, see Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, p. 202.

⁸⁶ 'Le congrès de Issoudun', *Le socialiste*, 28 Sept.–19 Oct. 1902.

⁸⁷ Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, pp. 220–1.

found its constituency – a disjuncture that reinforced the incomprehension and distrust separating socially idealistic priests from working-class militants.⁸⁸ Indeed, one of the more insightful leaders of French Christian Democracy ruefully confessed that his church, when taking its social gospel to the proletariat, identified as workers ‘precisely those who can’t work’.⁸⁹ Confronted by a church preaching obedience, resignation, and humility to ‘the poor’, Guesdists snarled that workers would only be truly free when ‘all these Christian... moralists have been tossed into the deep with stones tied around their necks’.⁹⁰

The worst indictment that the Parti Ouvrier could hurl against religion, however, was not that the church embodied antiquated Medieval mentalities of hierarchy and humility, but that clerical authority served the bourgeoisie in the capitalist present. This theme – the Guesdists’ major contribution to the *fin de siècle*’s intricate pattern of anti-clerical polemic – suffused the POF’s angry commentary on the religious question. Guesdists regularly depicted religion as no more than an opiate distilled to pacify the proletarian masses – and one distributed by bourgeois drug-dealers who carefully refrained from consuming their own stupefying wares.⁹¹ Like other educated Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, Guesdist journalists easily recalled Taine’s and Renan’s ruthless programme of ‘religion for the masses and philosophy for the elite’.⁹² In fact, a gradual (although by no means uniform) evolution had transformed bourgeois philosophical politics during the nineteenth century – from the aggressive secularism bequeathed by the Revolution, though the mid-century manipulativeness that eventuated in Taine’s cynicism, to the *fin de siècle* spirituality that proved so impenetrable to Marxist materialists. In assuming that France’s capitalist rulers propagated a religion they actually despised, the Parti Ouvrier had fallen a generation behind the times.⁹³ None the less, France’s bourgeois notables, whether cynically manipulative or genuinely

⁸⁸ N. Ravitch, *The Catholic church and the French nation* (London, 1990), p. 84, and C. Heywood, ‘The Catholic church and the formation of the industrial labour force in nineteenth-century France: an interpretive essay’, *European History Quarterly*, 19 (1989), p. 528. The gendered dimension of this disjuncture is important. The aggressively independent cabaret culture which provided the social milieu for socialist self-assertion (and for popular anti-clericalism) was largely male, and differed strikingly from the more vulnerable and dependent life-world of most proletarian women, who appear to have both needed and wanted the church far more than did their men-folk. The latter may have hated priests all the more as a consequence. Guesdists were vaguely aware of the contemporaneous feminization of religious practice – that religion appealed particularly to ‘women and children’. See, for instance, ‘Le congrès de Bernon’, *Le socialiste*, 15 Aug. 1894. For a study of the Guesdists’ efforts to comprehend the gendered realities of the *fin de siècle* working class, see R. Stuart, ‘Gendered labour in the ideological discourse of French Marxism: the Parti Ouvrier Français, 1882–1905’, *Gender and History*, 9 (1997), pp. 107–29.

⁸⁹ The Abbé Naudet, cited in Lagrée, ‘Exilés dans leur patrie’, p. 387.

⁹⁰ P. Lafargue, ‘La production capitaliste’, *L’égalité*, 8 Oct. 1882.

⁹¹ Lafargue’s mordant *La religion du capital* is the best and most sustained Guesdist polemic along these lines, and one of the classics of anti-religious propaganda.

⁹² As described in J. Schapiro, *Anticlericalism* (Princeton, 1967), p. 55.

⁹³ Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, pp. 195–207.

devout, undoubtedly agreed with their Guesdist enemies on the fundamental issue: religion buttressed social order, including the social order of capitalism.⁹⁴

As for the Catholic hierarchy, it depended upon its wealthiest parishioners – by the *belle époque* more often liberal bourgeois than reactionary aristocrats – to supplement the meagre official subsidy of the secular clergy and sustain the church's massive apparatus of good works. Bishops, anxiously aware that the very survival of their sees' network of parochial education and confessional charity depended upon the voluntary munificence of the devout bourgeoisie, assiduously courted Catholic counting-houses.⁹⁵ Even parish priests, although largely recruited from humble petit-bourgeois or farming families, gravitated into the company of local notables – the notaries, businessmen, and rentiers best able to support parochial enterprise, and the hosts who offered the best dinner parties.⁹⁶ No wonder the French church, despite its pseudo-medieval philosophy, danced attendance upon the plutocrats of modern commerce and industry. No wonder the church ignored, or even repudiated, its immemorial condemnation of usurious finance.

Guesdists delighted in pointing out the embarrassing incongruities between, on the one hand, the Thomist social doctrine so enthusiastically developed and disseminated under Leo XIII and, on the other hand, the squalid compromises entailed by his church's dependency upon capitalist subsidy. It was all very well, the Parti Ouvrier acceded, for Leo's *Rerum novarum* to ascribe the wealth of nations to the fruits of labour. No Marxist would disagree. But the great encyclical none the less defended the property of the non-labouring wealthy against the claims of the labouring poor. For the Parti Ouvrier, this contradiction could not be resolved: the pope's feeble argument that bourgeois property embodied the personal labour of its possessors failed dismally in the new capitalist world of trusts and corporations, of anonymous stocks and bonds.⁹⁷ Guesdists were particularly scathing about the church's courting of financial wealth – the wealth that so obviously violated Catholicism's age-old strictures against usury. When the church had to choose between its doctrinal traditions and the blandishments of Catholic finance (even of Jewish finance, Guesdists slyly noted),⁹⁸ pope and bishops unanimously if shamefacedly chose the latter.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ For a particularly illuminating instance of this mentality focusing upon one of the POF's major clerical opponents, see M. Perrot, 'Note sur le catholicisme dans le Calvados au début de la Troisième République: les cercles d'ouvriers, l'Abbé Garnier', *Annales de Normandie*, 7 (1957), p. 326.

⁹⁵ Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, pp. 58, 202.

⁹⁶ Hilaire, 'Les ouvriers de la région du Nord devant l'église catholique', pp. 197–8, and R. Villain, *L'enseignement social de l'église* (Paris, 1984), p. 138.

⁹⁷ Anon., 'L'encyclique', *Le socialiste*, 17 June 1891. For the Catholic defence of private property, see A. Degand, 'La défense de la propriété privée: aux sources de la doctrine sociale de l'église', *Social Compass*, 24 (1987), p. 180.

⁹⁸ *Le socialiste* rejoiced in occasions such as the attendance of ultramontane aristocrats at a Rothschild wedding, occasions which supposedly demonstrated how 'the question of class overrides and suppresses every question of... religion'. Anon., untitled, *Le socialiste*, 5 June 1892.

⁹⁹ See, for instance, P. Lafargue, 'Le socialisme chrétien', *Le socialiste*, 1 Apr. 1891.

Indeed, not only had Catholicism made its peace with modern capitalism, but the church had supposedly become a capitalist itself, and one of the worst. Indicting Catholicism, Inc., *Le socialiste* demonstrated how ‘the church – which has been wrongly accused of spurning modern society – has fallen into step with capitalist civilization. To its sacristies, to its confessionals, it has added its workshops, its orphanages, and other places of labour and profit.’¹⁰⁰ Catholic religious orders – always the primary target of Guesdist polemic, as opposed to the secular clergy – had indeed accumulated enormous wealth. Their vast properties made them, collectively, the wealthiest rentier in France.¹⁰¹ Worse yet, these capitalists in habits not only lived off the unearned income of their accumulated wealth, but directly exploited workers, and particularly those most vulnerable of workers: women and children. According to the Guesdists, Catholic convents and orphanages, behind their baroque facades, actually enriched their clerical ‘owners’ as sordid low-wage or no-wage enterprises. The religious orders, more capitalist corporations than religious congregations, exploited their ‘employees’ with ‘a rapacity unknown among secular employers’.¹⁰² This indictment resonated with long-standing proletarian hostilities: French workers had detested convent labour since at least the eighteenth century.¹⁰³ Guesdist attacks on the ‘capitalist-church’ perpetuated a century-long proletarian tradition.

Even where the church was not itself an employer, Guesdists described how it seconded the bosses’ authority, thereby creating a formidable ‘alliance of altar and cashbox’.¹⁰⁴ Priests sought out reliably deferential recruits for local factories, clergy identified parish ‘trouble makers’ for grateful employers, while parochial schools and Catholic charity disciplined working-class families into compliance with bourgeois norms no less than into acceptance of religious instruction. Capital returned the favour: workers might face dismissal if they refused parochial schooling for their children.¹⁰⁵ Devout capitalists ruthlessly exploited their religion to maximize their profits, while spending their profits to propagate their faith. They employed members of religious orders to supervise workers, established religious observance as a routine aspect of the working day, and funded the religious rituals and Catholic institutions of their ‘company towns’. Angrily denouncing such practices, the Parti Ouvrier launched one of its most vehement and sustained campaigns against ‘Notre Dame de l’Usine’ – a cult of Marian devotion and employee docility

¹⁰⁰ ‘Le Parti Ouvrier à la chambre’, *Le socialiste*, 14 May 1899.

¹⁰¹ Dansette, *A religious history of modern France*, p. 190. For the Guesdists’ hatred of rentier wealth, see Stuart, *Marxism at work*, pp. 319–21.

¹⁰² Paul Grados, ‘Anticléricalisme’, *Le socialiste*, 2 and 9 Dec. 1900.

¹⁰³ L. Struminger, ‘“A bas les prêtres! A bas les couvents!”: The Church and the workers in nineteenth-century Lyons’, *Journal of Social History*, 11 (1978), pp. 546–53, and Bruhat, ‘Anticléricalisme et mouvement ouvrier’, pp. 86–8.

¹⁰⁴ Gibson, *A social history of French Catholicism*, pp. 202–3.

¹⁰⁵ R. Jonas, ‘From the radical republic to the social republic: On the origins and nature of socialism in rural France’ (Ph.D. thesis, California, Berkeley, 1985), p. 74.

propagated and sometimes enforced by paternalist employers in the northern textile industry, that seed-bed of French Marxism.¹⁰⁶ There, in the recesses of the cotton mills and linen factories, chapel and workshop had indeed fused into a single clerico-capitalist disciplinary device, thereby confirming the POF's worst suspicions about the role of religion in bourgeois society. Animated by faith and avarice, Catholic paternalism advanced across industrial France as one of French capitalism's most formidable strategies – exemplified in the Association Catholique des Patrons du Nord, which organized explicitly against the Parti Ouvrier on Guesdism's home terrain.¹⁰⁷

Contributing its force and faith to this strategy, the French church undoubtedly sought to mould a docile and diligent labour force – playing its role in the making of the French working class – to the specifications of capital.¹⁰⁸ What factory owner would not have cheered the words of the Abbé Lemire – paladin of nascent Christian democracy – when he proclaimed that ‘well-being is conceivable for a worker only if he has modest desires, and above all if he is willing to sacrifice’?¹⁰⁹ Clerics and capitalists alike accepted that ‘there are only two alternatives: we'll either have Christian workers who will be content with their lot... or we'll have non-Christian workers who, by the logic of their intellectual and moral state, will be the indefatigable champions of political and social upheaval’.¹¹⁰ Guesdists enthusiastically agreed. ‘The final battle’, *Le socialiste* predicted, ‘will be fought between Notre-Dame-de-l'Usine and socialism. It's simply a matter of deciding if the worker will become master of nature and of his destiny, or if he'll remain the slave of God and of the boss, who has become the representative of God on earth.’¹¹¹ No wonder Guesdists, when they asked themselves why workers attended mass rather than socialist rallies, why they participated in their parish rather than in the POF, answered that ‘they can't do otherwise. When they're up against clerical bosses, it's their daily bread that's at stake’¹¹² – yet another answer to the puzzle of continuing proletarian religious practice in the new world of capitalist and socialist modernity. Thus Catholic employers appeared in Guesdist

¹⁰⁶ For the Guesdist campaign, see C. Willard, ‘Les attaques contre Notre-Dame de l'Usine’, *Mouvement Social*, 57 (1966), pp. 203–9.

¹⁰⁷ G. Lepoutre, ‘Montée et contestation du modèle paternaliste: l'association catholique des patrons du Nord – Mouvaux 1884–1894’, *Revue du Nord*, 63 (1991), pp. 259–69.

¹⁰⁸ See, above all, the insightful argument in Heywood, ‘The Catholic Church and the formation of the industrial labour force in nineteenth-century France’, pp. 509–33, and D. Landes, ‘Religion and enterprise: the case of the French textile industry’, in E. Carter et al., eds., *Enterprise and entrepreneurs in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France* (London, 1976), pp. 45–9. The common assumption that employers favoured clerical authority over their workers is, however, challenged in A. Cottreau, ‘Vie quotidienne et résistance ouvrière à Paris en 1870’, introduction to D. Poulot, *Le sublime* (Paris, 1980), p. 56, and G. Cholvy and Y.-M. Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine, 1880–1930* (Paris, 1986), pp. 181–2.

¹⁰⁹ Lemire in 1894, quoted in M. Montuclard, ‘Aux origines de la Démocratie Chrétienne’, *Archives de sociologie de religion*, 3 (1958), p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Dupanloup, cited in Pierrard, *L'église et les ouvriers en France*, p. 329.

¹¹¹ Paul Dramas, ‘L'Union Libérale’, *Le socialiste*, 6 Dec. 1896.

¹¹² Paul Grados, ‘Le vrai moyen’, *Le socialiste*, 14–21 June 1903.

polemic as the worst of bosses, as malignant ‘exploiters and oppressors of a higher order’¹¹³ who combined capitalist exploitation with confessional tyranny.

With characteristic reductionism,¹¹⁴ Guesdists decided that the church endured only by abetting capitalists as it had once abetted feudal lords: organized religion, retooled for modernity, supposedly served simply as ‘a...sacred gendarmerie assigned to the defence of capital’.¹¹⁵ The Parti Ouvrier even prefigured Althusser’s notorious concept of ‘ideological state apparatuses’. According to *Le socialiste*, ‘the priest is just like the policeman, like the judge, like the soldier; he is one of the pillars of the established order. He’s part of that apparatus of oppression formed by the bourgeois state.’¹¹⁶ Patronage of religion by this ‘bourgeois state’ consolidated the Guesdists’ fusion of the confessional and the counting-house. In France before the separation of 1904 – where the state appointed bishops as, in effect, ‘spiritual prefects’¹¹⁷ and paid the secular clergy as de facto civil servants – Guesdists easily equated church and state, the former represented as merely an instance of the latter. No aspect of this symbiosis escaped Guesdist censure. Cooperation between French colonialists and the missionary orders, for example, outraged the anti-imperialist POF: missionaries, according to the Parti Ouvrier, served Paris as ‘the best agents of the colonial programme’.¹¹⁸ Overall, the Parti Ouvrier concluded that ‘the churches nowadays are no more than annexes to the prefecture of police. It’s as a guard-dog of capitalist property that... the cassocked policeman has survived... the disappearance of that God in which he is the first to disbelieve.’¹¹⁹ Given the Guesdists’ bitter hostility towards the ‘bourgeois state’, and particularly the Parti Ouvrier’s detestation of the ‘prefecture of police’ that harassed and harried French Marxists, equation of church and state necessarily intensified the POF’s already acute distaste for religion.¹²⁰

The apotheosis of this Guesdist theme – the fusion of church and state, the conflation of secular liberalism with religious reaction – came during the *ralliement* of the 1890s. Anti-clerical Republicans and anti-Republican Catholics had united against socialism – melding, in the Guesdists’ dichotomous world-view, into ‘the most scandalous of alliances: Republicans and monarchists, free-masons and clericals, embracing and coupling on the same

¹¹³ Report of a speech by Alexandre Zévaès, ‘Le Parti Ouvrier en France – Coutances’, *Le socialiste*, 28 Apr. 1895.

¹¹⁴ Stuart, *Marxism at work*, ch. 9.

¹¹⁵ A. Delon, ‘Notre anticléricalisme’, *Le socialiste*, 18 Nov. 1900.

¹¹⁶ Anon. commentary on a report in *Le temps*, *Le socialiste*, 2 Jan. 1892.

¹¹⁷ C. Bonnier, ‘La pensée de derrière la tête’, *Le socialiste*, 7–14 Sept. 1902.

¹¹⁸ Charles Bonnier, ‘Libre-pensée et politique coloniale’, *Le socialiste*, 6–13 Jan. 1901.

¹¹⁹ J. Guesde, ‘L’ordre révolutionnaire’, *L’égalité*, 22 Oct. 1882.

¹²⁰ For Guesdist hatred of ‘the bourgeois state’, see Stuart, *Marxism at work*, ch. 7. For the conjunction of church and state in socialist rhetoric, see the fine study in C. Castaldo, ‘Socialism and Catholicism in France: Jaurès, Guesde, and the Dreyfus Affair’, in F. Tallett and N. Atkin, eds., *Religion, society and politics in France since 1789* (London, 1991), pp. 137–47.

electoral lists'.¹²¹ In the end, the *ralliement* failed. But, for the duration of the experiment, it confirmed the Guesdists' conviction that church and state had merged into one monstrous instrument of bourgeois oppression. Confronted by a nascent conservative front of *ralliés* and liberals, the 'scientific socialists' of the POF wrapped themselves in the mantle of Enlightenment and denounced the bourgeoisie for deserting Republican liberty and materialist rationality for clerical tyranny and spiritual obscurantism. 'Thus end all failing classes', Guesde trumpeted, 'clinging to God and to the religion that they struggled against in the period of their virility'.¹²² Parodying Gambetta's immortal battle-cry ('Clericalism, there's the enemy!'), the Parti Ouvrier maliciously proposed a revised liberal programme: 'Clericalism, there's the ally!'¹²³ For the Guesdists, the *ralliement* advertised the historical bankruptcy of their liberal enemies: it betrayed the revolutionary tradition of 1793, 1848, and 1870, abandoned liberty, equality, and fraternity for authority, hierarchy, and aristocracy, and placed 'the French Republic under the patronage of the Vatican'.¹²⁴ At the same time, Guesdists exploited the compromises and corruptions of the *ralliement* against conservative Catholics no less than against 'bourgeois Republicans'. Commenting on Leo XIII's abandonment of his church's traditional commitment to the French monarchy, *Le socialiste* sneered that 'what the church really wants is power at its command, whether that power is hereditary or elective. Its allegiance or origin hardly matters, provided that, the [church] really rules. [The church] can, and must, be successively royal, imperial, national, or republican. What it will never cease to be is the guard-dog of the possessing class.'¹²⁵ Liberals had abandoned their traditional ideals, while Catholics had deserted their idealized traditions – both treasons committed in the name of bourgeois defence. Characteristically, Guesdists rejoiced that their liberal and clerical enemies had finally merged into 'a single reactionary mass'.¹²⁶

Thus the predominant approach of the Parti Ouvrier to religion: a strident socialist anti-clericalism shading into militant atheism – permeated by residues of the Left's traditional anti-religious rhetoric, animated by hatred of the supposed symbiosis between clergy and capital. Indeed, Guesdists occasionally ignored the sins of capital altogether in their embittered obsession with clerical tyranny and religious obscurantism, depicting a Manichean world with 'only two forces in contention: Catholicism and socialism'.¹²⁷ In their most fevered

¹²¹ J. G., 'Après la bataille', *Le socialiste*, 15 May 1892. For the capitalist-defence foundation of the *ralliement*, see H. Lebovics, *The alliance of iron and wheat in the Third French Republic, 1860–1914: origins of the new conservatism* (Baton Rouge, 1988), ch. 5, and D. Schapiro, 'The *ralliement* in the politics of the 1890s', in D. Schapiro, ed., *The right in France, 1890–1919* (London, 1962), p. 13.

¹²² Jules Guesde, *Christianisme et socialisme* (Paris, n.d.), p. 27.

¹²³ J. G., 'La fin d'une classe', *Le socialiste*, 11 Mar. 1894.

¹²⁴ Speech of Alexandre Zévaès to the Chamber, 14 Nov. 1899, *Journal officiel 1899. Chambre des députés: débats parlementaires*. ¹²⁵ 'Au hasard de la semaine', *Le socialiste*, 28 Feb. 1892.

¹²⁶ 'Le Parti Ouvrier en France', *Le socialiste*, 4 Aug. 1895. For the Guesdist addition to this Lassallean concept, see Stuart, *Marxism at work*, pp. 305–7.

¹²⁷ Anon., 'De l'argent!', *Le socialiste*, 12 Feb. 1893.

rhetoric, Guesdists portrayed this conflict as a war to the death. Either socialism would be tortured into submission by a renascent Inquisition, even martyred in a counter-revolutionary *auto de fé*, or religion would be discredited by a socialist Enlightenment, even extirpated in a revolutionary reign of terror. ‘The religious question’, in this bloodthirsty vision, ‘would be resolved by violence alone.’¹²⁸ In any case, Guesdists anticipated a new world in which churches ‘would be transformed into restaurants, into dance halls, [and where] chapels would become meeting places where one goes to drink and flirt with one’s lover’.¹²⁹ The long-awaited revolution against capital would also be a revolution against the church; the dreamed-of socialist society would be freed not only from exploitation, but from religion.

IV

How then to sum up the *fin de siècle* Marxists’ engagement with the ‘religious question’? One constant goal determined Guesdist polemic: unification of the working class in the struggle for socialism. Beyond this strategic imperative, however, Guesdists displayed extreme tactical flexibility, even complete confusion. In one mode, the Parti Ouvrier – determined to focus the workers’ ideological vision solely upon proletarian class interest – advocated agnostic indifference to religion. According to the Guesdists, the bourgeoisie itself, to its great advantage, answered the ‘religious question’ with precisely this solution: manipulating religion to divide the working class, while ignoring religious divisions when conducting its own affairs. Envy of the ruling class its supposed insensibility to confessional difference, the POF aspired to create a similar solidarity among proletarians, to mobilize every worker, ‘whether he worships the serpent, Mohammed, Buddha, Christ, or the sun’.¹³⁰ This programme of agnostic solidarity, however, failed dismally, as religion and anti-clericalism consolidated and even expanded their domains within the *fin de siècle* political mentality – uniting Catholic workers with clerical bourgeois, allying the anti-clerical proletariat with the secular bourgeoisie, and dividing devout workers from their free-thinking comrades. Confronted by these realities, Guesdists understandably abandoned their strategy of indifference, but only to slide into a morass of tactical incoherence and contradiction. At one extreme, the Parti Ouvrier, accepting the continuing vitality of religious devotion, propagated a rudimentary Christian socialism. The socialist revolution alone, Guesdists contended, would realize Christ’s promise of universal brotherhood and love. At the other extreme, Guesdists hurled anathemas at the religious ‘superstitions’ that inhibited workers’ adherence to the socialist revelation. These contradictions undoubtedly confused and alienated the POF’s actual and potential constituencies. Workers who subscribed to the Left’s traditional anti-

¹²⁸ G. Deville, ‘La question religieuse’, *L’égalité*, 11 Dec. 1881.

¹²⁹ P. Lafargue, ‘Le lendemain de la révolution’, *Le socialiste*, 21 Jan. 1888.

¹³⁰ P. Lafargue, ‘Le socialisme chrétien’, *Le socialiste*, 1 Apr. 1891.

clericalism rejected the party's official indifference to the religious question, and hated its sporadic attempts to conciliate the faithful, while workers who retained their Catholic faith likewise repudiated Guesdist agnosticism, and detested the movement's frequent lapses into socialist anti-clericalism.¹³¹ None of the POF's tactical improvisations succeeded: workers' preoccupation with the religious question, if anything, increased in intensity during the party's years of militancy; proletarian religious convictions, even when recognized by the POF as deeply ingrained and authentic, could not be annexed to the Guesdists' socialist cause; while clerical and anti-clerical political movements continued to bar the road to socialist hegemony within the French political culture. Foreshadowing the disillusionments of today's 'post-Marxists' throughout our postmodern world, the French Marxists of the *belle époque* signally failed to answer the 'religious question'.

¹³¹ Lafargue's notorious inaugural speech to the Chamber of Deputies is a good instance of this dynamic. Having infuriated the anti-clerical Left by his praise of the Christian-Social leader de Mun, Lafargue attempted to compensate by introducing some particularly ferocious anti-religious legislation. He ended by antagonizing everyone – anti-clericals and Christians.