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Contested Christianities: Communism and Religion in July Monarchy France

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In a newspaper article from June 13, 1843, Heinrich Heine provides us with a vivid description of the radical reformist landscape in France. While the Saint-Simonian movement, of whom Heine had been a supporter, lay shattered, the Fourierists were still “fresh and active”—but the greatest current that would eventually unite all reformers were the communists.¹ Friedrich Engels, writing in October of the same year, noted that the communist movement in France was represented especially by the Icarians led by Étienne Cabet, but also by Pierre Leroux, George Sand, the Abbé Lamennais, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.² The latter claimed, in 1844, that communism was the current name for socialism, which still lacked consciousness and unity, but could count over 100,000 followers, maybe 200,000.³ Communism had certainly become a mass movement by the mid-1840s, and it was Cabet (1788-1856) who established his Icarian

¹ Heinrich Heine, *Lutezia*, Sämtliche Werke 10 (Leipzig: Hesse & Becker Verlag, 1898), 261.

² Friedrich Engels, "Progress of Social Reform on the Continent," in *MEGA I*, 3 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1985).

³ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Correspondance*, 14 vols., vol. 2 (Paris: Lacroix et Compagnie, 1875), 161. Engels claimed the followers of Cabet alone to amount to 500,000.

Communism as the most influential school.⁴ In 1844/45, the police regarded him as the leader of the communists.⁵ It would be misleading to assume, however, that communism was a monolithic movement with a fixed doctrine and identity. In contemporary accounts, the distinctions between “communism” and “socialism” are often unclear, and they remain so up to this day.⁶ Generally, it can be said that most communists differed from many socialists in that they proclaimed a radical abolishment of private property, and sometimes of marriage and traditional family structures. These aims can as well be found, to varying degrees, across the socialist spectrum, e.g. among Saint-Simonians and Fourierists; and although some reformers did indeed wish to abolish the marriage-based family as the smallest social unit, the alleged communist threat to the institution of marriage is mostly a product of anti-reformist polemics. In short, the different reformist identities were anything but stable, and it was often unclear what exactly it meant to be a “socialist” or “communist.” Not surprisingly, then, the 1840s saw fierce struggles among reformers who claimed to be the representatives of “true” communism or socialism.

In what follows, it will be argued that religion emerged as a central identity marker in these debates. The development of Cabet’s understanding of religion will serve to illustrate this argument and will first be discussed against the historical background of the relationship

⁴ Christopher H. Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France. Cabet and the Icarians, 1839-1851* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 20-108; cf. Jules Prudhommeaux, *Icarie et son fondateur, Etienne Cabet* (Paris: E. Cornély, 1907).

⁵ Johnson, *Utopian*, 145.

⁶ Jacques Grandjonc, *Communisme/Kommunismus/Communism. Origine et développement international de la terminologie communautaire prémarxiste des utopistes aux babouvistes 1785-1842*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Schriften aus dem Karl-Marx-Haus 39* (Trier: Karl-Marx-Haus, 1989).

between religion and communism in France. On this basis, Cabet's polemics against other communist and socialist understandings of religion will be discussed, which will finally help to highlight similarities and differences among radical reformers. The year 1841 forms the stage for a decisive conflict in this respect, whose protagonists were Cabet, the aforementioned Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854), and the more obscure young radical Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810-1875). Cabet's polemics are especially relevant since the two authors can be regarded as the most radical religious communists at that time. In 1841, both were sentenced to prison in spectacular trials for their recent publications, Constant for his *Bible de la liberté* (1841), and Lamennais for his *Le pays et le gouvernement* (1840). In 1841 and 1843, Cabet launched extensive attacks on them. The great importance that he attached to the matter is remarkable: While he was notorious for his polemics against rivals in numerous articles,⁷ especially in his journal *Le Populaire*, he dedicated two independently printed pamphlets to denounce Lamennais and Constant—a practice that he only took up against one more individual opponent, Théophile Thoré. Evidently, Cabet felt it necessary to distance himself from Lamennais and Constant, who were both clerics and thus addressed with the title *abbé*. This circumstance allows for instructing insights into the development of Cabet's communism, since the years around 1841 mark the shift to his passionate proclamation of "true Christianity." In earlier years, he had been more reserved about the topic of religion. While the first edition of his famous *Voyage en Icarie*, published in 1840, mentions religion or Christianity rather in passing, the edition of 1842 contains an appendix emblazoned with Cabet's new rallying cry, "*La communauté c'est le christianisme.*" By 1846,

⁷ Johnson, *Utopian*, 109-43.

the Christian identity of Icarian Communism was firmly established, as expressed by Cabet's highly popular *Le vrai christianisme suivant Jésus-Christ*.

This development, which has puzzled many later observers, is anything but surprising when seen in its historical context. Cabet's polemics of 1841-1843 show how different reformist claims to "true Christianity" clashed, and how Cabet responded to this challenge by bringing his Christian identity more and more to the fore. This illustrates not only the contested religious identities among social reformers, but also their opposition to the Christianity of the established Churches, which proved to be an especially sharp weapon against the two *abbés*. It can be demonstrated that Cabet did not go through a sudden "Pauline conversion,"⁸ but that his growing emphasis on Christianity was the outcome of a much more nuanced process that reflected the inherent intertwining of religion and radical reform in France.

I. RELIGION AND THE FRENCH COMMUNISTS

The central role of religion for the emergence of communism in France has long been overshadowed by the historical narratives of post-1848 reformers, most notably Marxism.⁹ Nowadays, we can rely on a wealth of scholarship that has recognized the religious elements at the basis of communist and socialist ideas—especially with regard to what has been called

⁸ Pamela M. Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx. Workers, Women, and the Social Question in France* (Teddington: Acumen, 2000), 51.

⁹ Gareth Stedman Jones, "Utopian Socialism Reconsidered," in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, History Workshop Series (London u.a.: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

“Romantic socialism.”¹⁰ However, the interpretation of these elements diverge significantly. While Henri Desroche emphasized the inherent millenarianism in early socialist theories and viewed them against the background of a longer tradition of religious ideas, Pamela Pilbeam emphasized the “pragmatic” character of religion in socialist theories, and Cabet’s Icarianism in particular.¹¹ In a similar, although less nuanced fashion, Cabet’s biographer Christopher H. Johnson regarded Cabet’s religious ideas as a pragmatic means to stimulate the “enthusiasm” of the masses.¹² Indeed, several classic studies have demonstrated how Christianity functioned as a vital way of communication between social reformers and their working class followers, especially artisans.¹³ However, if a merely “pragmatic” interpretation of socialist and communist religiosity might be able to explain the populist strategies of certain reformers, it only sheds light

¹⁰ Among the classical studies of this genre, see Herbert J. Hunt, *Le socialisme et le romantisme en France. Etude de la presse socialiste de 1830 à 1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935); David Owen Evans, *Le socialisme romantique. Pierre Leroux et ses contemporains*, Bibliothèque d'histoire économique et sociale (Paris: M. Rivière, 1948); Paul Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes. Doctrines de l'âge romantique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) and Frank Paul Bowman, *Le Christ des barricades* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987). Cf. the summaries in Jonathan Beecher, *Victor Considerant and the Rise and Fall of French Romantic Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1-8 and Julian Strube, *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts. Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi*, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 57-62, 98-102.

¹¹ Cf. Henri Desroche, "Messianismes et utopies. Notes sur les origines du socialisme occidental," *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* 8 (1959) and Pilbeam, *French Socialists*, 39, 52.

¹² Johnson, *Utopian*, 259.

¹³ E.g. François-André Isambert, *Christianisme et classe ouvrière. Jalons pour une étude de sociologie historique* (Tournai-Paris: Casterman, 1961), Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830-1852* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

on a part of the overall picture. There is abundant evidence that religion was not simply a tool that socialists and communists chose to employ at a certain moment. Not only were thousands mobilized by their religious ideas, but their socio-political theories, as well as their own reformist identities, were profoundly marked by religious concepts.¹⁴ In short, religion was integral to the formation of reformist identities and political programs.

Contemporary observers were very well aware of this. In his article from 1843, Engels scoffed at the French communists, who “are themselves Christians. One of their favourite axioms is, that Christianity is Communism, ‘*le Christianisme c'est le Communisme.*’”¹⁵ Heinrich Heine, in a much more favorable manner, likened them to the Church Fathers. And indeed, literally all French commentators perceived the communists as a decidedly *religious* movement. Until the 1850s, the histories of socialism and communism were the product of a veritable “heretical historiography,” in which radical reformers formed part of a long history of religious reform that often began with the ancient Gnostics and included later Christian reform movements and so-called “mystics.”¹⁶ In a pioneering effort, the liberal Louis Reybaud (1799-1879) published a series of articles in the *Revue des deux mondes* towards the end of the 1830s, which was edited in 1840 as *Etudes sur les réformateurs ou socialistes modernes*. In this standard work, Reybaud

¹⁴ For a broad discussion of the scholarship on religion, socialism, and communism, as well as the respective historical sources, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 41-147. For a more concise case study on the basis of the aforementioned Constant, see "Socialist Religion and the Emergence of Occultism: A Genealogical Approach to Socialism and Secularization in 19th-Century France," *Religion* 46, no. 3 (2016).

¹⁵ Engels, "Progress," 503.

¹⁶ Julian Strube, "Revolution, Illuminismus und Theosophie. Eine Genealogie der 'häretischen' Historiographie des frühen französischen Sozialismus und Kommunismus," *Historische Zeitschrift* 304, no. 1 (2017); cf. "Socialism and Esotericism in July Monarchy France," *History of Religions* (forthcoming).

provided a fascinating heretical historiography of the socialists, especially the Saint-Simonians and Fourierist. This was followed by an article about “The Communist Ideas and Sects” in 1842. Reybaud was much less sympathetic to the rapidly growing communist “sects,” which he denounced as the successors of a long tradition of “mystics” that stretched back to the Moravians, the Anabaptists, the adherents of Wycliffe, Luther and Müntzer, and finally to the Therapeutae, Essenes, Philo, and Josephus.¹⁷ Providing an interpretation quite akin to Desroche’s, Reybaud maintained that communists were the direct heirs of medieval chiliasts and millenarianists. Similar accounts can be found in other critical histories of communism and socialism,¹⁸ but also in highly diverse historiographies from within the reformist camp until the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁹

¹⁷ Louis Reybaud, "Des idées et des sectes communistes," in *Revue des deux mondes* (Paris: Au Bureau de la Revue des deux mondes, 1842), 12-18.

¹⁸ Alfred Sudre, *Histoire du Communisme ou Réfutation historique des utopies socialistes* (Paris: Lecou, 1848); Adolphe Franck, "Etudes sur le Socialisme. Le Communisme jugé par l'histoire," in *La Liberté de Penser. Revue philosophique et littéraire* (Paris: Joubert, 1848); Jean Joseph Thonissen, *Le socialisme depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à la constitution française du 14 janvier 1852*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Louvain/Paris: Vanlinthout et Compagnie/Sagnier et Bray, 1852).

¹⁹ E.g. Giuseppe Ferrari, *Essai sur le principe et les limites de la philosophie de l'histoire* (Paris: Joubert, 1843), 465; François Villegardelle, *Histoire des idées sociales avant la Révolution française, ou les socialistes modernes devancés et dépassés par les anciens penseurs et philosophes* (Paris: Guarin, 1846), 12, 39-49; Alphonse Esquiros, *Histoire des Montagnards* (Paris: Victor Lecou, 1847), 4-16; Karl Kautsky, *Die Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1895); Georg Adler, *Geschichte des Sozialismus und Kommunismus von Plato bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Hirschfeld, 1899).

A look at the 1830s reveals a certain ambivalence of religion in the context of communism, which helps to illustrate Cabet's increasing focus on Christianity. The term *communisme* emerged to denote a political theory that was based on the concept of the *communauté*—and it is significant that this concept used to be related to the *communauté des biens*, the Apostolic Community of Goods. This becomes evident in the earliest self-referential “communist” writings, the most famous of which is the *Conspiration de Babeuf*, first published in 1828 by Philippe Buonarroti (1761-1837). It described the system of the *communauté des biens et des travaux* that had been proclaimed by Gracchus Babeuf (1760-1797) and his followers.²⁰ This system stipulated the abolishment of private property.²¹ While other revolutionaries had often appealed to Christianity, Buonarroti made the link between the *communauté* and primitive Christianity explicit only once. In a footnote, he explained that “the pure doctrine of Jesus” was identical with “the natural religion” and could be the foundation of a wise reform, as well as the source of “truly social customs,” since it was irreconcilable with materialism—“if Christianity had not been disfigured by those who deceive to oppress.”²² Buonarroti envisioned that “all republican institutions and customs” should be based on religious ideas. However, this should not be a certain *culte*, but equality itself should be deified and revered by the people.²³ This

²⁰ Philippe Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'égalité dite de Babeuf*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Baudouin Frères, 1830), 9, 87, 208. This system is described as the outcome of a tradition that includes Minos, Platon, Lykurg, and the Church Fathers, later Thomas Morus, Montesquieu, and Mably.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, 254-55.

understanding of religion was clearly prone to the revolutionary cults, of which the Cult of the Supreme Being is explicitly mentioned.

Early communists often invoked religion and Christianity, but they usually rejected the Christianity of the Churches as corrupted and abused as a tool to deceive the common people. Many of them either envisioned a return to the pure Christianity of Jesus and his Apostles, or the creation of a new, “rational” religion that should reflect the progressive perfectibility of humanity. The majority of reformers navigated between these two poles, such as the Saint-Simonians, who proclaimed that their *positive* Christianity would not simply mark a return to the past, but the realization of a new “synthesis.”²⁴ Several examples from the communist cohort illustrate how unstable the categories of religion or Christianity were. For instance, Jacques Pillot (1808-1877), a former priest of the socialist-inclined Eglise catholique Française founded by the Abbé Châtel,²⁵ published *Le code religieux et le culte chrétien* in 1837 but later shifted to atheist tendencies. Théodore Dézamy (1808-1850), a former secretary of Cabet who soon turned into one of his most eager critics, maintained in his *Code de la communauté* (1842) that the “communauté universelle” was the only rational religion, the only normal state of humanity.²⁶ He displayed a staunch anti-clericalism and propagated the *communauté* as the new “positive” and “sacred” religion that dated back to the ancient Gnostics.²⁷ These different understandings of religion aroused countless polemics.

²⁴ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 77-81.

²⁵ Iorwerth J. Prothero, *Religion and Radicalism in July Monarchy France. The French Catholic Church of the Abbé Chatel*, Studies in French Civilization (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 2005).

²⁶ Théodore Dézamy, *Code de la communauté* (Paris: Prévost/Rouannet, 1842), 261.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71, 262-63.

Viewed against this background, it becomes clear that Cabet's Christian rhetoric did not come out of nowhere. Communism emerged, even on an etymological level, in an atmosphere that was highly charged with religious language and ideas. Its fierce opposition to the Churches, and its claims for new, "rational" or "positive" forms of religion, set it apart from established forms of religion. This led many scholars to conclude that the communists were propagating "pseudo" or "substitute" religions, or mere forms of "mysticism" or "enthusiasm."²⁸ In contrast to these views, it appears to be more instructive and historically accurate to regard communist understandings of religion in the context of the emergence of new religious identities in the nineteenth century, which reflected broader trends of religious pluralization and "modernization." In this light, Cabet's struggles to claim the status of "true Christianity" for his Icarian Communism become much more than just a pragmatism to incite the enthusiasm of the working classes: They touch the very core of communist identity formations and should be situated in the broader context of the meaning of religion in the nineteenth century.

II. ETIENNE CABET AND HIS ICARIAN COMMUNISM

Étienne Cabet established himself as a vocal reformer in the 1830s, when he expressed the frustration of many radicals who believed that the July Revolution had been "smuggled away" by the new liberal government.²⁹ This decade saw the emergence of socialist and communist "schools," and the first uses of the terms *socialiste* or *communiste* to denote their members.

²⁸ For example, Johnson's study of Cabet or Frank Edward Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris*, 2 ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965). More nuanced perspectives can be found in Donald G. Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870* (London/New York/Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1963) or Bénichou, *Temps*.

²⁹ Etienne Cabet, *Révolution de 1830 et situation présente*, 3 ed. (Paris: Deville/Cavellin, 1833), 3, 137-44.

Cabet became one of the loudest voices in the struggle for the right political course. He mostly wrote in his newspaper, *Le Populaire*, which was founded in 1833 and prohibited in 1834. Cabet was forced into exile and spent the following five years in England, where he prepared his *Voyage et aventures de lord William Carisdall en Icarie* (1840). Within a few years, Cabet established himself as a leader. But he also presented himself as an apostle, who proclaimed the coming of the true Christianity as the foundation of a new social order. Proudhon mocked him as one of those socialist “preachers” who tried to disseminate their “gospel” in the turbulent atmosphere of radicalism.³⁰

It has been indicated above that Cabet’s new apostolic role did not come as sudden as some scholars suggested.³¹ In fact, his re-entry onto the stage of radical reform in France was already determined by a religious rhetoric. When he first attracted greater attention with his 1840 brochure, *Comment je suis communiste*, he described the principle of the *communauté* as a “religion sociale et politique” which he was determined to defend “like an Apostle.”³² In another brochure of 1841, he maintained that, if today a congress took place under the presidency of Jesus Christ, it would be called *communauté*.³³ The first pseudonymous edition of his *Voyage* repeatedly praised the values preached by Jesus Christ,³⁴ although religion was conceived

³⁰ Proudhon, *Correspondance*, 2, 131.

³¹ It should be mentioned that Cabet had been a member of the Charbonnerie in the 1820s and was thus familiar with freemasonic conceptions of rational and social religion, as well as its highly charged religious symbolism. A closer examination of these links would most likely unearth further evidence of his early ideas about religion.

³² Etienne Cabet, *Comment je suis communiste* (ohne Ort: ohne Verlag, 1840), 16.

³³ *Ma ligne droite ou Le vrai chemin du salut pour le peuple* (Paris: Prévot/Rouannet/Pilout, 1841), 41.

³⁴ *Voyage et aventures de Lord Villiam Carisdall en Icarie*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Paris: Hippolyte Souverain, 1840), 163-64, 80-81.

primarily as a means to provide a philosophical and moral system for the people. The *culte* is free and without practice or ceremony, while priests are elected and supposed to lead an exemplary life, devoted to the representation of the general will.³⁵ When the book was re-published under Cabet's real name in 1842, he included an appendix with the famous slogan that puzzled Engels. Therein it was declared that "Jesus Christ himself has not only proclaimed, preached, commanded the *Communauté* as a consequence of *fraternité*, but he has practiced it with his Apostles." We also learn that heretical and reformist sects from antiquity until the present day had practiced the "Communauté according to Jesus Christ. The current Communists are thus the *Disciples*, the *Imitators*, and the *Continuators* of Jesus Christ."³⁶

In the course of the 1840s, Cabet moved his understanding of "true" Christianity further to the fore: In *Le vrai christianisme suivant Jésus-Christ* from 1846, he enthusiastically declared the identity of the religious and political orders. He emphasized his claim that Jesus Christ had preached communism,³⁷ while at the same time highlighting the errors and abuses of the Church. His goal was nothing less than the creation of the Kingdom of God—not in the afterlife, but in the here and now, on Earth.³⁸ The *Vrai Christianisme* was a huge success and sold 2,000 copies

³⁵ Cf. the analysis in Henri Desroche, "Préface," in *Voyage en Icarie*, ed. Etienne Cabet (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1970), XLVII-LVII and Yolène Dilas-Rocherieux, "Utopie et communisme: Etienne Cabet: de la théorie à la pratique," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 40, no. 2 (1993): 264-66. It has also been noted that Cabet's model of society is profoundly marked by Christian morality, with a strong focus on asceticism. See Leslie J. Roberts, "Etienne Cabet and his Voyage en Icarie, 1840," *Utopian Studies* 2 (1991): 86-87.

³⁶ Etienne Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie* (Paris: Au Bureau du Populaire, 1845), 567.

³⁷ *Le vrai christianisme suivant Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Au Bureau du Populaire, 1846), 97, 620.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 390-94. This reflected common socialist and communist ideas, which were similarly expressed by other influential authors, such as the Fourierist Victor Considerant; see Strube, "Socialist Religion," 17.

in less than three weeks.³⁹ This was observed by later scholars with some bewilderment.

Christopher H. Johnson noted that Cabet had apparently transformed his doctrine into a “serious religious enthusiasm,” but that his religious rhetoric was “rational,” although he sometimes lapsed into a “semi-mysticism.” Johnson explained these contradictions by claiming that Cabet wanted to please “both the humanists and the fundamentalists among his followers,” which were characterized by a “latent millenarian enthusiasm.”⁴⁰

The picture looks differently if these aspects are not perceived as contradictions—and thus seen through the lens of later understandings of “proper” communism or “actual” religion—but rather as sincere attempts to develop a new social order on the basis of a synthesis of religion, science, and philosophy. Religion was neither an appendix nor a mere tool in this endeavor. The great amount of energy that Cabet devoted to develop and defend his “true Christianity” demonstrates the earnestness with which radical reformers contested each others’ understandings of Christianity. This becomes evident in the light of his polemics against the two radical *abbés*.

III. THE ABBÉS CONSTANT AND LAMENNAIS

It is quite remarkable that a prominent reformer like Cabet devoted a lengthy brochure to denounce the writing of a newcomer like Alphonse-Louis Constant. Although Constant’s historical role as a radical soon fell into oblivion—he is nowadays remembered as the founder of occultism in the 1850s, when he took up his pseudonym Eliphas Lévi⁴¹—he was widely known in the 1840s. The young cleric had caused a sensation with his *Bible de la liberté*, which later

³⁹ Pilbeam, *French Socialists*, 51.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Utopian*, 233-34.

⁴¹ Strube, "Socialist Religion,"

turned out to be among the writings most frequently found during police raids.⁴² In 1836, Constant had been forced to abolish his education as a priest because of a love affair, shortly before his consecration. He consequently immersed himself in a milieu of artists and socialist radicals.⁴³ The result of this period of radicalization, which involved a series of personal tragedies and setbacks, was the *Bible de la liberté*. The book was marked by a striking religious language and ideas that reflected the milieu of those *petits romantiques* who had been enthusiastic about radical socialism in the 1830s—often inspired, as in Constant’s case, by writings such as those by George Sand and Lamennais.⁴⁴

Constant declared that Jesus Christ had been the first revolutionary who attempted to overthrow the social order.⁴⁵ His doctrine was the outcome of ancient religious truths, heralding the revolution that promised to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth. However, this true Christianity was suppressed by the official Church, which had perverted the teachings of Christ into an instrument to rule the ignorant masses. Those who were able to understand the true doctrine had been struggling against this perversion throughout the ages—forming a chain of initiates into a revolutionary tradition that had now erupted in the form of communism as represented by Lamennais.⁴⁶ Some passages of the *Bible* contained violent calls for a bloody overthrow of the social order, which caused both amazement and abhorrence within the reformist

⁴² *Sozialismus*, 229.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 212-27.

⁴⁴ For a comprehensive analysis and contextualization, see *ibid.*, 227-68. Also see Frank Paul Bowman, *Eliphaz Lévi, visionnaire romantique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969) and *Christ*.

⁴⁵ Alphonse-Louis Constant, *La Bible de la Liberté* (Paris: Le Gallois, 1841), 45-46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

camps, and eventually led to the imprisonment of its author.⁴⁷ In two further writings from 1841, *L'assomption de la femme* and *Doctrines religieuses et sociales*, Constant developed his ideas in a more moderate tone. These include his fervent “feminism,” which was heavily influenced by the contemporary worship of Mary.⁴⁸ Especially remarkable are his more extravagant ideas about Lucifer as the rebellious angel of liberty, and the final redemption of humanity by Lucifer’s redemption through Mary, which would result into an androgynous unity of humanity with God.⁴⁹ Constant would continue his reformist career in a highly turbulent way, eventually emerging as one of the most radical voices in the atmosphere of 1848.⁵⁰ A contemporary Montagnard, Adolphe Chenu, named him as one of the most determined critics of private property, marriage, and family. According to Chenu, these radicals behaved like “apostles” and did not want to realize their goals by patient and careful politics, but by immediate action.⁵¹

It does not come as a surprise that Constant’s writings stirred up the public and caused a major controversy among reformers. For all the differences in content, every contemporary reader

⁴⁷ E.g. *Ibid.*, 59-60: “C’est pourquoi, après la protestation par l’amour, doit venir la protestation par la colère. Ils n’ont pas écouté les anges de paix, qu’ils tremblent devant les anges exterminateurs ! [...] Car je vous le dis en vérité, quiconque vous tue n’est pas un assassin, c’est un exécuteur de la haute justice.”

⁴⁸ In contrast to Pilbeam’s assessment in *French Socialists*, 50-51, there was a quite popular socialist current that combined the worship of Mary with “feminist” ambitions. About the ambivalence of this “feminism,” see Naomi Judith Andrews, “La Mère Humanité. Femininity in the Romantic Socialism of Pierre Leroux and the Abbé A.-L. Constant,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002).

⁴⁹ Alphonse-Louis Constant, *L’Assomption de la femme ou Le livre de l’amour* (Paris: La Gallois, 1841), 78-79.

⁵⁰ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 287-388.

⁵¹ Adolphe Chenu, *Les Conspirateurs. Deuxième partie tirée des mémoires d’un Montagnard* (Paris: D. Giraud et J. Dagneau, 1850), 105, 11.

immediately recognized the style of Constant's writings: It was that of Félicité de Lamennais, another cleric who had turned away from the Church to propagate a Christian socialism. In the 1820s, Lamennais had risen to great fame as the leader of the so-called Neo-Catholic movement, whose young representatives attempted to establish a progressive, liberal Catholicism that should actively engage with contemporary philosophical, scientific, and political challenges.⁵² The Neo-Catholics shared many concerns—and common heroes, such as Joseph de Maistre—with the emerging socialist schools, and indeed regarded them as one of their main contenders in the struggle for the establishment of a new social order.⁵³ When the movement was crushed between the fronts of Gallicanism and the staunchly anti-progressive Holy See in the early 1830s, Lamennais caused an international scandal by rejecting Roman Catholicism and propagating a radical Christian socialism. In 1834, he published his extremely influential *Paroles d'un croyant*, one of the most successful publications of his time that did not only prompt a papal encyclical but also inspired a whole generation of radicals.⁵⁴ This outstanding impact is especially striking

⁵² Strube, *Sozialismus*, 177-211. The most complete studies of Lamennais are still Jean-René Derré, *Lamennais, ses amis et le mouvement des idées à l'époque romantique 1824-1834*, Bibliothèque française et romane. Études littéraires (Paris: Klincksieck, 1962) and Louis Le Guillou, *L'Évolution de la pensée religieuse de Félicité Lamennais* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1966).

⁵³ Julian Strube, "Ein neues Christentum. Frühsozialismus, Neo-Katholizismus und die Einheit von Religion und Wissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 66, no. 2 (2014).

⁵⁴ The *Paroles* saw over 100 editions and sold at least 400,000 copies; they were translated into most European languages and received enthusiastically by the public. Gregory XVI reacted in 1834 with *Singulari nos*, after he had condemned the Neo-Catholic movement indirectly in 1832, in the encyclical *Mirari vos*. See Derré, *Lamennais*, 688-90, Le Guillou, *Evolution*, 233-45, Berenson, *Populist Religion*, 49f., Bowman, *Christ*, 189-95 and Bernard M. G.

because of its highly apocalyptic revolutionary style.⁵⁵ Lamennais published a stream of celebrated writings, including *Affaires de Rome* (1836), *Le livre du peuple* (1838), *Le pays et le gouvernement* (1840, earning him the prison sentence), the multivolume *Esquisse d'une philosophie* (1840-1846), and *Du passé et de l'avenir du peuple* (1841). Although obvious, his outstanding influence on contemporary socialism and communism was often neglected—Johnson's study of Cabet, for instance, does not even mention him.

Constant was regarded as the most notorious disciple of Lamennais. There is no evidence for a personal exchange between the two abbés, although both were incarcerated in the same prison; but all observers agreed that Constant combined the mystical-apocalyptic bombast of Lamennais's writings with the rage of revolutionary violence. In court, the attorney Jean-Isidore Partarrieu-Lafosse accused Constant of being a member of the same "sect" that wanted to introduce a "new religion" whose first dogma was "the overthrowing of the whole social order."⁵⁶ The liberal Catholic Louis de Carné, a former disciple of Lamennais, expressed his shock in the *Revue des deux mondes* about the recent "communist" publications of Lamennais and Constant. He regarded the latter as a "disciple" of the former Neo-Catholic leader. In his eyes, the *Bible* was "the logical consequence of certain ideas and certain passions" that posed a serious threat to society: "one abyss leads into the other."⁵⁷ The liberal *National* echoed this

Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism. Studies in Early Nineteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 189-96.

⁵⁵ E.g. Félicité Lamennais, *Paroles d'un croyant* (Brüssel: C. J. de Mat, 1834), 92, where the blood sacrifice of Christ leads to the transfiguration of the world. The passage describes a mystical ascent to the Heavens.

⁵⁶ Jules Thomas, *Procès de "la Bible de la liberté"* (Paris: Pilout, 1841), 19.

⁵⁷ Louis de Carné, "Publications démocrates et communistes," *Revue des deux mondes* 27 (1841): 730.

criticism and emphasized that Constant was now pronouncing everything that the more restraint Lamennais had only dared to think.⁵⁸ Even on the other side of the Rhine, numerous observers were captivated by the ferocity of the young radical. Sebastian Seiler, a later member of Marx' and Engels' Kommunistisches Korrespondenz-Komitee, reports that the *Bible* had been too extreme even for "ultra-radicals and neo-communists": "Lamennais, it was said in all newspapers, had been a lamb in comparison to this young furious abbé."⁵⁹ Karl Grün regarded Constant as "even more pathological" than Lamennais. He was "the fruit of the blossom of Lamennais," who had burnt brighter, but also shorter: "he appeared like a bloody tail of a comet."⁶⁰ The more positively inclined Emil Weller counted Constant among the "priests of the future" and wrote: "The 'Bible' surpassed everything in wild, devouring ardor, it is the Book of Revolution and already merits to be elevated as a poetic work."⁶¹ The liberal historian of socialism, Lorenz von Stein, wrote in 1850 that Constant had followed the "religious communism" of Lamennais: "it was the tone of Lamennais, but hollow, without aim, full of hatred of the rich, the powerful, full of the deification of the proletariat, and all that in a rhythm modelled after the Bible..."⁶²

⁵⁸ See the issue of September 3, 1841.

⁵⁹ Sebastian Seiler, *Das Eigentum in Gefahr! Oder was haben Deutschland und die Schweiz vom Kommunismus und Vernunftglauben zu fürchten?* (Bern: Jenni, 1843), 29-43.

⁶⁰ Karl Grün, "Theologie und Sozialismus," in *Rheinische Jahrbücher zur gesellschaftlichen Reform*, ed. Hermann Püttmann (Konstanz: Verlagsbuchhandlung zu Belle-Vue, 1846), 31-34.

⁶¹ Max, *Die französische Volksliteratur seit 1833* (Leipzig: E. O. Weller, 1847), 37.

⁶² Lorenz von Stein, *Geschichte der socialen Bewegung in Frankreich von 1789 bis auf unsere Tage*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1850), 422.

It becomes obvious why Cabet would have chosen these two authors for his frontal attack. They were widely perceived as the most radical religious communists, which made them prominent contenders for the proclamation of a “true Christianity” as “true communism.” However, things were a bit more complicated. Despite all the admiration that Constant displayed for Lamennais, there were crucial differences between them. Most obviously, Constant openly identified as a “communist,” while Lamennais rejected this label. In 1841, Constant demanded the abolishment of private property and traditional family structures, and he attacked Lamennais for rejecting these aims in *Du passé*: “with pain we have seen how the author of the *Paroles d’un croyant* has been forced to deny Christ and defend the spirit of property.”⁶³ Unlike the disillusioned Lamennais, Constant vehemently insisted that the true religion could only be found in *Catholicism*, which had to be liberated from the corruption of the “bad priests.” He accused other reformers of denying the eternal truths of Catholicism and instead causing an “anarchy of opinions.” Instead of relying on the opinion of the masses and thus on human errors, a reform should be based on the “truth” and on the “authority” of the revelation of God—Étienne Cabet was among those who Constant attacked for failing to realize this.⁶⁴ Constant bluntly rejected the profane reformist schools and positioned himself as the revelator of divine truths, whose realization had nothing to do with party politics, but with the revival of the uncorrupted doctrine of Christ: “The primitive Church was no party.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Alphonse-Louis Constant, *Doctrines religieuses et sociales* (Paris: Le Gallois, 1841), 85.

⁶⁴ *Assomption*, 102-03; *Doctrines*, 43-44.

⁶⁵ *Doctrines*, 42. It should be noted that the term *parti* should not be confused with the more recent concept of a political party.

In turn, Lamennais had denounced the “Christianity of Rome” and instead propagated a “religion of humanity.”⁶⁶ He too proclaimed a *droit évangélique* as the foundation of a perfect society, and his glorification of the *peuple-Martyr*, or even *peuple-Christ*, resonated strongly with many radicals, including Constant.⁶⁷ Many ideas overlapped with those of contemporary socialists and communists, drew from the same sources, or functioned as an inspiration for them. But Lamennais only accepted the label “socialist” with great caution, and he decidedly rejected to be counted among the communists. Although relatively few scholars were willing to include him in the history of socialism without reservations,⁶⁸ there is no question about his major relevance for radical reform at that time, and contemporaries took this fact for granted. It can be argued that an exclusion of Lamennais from the contexts of socialism and communism results from the anachronistic projections of later understandings of these terms, in which religion had no place, at least not as an integral part. However, it has become evident by now that such a perspective is highly misleading. The following quarrels will further substantiate this point.

IV. CONTESTED CHRISTIANITIES: POLEMICS IN THE REFORMIST CAMPS

While Proudhon ridiculed the “prophecies” of the abbé Constant and simply snapped at him to “shut up,”⁶⁹ Cabet felt challenged enough to engage in lengthy polemics with him. It will be

⁶⁶ Félicité Lamennais, *Affaires de Rome* (Brüssel: Société belge de librairie, 1836), 302.

⁶⁷ E.g. *Du Passé et de l'avenir du peuple* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1841), 105-19; *Paroles*, 8. See the more detailed analysis in Strube, *Sozialismus*, 196-209.

⁶⁸ E.g. Charles Édouard Boutard, *Lamennais, sa vie et ses doctrines*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Paris: Perrin, 1913), 204. Reardon, *Religion*, 202.

⁶⁹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *De la création de l'ordre dans l'humanité ou Principes d'organisation politique* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1843), 35: “Qui t’a chargé de dire mes justices et de prophétiser en mon nom l’incendie et le

remembered that Constant had fired the first shot in the battle. Cabet reacted by taking a stand in his *Populaire*. The newspaper had been re-founded as recently as on March 14, 1841, and quickly became the most widely circulated reformist periodical that exerted most of its influence among the working class. It was the first openly communist newspaper in France, until *La Fraternité* and the especially radical *Humanitaire* followed within months.⁷⁰ After the *Populaire* had reported about the trial of the *Bible de la Liberté* on May 20, Cabet wrote on July 25 that Constant had been able to evoke great enthusiasm among those “young, quick-tempered folks” that could be called “ultra-communists.” Cabet quoted some violent passages from the *Bible* and warned against its content. He was particularly shocked that such words were written by a mature, educated man: by a priest. Naturally, he also criticized Constant for his attacks on other reformers, including himself, and ridiculed the fickleness with which Constant oscillated between certain statements his three publications from 1841: “No, if the abbé Constant calls himself a communist, I am not a communist like him; I do not want threats and violence, but the voice of public opinion.”

After that, a veritable quarrel broke out within the communist camp. In August, *La Fraternité* published a defense of Constant from the pen of Richard Lahautière (1813-1882), whose “spiritualistic” communism was essential for the dissemination of the ideas of Pierre Leroux among communists. In September, the recently founded Lyon paper *Le Travail* joined into this defense, which was mainly based on a call for solidarity for an incarcerated comrade. Several

carnage ? [...] Malheureuse victime du sacerdoce, âme égarée par d’horribles lectures, je ne t’impute pas ta folie [...]. Tais-toi.”

⁷⁰ Johnson, *Utopian*, 78-83; cf. Berenson, *Populist Religion*, 48; Jean-Michel Paris, *L’Humanitaire (1841). Naissance d’une presse anarchiste?* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014).

young workers issued public letters and petitions in support of the abbé.⁷¹ The latter intervened personally with letters from the prison, which were published on September 5 in *La Fraternité*, and on October 10 in *Le Populaire*. Constant accused Cabet of attacking a prisoner. He also maintained that he had erroneous knowledge of his background, and that he had either not read his writings or misunderstood them: “You say that you are no *communist* like I am, and I believe this well, Monsieur, because although I do not share your opinions, I would grieve you neither with hard words, nor with *daring* accusations, if I knew that you were in *prison*.” This not particularly substantial defense failed to stop Cabet from publishing his pamphlet in the same month.

The *Réfutation des trois ouvrages de l'Abbé Constant* comprised 34 pages, two third of which were devoted to the publications of 1841, while the last third was a summary of the debates surrounding them, which Cabet used to deal blows to his other adherents from *La Fraternité*, *Le Travail*, and *L'Humanitaire*. Cabet's criticism was crushing. Given the turbulent past of the abbé, it was easy for him to discredit his assertion to be a virtuous religious leader and martyr.⁷² Perhaps hitting the sorest spot, he could point out that Constant had base personal motives for his rage: It was not the instruction of the people that motivated him, but his thirst for revenge against the priests who had outcast him.⁷³ But Cabet did not content himself with *ad hominem* attacks. First and foremost, Cabet decried the insubstantial, “mystical” ideas of Constant. Although he agreed with his Christian principles and confirmed the identity of communism and Christianity,

⁷¹ For details, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 279-82.

⁷² E.g. Etienne Cabet, *Réfutation des trois ouvrages de l'abbé Constant* (Paris: Prévot/Rouannet, 1841), 17.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

Cabet charged Constant with having a very limited understanding of *communauté*. His demand for a return to the doctrine of Christ and the abolishment of private property was laudable, but “*how*” should this be realized?⁷⁴ In addition, Cabet, who identified as a strict pacifist, condemned the violent character of the Bible, which provoked a massacre.⁷⁵ This violence translated into the sphere of the family: A priest, of all people, proved to be a *libertin* who encourages wives to murder their husbands, and children to commit fratricide.⁷⁶ Cabet exclaimed: “If we should write (and perhaps we will do this soon) a BIBLE OF EQUALITY, FRATERNITY, COMMUNITY, AND LIBERTY, in *popular style*, then one would see very different teachings emerge from it!” Cabet perceived Constant’s *Bible* as a direct rival of his own writings, of which he clearly had in mind the upcoming edition of *Voyage en Icarie*. This is further emphasized by the fact that he was evidently bothered by the *Bible*’s huge success: He bitterly remarked that “100,000 copies of this work have empoisoned the Workers.”⁷⁷ The struggle for “true Christianity” was also a struggle for the favor of the masses.

Other parts of the *Réfutation* allow for further instructive insights into the place of religion in the contemporary landscape of communism. Constant had complained about “materialists” among the communists, who he accused of undermining his position. Scoffing at this argument, Cabet stressed that those “materialists” consisted of maybe a dozen “ultra-communists” from the *Humanitaire* or the *Communautaire*—Constant was raising a spectre that did not reflect the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 6-8.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 8-10.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 12.

actual religious orientation of the communists.⁷⁸ Indeed, Constant had not been attacked for his religious identity in the slightest. Quite on the contrary, it were the Christian ideals and their “social” relevance that were universally lauded even by critics, including Cabet. It was specifically the identification of Christianity and *communauté* that Cabet found valuable in the *Doctrines religieuses et sociales*: “If the abbé Constant had not published other writings, we would applaud this part of his last work, although it does not contain any idea about organization.”⁷⁹ At the same time, Cabet took umbrage at his Catholic identity, whose authoritarian and irrational character seemed to be at the root of all evil: “Ultimately, he does it like *Monsieur Lamennais*, he comes down to crying out: BELIEVE and your faith will SAVE you!!!”⁸⁰

Cabet was primarily concerned about imposing his own, true communism. As he explained in another brochure of 1841, *Ma ligne droite ou Le vrai chemin du salut pour le peuple*, it was not him who was sowing seeds of division by criticizing a Constant or Lamennais; instead, their erroneous concepts of communism threatened to lead the movement in a wrong direction.⁸¹ Surrendering to this onslaught, Constant made a peace offer in a letter from December 23, 1841. It failed to convince Cabet, who made clear that he was determined to crack down on both the “excessive” Catholicism of Constant and the materialism of the *Humanitaire*. For him, there was only one path, whose true Bible he finally called by its name: *Voyage en Icarie*.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 16-17.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁸¹ *Ligne*, 8-9.

After the abbé Constant had been silenced for a couple of years, Cabet opened another front and published a brochure attacking the alleged *Inconséquences de M. de Lamennais* in 1843. Cabet had been decisively inspired by the “new” Lamennais, although this influence is rarely recognized. “With deep pain,” Cabet took note of Lamennais’s criticism of the socialists, Owenists, Fourierists, and especially the communists in *Du passé et de l’avenir du peuple* (it will be remembered that Constant had reacted in a similar fashion).⁸² The writings since the *Paroles* had been decisive for the formation of radical reformist identities, and even the first issue of the *Humanitaire*, of July 1, 1841, had praised them before expressing regret about Lamennais’s distancing from the communists. The shock was felt deeply and had to prompt a reaction.

In his brochure, Cabet expressed his conviction that Lamennais had taught a communist doctrine in the *Paroles d’un croyant*, the *Livre du peuple*, and *De l’esclavage moderne*.⁸³ This perception of Lamennais as a “communist against his will” was widely spread, also on the other side of the Rhine.⁸⁴ In the eyes of Cabet, Lamennais’s fallacious development since *Du passé* could only be explained by his indelible Catholicism. Once a priest, always a priest: “No, Monsieur de Lamennais, you are not a *philosopher* in the slightest; you are only a *priest*...”⁸⁵ Because of his

⁸² See *Le Populaire*, No. 6, September 5, 1841.

⁸³ Etienne Cabet, *Inconséquences de M. de Lamennais, ou Réfutation de "Amschaspands et Darvans", "Du passé et de l’avenir du peuple", et de cinq articles de l’"Almanach populaire"* (Paris: Au Bureau du "Populaire", 1843), 4-6, 20-21.

⁸⁴ The prime example is Wilhelm Weitling, who said in December 1841 that Lamennais had been a communist “without knowing it.” In 1849, he was still convinced that Lamennais criticized communism “without realizing that his own heart” belonged to it. See Wolfgang Schieder, *Anfänge der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung. Die Auslandsvereine im Jahrzehnt nach der Julirevolution von 1830*, Industrielle Welt 4 (Stuttgart: Klett, 1963), 269.

⁸⁵ Cabet, *Inconséquences*, 27.

relapse into his old profession, he had become enmeshed in endless “inconsequences and contradictions.” His demands for a “new religion” resulted from the same Catholic belief in authority that Cabet had denounced in the writings of Constant.⁸⁶ His defense of private property contradicted the doctrine of Jesus Christ and marked a return to the delusions of the Church.⁸⁷ His Catholic indoctrination had deceived Lamennais, who was a “victim” of priesthood just like Constant—Cabet established the connection between the two men in a caustic comment.⁸⁸

In conscious opposition to the two abbés, Cabet elevated his Icarian Communism to the status of the sole interpretation of the doctrine of Jesus Christ and primitive Christianity. A look at Cabet’s argumentation in his famous *Le vrai christianisme suivant Jésus-Christ* of 1846 shows that he was developing a news strategy for this. Therein he insisted that Jesus Christ had expressed his doctrine in allegories that could only be comprehended by his disciples. For all those who had not been “initiated” into his language, its true meaning remained a “mystery.”⁸⁹ Cabet engaged in a veritable exegesis of numerous statements from the Gospel of Matthew, interpreting them as encrypted communist teachings: “Enigmatic, allegoric, and parabolic expressions.”⁹⁰ Not surprisingly, Cabet claimed to be the solitary holder of the key to decrypt

⁸⁶ Ibid., 8. Here too, we find the exclamation “BELIEVE and your faith will SAVE you!!!”

⁸⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁸ *Inconséquences de M. de Lamennais, ou Réfutation de "Amschaspands et Darvans," "Du passé et de l'avenir du peuple", et de cinq articles de l'"Almanach populaire"* (Paris: Au Bureau du Populaire, 1843), 28. Cabet here refers to Constant’s retreat to a suburb of Paris, where he attempted to live a calm life as a town cleric. For Cabet, this betrayed Constant’s true nature as a slave of the Church. The episode eventually resulted in another scandal, when he published his fascinating *La Mère de Dieu* in 1844, and returned to the sphere of radicalism with fervor.

⁸⁹ *Le vrai christianisme*, 336.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 90.

this allegoric communism, which would herald the end of priesthood and give birth to a “Christianity of the people,” as it had been practiced by the primitive Christians.⁹¹

[A]ccording to Jesus, the Apostles, and the Church Fathers, Christianity cannot exist without Communism, and nobody can call himself *Christian* if he is not *Communist*.

And vice versa, COMMUNISM is nothing but true CHRISTIANITY.

[...] you will be convinced of the identity of the two *Doctrines* and the two *Systems*, of the COMMUNAUTÉ and the KINGDOM OF GOD with respect to the social organization.⁹²

These ideals of primitive Christianity had been corrupted by the priestly claim for exclusive knowledge, which resulted in the degenerate Catholicism of the official Church. Cabet introduced a new element to this well-known narrative by posing as the possessor of a key to the understanding of a secret language of initiates. By emphasizing that he could decipher the true Christian doctrine, Cabet attempted to silence rival Christian reformists on the one hand, and the Church on the other hand. His “popular Christianity” would have no priesthood, but it appears to come with a Pope.

V. CONCLUSION

It is safe to assume that the publications of Constant and Lamennais have decisively contributed to Cabet’s self-understanding as a Christian, and consequently to his increasing emphasis on Icarian Communism as the only “true Christianity.” Quite remarkably, he adopted a strategy to legitimize this claim that is practically identical with what the abbé Constant had propagated

⁹¹ Ibid., 617.

⁹² Ibid., 620.

since 1841: The narrative of an encrypted, quasi “occult” character of the true doctrine of Christ that was handed down by a chain of initiates and had now found its new Apostle. It is quite likely that Cabet was inspired by the young abbés writings, although it must be noted that similar ideas were omnipresent among radicals at that time.

It has been discussed how Cabet attacked the two abbés because he saw in them main contenders for his interpretation of Christian communism. This allows for a brief characterization of these “contested Christianities”: First, Cabet wanted to establish a “popular” Christianity that was resolutely anti-clerical. It was also anti-ceremonial and claimed to be non-dogmatic, although this latter point appears little convincing. Certainly, Cabet envisioned a Christianity without a focus on a personal God, without a “cult,” and eventually without priests.⁹³ As he wrote in *Voyage in Icarie*: “Our universal or popular religion is, to be true, only a system of moral and philosophy, and it has no other use than to make people love each other like brothers”⁹⁴ In the years until 1846, Cabet changed his tone considerably and put a stress on “allegories,” “initiation,” and a comprehensive exegesis of the Scripture. This language practically replaced the earlier reminiscences of natural religions, rational philosophies, or revolutionary cults.

Constant, on the other hand, propagated a “Catholic Communism” or *communisme néo-catholique*, as he wrote in 1846.⁹⁵ Posing as the latest representative of a long tradition of revolutionaries, he declared to be the unique revelator of true Christianity and employed both a language and an argumentative strategy that might very well have served as an inspiration for

⁹³ Cf. Desroche, “Préface,” LIV-LV.

⁹⁴ Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie*, 171.

⁹⁵ Alphonse-Louis Constant, *La voix de la famine* (Paris: Ballay Aîné, 1846), 14. This publication led to the second imprisonment of its author. See Strube, *Sozialismus*, 354-58.

Cabet. Interestingly, both Cabet and Constant had an understanding of communism that was thoroughly elitist: The people, or the “masses,” were ignorant of the true meaning of Christianity and needed the instruction of an élite of initiates. While Cabet developed a social structure that was implicitly based on this hierarchy and thus betrays a certain totalitarian tendency,⁹⁶ Constant was not concerned with questions of social organization at all. Cabet was correct in pointing out that the young abbé’s writings lacked a political program. Constant’s ideas were apocalyptic, assuming a mystical transformation of humanity into an *association universelle*, which he equaled with the establishment of an androgynous state of humanity, and finally a mystical union with God. These extravagant ideas made him a political outsider, but a notorious one whose voice was widely heard, if often ridiculed. After the coup of 1851, he would join the ranks of many disillusioned socialists who engaged with Spiritualism and other new religious movements—as a mage and Kabbalist, he would emerge as the founder of occultism.

In contrast, the famous Lamennais had served as a main inspiration for Cabet, Constant, and countless other religious reformers. His turn against Catholicism and his striving for a new religion of humanity put him at odds with his former Neo-Catholic followers, while his rejection of certain communist ideas caused much frustration within the radical reformist sphere. Without any doubt, his ideas formed an integral and highly influential part of socialist and communist discourse in the 1840s, and his political activism would only end after he had taken a seat among the Extreme Left in the National Assembly of 1848-1851. Disillusioned like so many others, he died in obscurity while his fellow abbé rose to unprecedented fame.

⁹⁶ Roberts, "Etienne Cabet,"

The clashes of these different understandings of Christian communism illustrate the highly contested meaning of religion in July Monarchy France. One central insight that can be gained from the reformist quarrels is the fact that, until the 1850s, the “materialist” or “atheist” communists were a minority in France. Due to the course of history in the second half of the century, this circumstance has often been overlooked. Religion was not only a pragmatic tool to stimulate the enthusiasm of the masses, but radicals of all cohorts debated its meaning with all sincerity and regarded it as the basis of their political systems.

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