

# Scepticism and Sovereignty: The significance of Lamennais

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## PART I I

The changes in Lamennais's thinking after the papal condemnation of 1832 were in many ways anticipated in earlier works. In adopting a populist stance in his political writings, he was but extending into the social and political field the epistemological principal of *le sens commun*, as the final authority to which individual reason must submit. In an appendix to *Des progrès de la révolution*, published in 1829, he drew an analogy between his belief in the superiority of faith to individual reason in intellectual matters and the superior claim of social duty to individual liberty in the political world. I shall now outline how his thinking on religion and politics developed in the years following his break with the church.

### A New Politics

All societies, Lamennais claimed, are composed of two orders, the one of dependence, the other of liberty, the one that unites and binds all wills together, the other that consists in the expansion of each of them, one constituting the basis of the social order, the other guiding its development. [O.C., IX, 315–6] Here he both applied the epistemological model to the social world and gave more importance to the subjective individual element than he had previously.

By 1830 Lamennais had entirely lost faith in monarchy, in his later writings he went further, denouncing the 'monarchical idolatry' of his youth. 'Louis XIV was not a man subject to the ordinary duties of men. What was he then? a king. Well then, what is a king? Is he by any chance a god? Something better if you will'. [O.P., IV, 217] The people are sovereign. The revolutionary ex-cleric urged the masses to seize power and convert their 'supreme will' into laws, otherwise the old rulers 'will become your masters, they will be the true sovereigns and your sovereignty will become for you a complete subjection'. [O.G., 506] Such sentiments as these give substance to the comment of W.G. Roe that he 'remained an authoritarian.... The people, and not popes and

kings, were now regarded by him as instruments of God's power'<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite his Rousseauite rhetoric, Lamennais remained suspicious of communism, which he interpreted as a materialist doctrine depriving people of the right to private property and giving power to an impersonal and inflexible state. 'To assure the life of each and at the same time liberty, it is not at all a question of abolishing property but, on the contrary, of multiplying it, of rendering it accessible to all.' To abolish property, transferring it from the individual to the state, would be to abolish liberty. While a capitalist system of wage labour was one modern form of slavery, communism was another. [O.G., 566–7] The Breton prophet shared with Proudhon and other provincial French writers a suspicion of centralism and a belief in the devolution of power to the regions. He subscribed, in this matter, to the principle of subsidiarity, which was destined to play an important role in catholic social teaching. To this end it is important that the ownership of property be widely distributed. This in turn requires a system of banking which enables peasants to receive credit at low rates of interest.

Lamennais claimed that all human social structures had been characterised by the domination of the mass of the people by a small privileged class. The distinction between capitalist and worker in his day was but a replication of ancient slavery or feudal systems of domination. The modern worker, though legally distinguishably from a slave, enjoys a liberty which is fictional: 'the chains and the rods of modern slavery, are hunger'. [O.G., 490.] Christianity contained the seeds of a new order, in which all are children of God, brothers of Christ, 'equal in the order of nature and in that of grace'. [O.G., 483–4.] But after eighteen centuries of christianity, we still live in a pagan system. Liberty, equality, fraternity are proclaimed in the name of God, but inequality and slavery prevail. The figure of Christ is replaced by the spectre of Cain. He lamented how the religion of Jesus Christ, 'religion of justice and liberty', had been used to legitimate the oppression of the people [O.C., X, 303, and O.P., IV, 199] 'Brothers', he declared, 'this profound disorder, this impious rebellion against God and his law, this insolence, this criminal violation of basic human right must stop'. To allow it to continue is to accept complicity in its evils. But not only did he rebuke the ruling classes, but urged direct action on the part of the oppressed. 'People, people,' he cried, 'Slaves rise up and break your fetters: suffer this degradation to the name of man no longer!'. He called for a new Spartacus to lead the slaves of his day to freedom, urging the oppressed to unite and seize political power, otherwise oppression would have no end. The powerful will always act to defend their privileges. [O.G., 498–502.]<sup>2</sup>

Lamennais gradually came to recognise the need to revise his

conception of authority. It was not simply a question of transferring 'sovereignty' from the monarch to the new populist state, but of developing a different conception of authority. The point, he claimed, is not to replace one system of domination by another, for 'domination implies distinct classes, consequently privileges, an assemblage of conflicting interests and, owing to the laws made by the upper classes to assure the advantages of their superior position, the sacrifice of all or almost all to the few'. [O.G. 409.] The Breton prophet proposed a new social order consisting in the solidarity of equals in a fraternal fellowship. The family was the model for this communitarian vision, where there is no master but God. [O.G., 417] He came to see that a false conception of God and of ecclesiastical authority had led to civil despotism.<sup>3</sup>

Alec Vidler has claimed that Lamennais's concern for liberty characterised his thinking throughout, 'Where Lamennais changed was not in the valuation he put on liberty, but in his understanding of the way in which liberty could best be secured in the conditions of the nineteenth century'.<sup>4</sup> This is to underestimate the change, for in his early works his conception of freedom was 'positive'. Freedom, he declared in 1820, is the state of a being which nothing can divert from its true end. It has nothing to do with choice or independence. A person's true end is to be found in 'society', guided by the spiritual power in that society. 'Man is free when he obeys the power, because he obeys the reason, the order which conserves society and each of its members'. [O.C., VIII, 234 & 237] In his later works he rejected 'this abstraction called society, which may be free and happy while each real and living member of the society is more of a serf than the serfs of the middle ages .... O terrible power of abstraction!' [O.P., IV, 1 73–5]<sup>5</sup> He came to see liberty as involving people taking action on their own behalf, both at an individual and communal level. Reacting to a speech of the recently installed 'Citizen King', Louis Philippe, the radical priest insisted that liberty does not consist simply in the rule of law. 'When the law constitutes despotism and tyranny,' he proclaimed, 'when it is unjust, oppressive and cruel, can we say that it is liberty?'

The kind of liberty in which Lamennais was interested in his early period could be achieved without strenuous political action. It was a question of people accepting the roles for which they were made and of obeying the appropriate authorities. His changed conception of liberty required a new political stance. A message of solidarity among the oppressed and active resistance to the current social order was preached. 'La resistance passive', he declared in a memorable phrase, 'est la resistance du cou a la hache qui tombe dessus'.<sup>6</sup> For the masses to renounce force would be to hand it over for ever to the side of evil.

For most of his life he attacked democracy, as being based on an atomistic view of the social order. Democracy destroys the notion of right—human and divine. Christianity, in contrast conserves and leads to stability; democracy destroys and displaces everything. An absolute equality destroys all hierarchy and leaves only fortune and the insatiable thirst for wealth. [O.G., 50–1.] The principle of democracy leads to a notion of the state as a collection of isolated individuals. [O.G., 107.] These were his ideas in the mid-twenties.

After the crisis of 1832 he modified this position. He lost faith in the pope as a defender of the poor. They must act on their own on the basis of solidarity in the search for justice. He exhibited little faith in representative democracy, but sketched a decentralised polity in which all could participate. As early as 1820 he had pointed to the trinitarian God as the model for a christian state.<sup>7</sup> Human power is nothing but a participation in the power of the Father, human intelligence is a participation in the intelligence of the Son, all life is a participation in the Spirit. [*Essai d'un système*, 30–1.] The life and love of the Spirit 'animates everything, enlivens everything, determines everything to converged towards the same centre, creating through an intimate union of many different diverse natures, the universal harmony of the creation.' [*Essai d'un système*, 113.] While in his early writings it was the unity of the Deity that he stressed, in later works there is a growing emphasis upon the plurality in God.<sup>8</sup> Lamennais believed then that social policies must find their rational basis in religious doctrine. [*Esquisse*, I, xxx] What then was the nature of the religion he preached in his later life, that would provide a basis for his political radicalism?

## A New Theology

Having rejected the infallible pope, Lamennais attempted to salvage certain substantive Christian beliefs. As we have seen he had no notion of religious authority other than a person or body issuing commands to an obedient people.<sup>9</sup> He could find little place in religion for the idea of authority as residing in the whole body of the faithful, intangible perhaps but none the less real. This is curious, because his notion of *le sens commun* in secular intellectual matters is precisely this. It possessed no infallible organ by which its authority could be proclaimed. Why was this necessary in the case of religious authority? When he abandoned the pope he appears to have rejected any religious authority other than the secular *sens commun*. Humanity is the true church, instituted by God at creation; this divine foundation constitutes 'the sovereignty of the people'. [O.P., IV, 149]

His new position involved a reversal in his understanding of the

relation between faith and reason. He now asserted the priority of the latter. Even to submit one's reason to authority is an act of the reason. But once recognise the priority of reason and there is no justification for limiting its empire. He attacked the idea that reason could not question the content of divine revelation but merely examine its external evidences, a position which he had previously held. Now if the authority responds in any way it immediately recognises reason's right to question and to judge its pronouncements, once it abandons the ground of faith for the ground of reason it abdicates. Either revelation may be defended by reason, in which case it can essentially be reduced to reason, or it must be accepted on other grounds. But what other grounds are there? *La raison commune* is in conflict with the claims of an infallible church. [O.P., IV, 69, 25–7, and 115] He naturally rejected one of his earlier maxims that to question ecclesiastical authority is a sign of culpable pride, to assert this is to confuse pride with reason. [O.P., IV, 112]

At times Lamennais's ideas approached deism, when he argued against any notion of miracle or of divine action in the universe, which he pictured as a closed system governed by permanent and immutable laws. Elsewhere, however, he criticised deists for fetishism in worshipping the forces of nature, in contrast to 'the negroes who retain by instinct a certain notion of Providence'. [O.P., IV, and 202] He distinguished 'le christianisme évangélique', which encourages love, equality and fraternity, from 'le christianisme théologique', a system of domination and hierarchy. [D.C., x]

Lamennais remained critical of protestantism, even after his condemnation in 1832. It is a 'système bâtard, inconséquent, étroit', fraudulently proclaiming liberty but leading to political despotism and egoism. [O.C., XII, 302.] Yet he was by then openly critical of Roman authoritarianism. Soon he reconsidered his position and praised the very features of Protestantism for which in his early days he had denounced it:

It contains in itself, though veiled, the immortal principle of the sovereignty of reason, and this principle, which is its secret life, saves the human spirit from the slavery into which it has been petrified under the humiliating pressure of an authority which, demanding a blind submission, an absolute obedience ... would extinguish its active powers. [D.C., viii]

Lamennais told the Italian republican Mazzini that the prospects of humanity depend on its future understanding of God, and insisted on 'the supreme importance of the trinitarian conception of God'.<sup>10</sup> There exists in God 'a veritable society, a perfect, infinite society, the eternal type of all societies. For society is nothing but multiplicity restored to

unity'. [*Esquisse*, I, 81.] He developed a kind of natural trinitarianism, in which ultimate reality was seen as a unity in multiplicity. He viewed it as the result of the progressive development of the human reason through the centuries, and as reflecting the way in which a contingent universe is related to its necessary cause. [*Esquisse*, I, xiii, and O.P., IV, 202 ]

## Conclusion

The life of Lamennais stands as an ensign, to warn against the dangers of authoritarianism. Authority is necessary in any social group, but should not be seen as wholly external to the members of the group. Authoritarianism divides the group into two parts, the sovereign and the rest. The sovereign, be it constituted of the one, the few or the many, hands down decisions and the clients receive and accept them. It is a conception of authority which finds favour in situations of disorder and disarray both in church and in state, where any kind of rational consensus is thought to be hopeless. Philosophical scepticism, mingled with political uncertainty frequently leads to authoritarianism. It became particularly evident during the turmoils of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, when theorists like Bodin, Hobbes and King James I of England, developed authoritarian theories. Later writers like Maistre, Chateaubriand, Bonald, Donoso Cortes, Balmes, or in milder form Coleridge and Burke, reacting against the commotions of the French revolution and the terror which followed, also laid emphasis upon absolute sovereignty as a basis for government. In ecclesiastical affairs this authoritarianism emerged at the time when the temporal power of the pope was challenged in the nineteenth century, and when liberal and secular forces threatened and rapid changes occurred, as in the Roman Catholic church of the 1960s and 1970s. There was a loud call for someone to lay down the law from above, popes Gregory XVI, Pius IX and John-Paul II obliged.

In the introduction to his selection of Lamennais' works, Henri Guillemin is clearly puzzled by his rejection of catholicism after disillusionment with the papacy. Surely the truths of christianity remain. If the incarnation and the doctrine of redemption are true, if the cross retains its meaning, if Christ is truly present in the bread and wine of the eucharist, why leave the church because one is disaffected by its government [O.G., 18]. This was a point that Tyrrell used to make. The reason is that for Lamennais papal sovereignty was of the very essence of christianity, everything depends on it. The articles of the catholic creeds are believed solely because they are prescribed by a sovereign authority; they have no standing apart from that. Reason and experience

count for nothing in religion. Any confirmation of christian belief from personal or communal experience is welcome, but of no consequence in the logic of belief. The whole edifice of catholic christianity is, for the authoritarian, balanced on the pinnacle of papal sovereignty. If that is removed the building collapses and all that remains are fragments gathered from the rubble which have little meaning, except as personal relics. As another authoritarian thinker put it, 'it is with the mysteries of our religion, as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole, have the virtue to cure, but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect'.<sup>11</sup>

Despite occasional references to a Trinitarian, pluralist model for political structures, Lamennais appears, throughout the various twists and turns of his pilgrimage, to have had little idea of a participatory catholicism in which each member contributed something to the authority of the whole body. When he rejected the bath-water of papalism he threw out the baby of catholic christianity with it, turning—in his last years—to a kind of liberal protestant humanism, with its atomistic rationalism, the fallacies of which he had tellingly exposed in his early writings. The vestiges of christian belief that he managed to salvage formed a rather incoherent religious basis for his political radicalism. His voluminous writings, however, provide a rich source of political and religious insights, which are still able to inspire prophetic voices in the present day.

- 1 W. G. Roe, *Lamennais and England*, p 19.
- 2 On the theme of social solidarity and consensus in Lamennais, see J.E. S. Hayward, 'Lamennais and the Religion of Social Consensus', *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, no 21, 1966, pp. 37f. Also J. Paul-Boncour, ed., *Lamennais*, Paris 1928
- 3 "'A terre, a terre, devant l'image de Dieu!" Qui dit célà? Le Prêtre. Pauvre peuple, le voilà prosteme. Lui, le roi, comme ils appellent, met le pied dessus. C'est bien! La société est desormais fondée'. [ O.P., IV, p. ] 83]. Though, as noted in the text, he spoke of God as 'master' as late as 1838.
- 4 Vidler, *Prophecy and Papacy*, p 114.
- 5 See David Nicholls, 'God, Totalitarianism and the Bugbear of "Society"', in *Deity and Domination* (London, 1989), pp. 127f.
- 6 'Passive resistance is the resistance of the neck to the axe which falls on it'. 'Discussions critiques', O.P., IV, p. 177; and O.P., IV, p. 212.
- 7 'Analogies entre la religion et la politique', *Le Défenseur*, novembre 1820.
- 8 In his *Defense de l'essai sur l'indifférence*, he wrote 'Dieu est un, et tout, dans l'ordre qu'il établit, porte ce grand caractère d'unité que lui est propre'. [O.C., IV, p. 299].
- 9 For a critique of this conception of authority see David Nicholls, *The Pluralist State* (London, 1994), especially ch. 7.
- 10 Lamennais to Mazzini, 18 août 1841, (Blaize ed. *Correspondance de Lamennais, Oeuvres inédites*, II, pp. 172 and 175.
- 11 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London, 1651, III, 32.