

Religion and Socialism: A. V. Lunacharsky and the God-Builders

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This article offers the first full engagement in English with Anatoly Lunacharsky's near lost work, *Religion and Socialism* (2 vols, 1908, 1911). Suffering from criticisms by Lenin, it has lain in obscurity in the Lenin archive in Moscow. Yet it is a crucial document, for it provides a "missing link" in the tradition of Marxism's engagement with religion, anticipating in many ways the work of Ernst Bloch. In this critical exposition of a work that is to be republished in Russian, and translated into English and Chinese, I focus on Lunacharsky's effort to recover the emotion and passion of Marxism (the "warm stream"), his poetic style and appreciation of texts, the understanding of human beings as raw material on a long path to an ideal image, his engagement with Christian communism, the crucial role of revolution in the "God-building" project, and his perception of the political ambivalence of religion. On that last matter, he seeks, like Bloch was to do, the revolutionary promise of religion and its engagement with socialism.

KEYWORDS Anatoly Lunacharsky, Christian communism, God-building, religion and socialism, revolution

Lunacharsky spoke like a god. That night Lunacharsky was a genius.¹

Anatoly Vasil'evich Lunacharsky is possibly remembered as the first and highly gifted Commissar for Enlightenment in the new communist Russia after 1917. He is also possibly recalled as a proponent of "God-building" (*bogostroitel'stvo*) before the revolution. But one struggles to find any substantial engagement with his key text of God-building, the unjustly neglected two-volume *Religion and Socialism*.² I undertake here an initial engagement, for this work is a crucial early and sophisticated engagement on the question of Marxism and religion, anticipating in many ways later developments in this rich tradition. The analysis begins with

¹ *The October Storm and After* (Moscow: Progress, 1967), 276.

² Anatoly Vasil'evich Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1* (Moscow: Shipovnik, 1908); Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2* (Moscow: Shipovnik, 1911).

some brief comments on the reasons for its obscurity and the circumstances of its rediscovery. Then I explore the main themes, emphases, and insights of the work, before indicating a number of implications and problems with his work. Given the fact that this work is largely unknown, my analysis is largely expository, although in the selection of its main themes and in the criticisms offered I naturally exercise my own judgment, especially in light of current debates. In doing so, I hope to restore this text to the tradition of Marxism and religion.

Conditions: Lost and Found

Religion and Socialism is a work that has been lost and found. Its loss was hardly due to any lack of quality. The reason is, rather, its particular history. Lenin launched a spirited attack when it was published, persuading the editorial board of *Proletary* to condemn it.³ Or rather, he lumped God-building in with the Left-Bolshevik interest in empirio-criticism and otzovism,⁴ as much for political as for theoretical reasons. Seeing the increasing appeal of these not necessarily connected positions amongst some younger and very articulate Bolsheviks, Lenin realized the need to quell the leftward push, thereby bringing philosophical questions to the fore. In hindsight, of course, he was probably correct, for a revolutionary push at the time would have generated an even fiercer reaction. But a side effect was the complete sidelining of *Religion and Socialism*. And given Lenin's crucial role in the 1917 revolution and the subsequent establishment of communism in Russia, the few copies of the book were left to the dust and bookworms of forgotten archival corners.⁵

The finding of such a work has thereby entailed a little sleuthing, for it has proved exceedingly difficult to find. The editors of the eight-volume *Collected Works* chose not to include *Religion and Socialism* in that collection.⁶ By contrast, the introduction to a separate volume, called *Religion and Enlightenment*, offers a statement concerning the waywardness of *Religion and Socialism* and cites Lunacharsky's own somewhat half-hearted distancing from the work in his later statements.⁷ *Religion and Enlightenment* includes a wide range of material, including *Vvedenie v istoriiu religii* (Introduction to the History of Religion),

³ V. I. Lenin, "Socialism and Religion," in *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (Moscow: Progress, [1905] 1966), 83–87. See also Lenin's articles in *Pravda* and *Put' Pravdy*: Lenin, "The Question of Mr. Bogdanov and the *Vperyod* Group (for the Editors of *Pravda*)," in *Collected Works*, vol. 19 (Moscow: Progress, [1913] 1963), 173–74; and Lenin, "Concerning A. Bogdanov," in *Collected Works*, vol. 20 (Moscow: Progress, [1914] 1964), 121–24.

⁴ Some brief definitions: during the counter-revolutionary period after the 1905 revolution, a group of younger militants took an otzovist line, pushing for only illegal party work, withdrawing the Social-Democratic representatives from the new Duma and ceasing involvement with legal organizations such as trade unions and co-operative societies (a variation was ultimatumism, which suggested an ultimatum be given to the Social-Democrats in the Duma and, should it not be met, the deputies should be recalled). They also became enthused with the empirio-criticism of Mach and Avenarius, a phenomenalism that they saw as providing a biological basis to historical materialism. Lunacharsky was among this group.

⁵ I am unable here to delve into the complexities of Lunacharsky's later appreciation of his book and the program of God-building. Such a study shows that Lenin was later ambivalent, a far cry from his initial condemnation: fully cognizant of what Lunacharsky was about, in almost daily contact with the Commissariat for Enlightenment, he gave significant space for more radical religious possibilities (although by no means for mainstream religion).

⁶ Lunacharsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1963–67). The complete text is available online at <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib>.

⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, ed. V. N. Kuznetsova (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1985), 8, 164.

lectures from 1918 which were reworked and published in 1923, and material that goes back to the early 1900s. Given this unfavourable early press and the subsequent Bolshevik victory, *Religion and Socialism* remained a work out of favour. A Yiddish translation of *Religion and Socialism* exists, but as far as the original work in Russian is concerned, only a few extant copies remain.⁸ The one in the National Library of St. Petersburg turned out to be too fragile to scan. Only after further inquiry (by my colleague, Sergey Kozin) was a copy found in the Lenin Library in Moscow. A high fee for scanning the two volumes resulted in a much-treasured copy being made, which is in our possession and is, to my knowledge, the only PDF version of it in the world. Since then, the text has been screened, converted into modern Cyrillic script (it was published before the 1917 language reform), and proofread. In addition to its republication in Russian, a translation is also planned.

Lunacharsky's Warmth

Marx bowed deeply to the manger-born proletariat.⁹

But who was Lunacharsky? Playwright, poet, polemicist, gifted orator, romantic, art and literary critic, prolific writer,¹⁰ expert on the history of religions, revolutionary, inspired first Commissar for Enlightenment in the new Soviet government,¹¹ key to winning over the intelligentsia to the new project of constructing communism,¹² and even the one who coined the term “cultural revolution,”¹³ Lunacharsky is one of the most fascinating figures of the Russian Revolution. He was hailed by admirers throughout the new Russia as “a true apostle of enlightenment,” as the representative of “the spiritual dictatorship of the proletariat.”¹⁴ Internationally, he was recognized as one of the most erudite ministers of education throughout the world.¹⁵

⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religye un sotsializm*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1921).

⁹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1* (Moscow: Shipovnik, 1908), 101.

¹⁰ An incomplete bibliography of Lunacharsky's writings on literature and art alone lists more than 2000 titles. The eight-volume edition of his *Collected Works*, first published in 1963–67 and now available online at lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib contains works on literature, art, sculpture, and music, but is also incomplete. Beyond all these, he published a massive amount of material on education after being appointed Commissar of Enlightenment.

¹¹ For an excellent study of the Commissariat and Lunacharsky's role, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). See also Arthur Ransome, *Russia in 1919* (New York: Dodo, [1919] 2011), 83–86; and Lunacharsky, *On Education: Selected Articles and Speeches* (Moscow: Progress, 1981).

¹² Despite initial strikes by school teachers, mass walkouts by bureaucrats and widespread resistance to a new regime generally regarded as illegitimate and soon to crumble, Lunacharsky was quite successful in this task: soon enough “teachers, workers, inventors, librarians, circus people, futurists, painters of all trends and genres (from the members of the old Peripatetic School to Cubists), philosophers, ballet dancers, hypnotists, singers, poets from the Proletcult movement, and people who were just poets, actors from the former imperial theatre — all of them came in an endless procession to Anatoly Vasil'evich.” *The October Storm and After* (Moscow: Progress, 1967), 266. For concrete measures to bring the intelligentsia on side, see A. Yermakov, *A. Lunacharsky* (Moscow: Novosti, 1975), 68–71.

¹³ Lunacharsky, *On Education*, 241.

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 1.

¹⁵ Although the available critical work on Lunacharsky is woefully thin, useful works include A. L. Tait, *Lunacharsky: Poet of the Revolution (1875–1907)* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1984); Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*; and Yermakov, *A. Lunacharsky*. Bergman's frustratingly superficial article does at least provide a workable survey; see Jay Bergman, “The Image of Jesus in the Russian Revolutionary Movement: The Case of Russian Marxism,” *International Review of Social History* 35 (1990): 220–48.

With this impressive pedigree, let me turn to the God-building (*bogostroitel'stvo*) position that emerges from *Religion and Socialism*. Apart from manifesting a significant level of research and reading, the work itself is structured into two long volumes, which are formally analogous to the Old and New Testaments.¹⁶ The content also indicates such a structure, for the first provides the groundwork for the second, in which the focus is the New Testament and then key elements of the Christian tradition. The first volume begins with a discussion of the conditions for its publication, the long germination of the author's ideas, the eternally perplexing difficulty of defining religion, and perhaps the first survey of socialist positions on religion (including Engels, Plekhanov, Feuerbach, and Dietzgen) — finding that they fall short. From there, in what is arguably the less interesting part and most indebted to contemporary evolutionary theory of religion, Lunacharsky explores the origins of religion and its stages of development, moving from “primitive” forms such as animism, through polytheism to monotheism, and then focusing on the developments of Brahmanism, Judaism, and Hellenism.¹⁷ Yet even here he deploys what will become a consistent process of discernment, seeking the revolutionary and democratic features of these forms. The most significant section is that on Judaism, for it deals with the Hebrew Bible (which Lunacharsky understood primarily as Jewish Scripture rather than Christian). Tellingly, he does not see Greek religion as a high point — like Hegel — from which humanity fell afterwards, but focuses on its negative, idealist, and class side.¹⁸

The second volume, however, is more germane to my interests here, for it deals extensively with the New Testament, the historical Jesus, Paul, and then the early currents of Christianity in terms of millenarianism, Gnosticism, and orthodoxy with its clear statement in Augustine. From this point, it moves into Christian socialism, with a particular eye on its appeal in Russia, assesses the development of liberal theology, especially in Protestant Germany, and then discusses at some length contemporary European, mostly German, religious philosophy (Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and, most fittingly, Feuerbach). An important discussion of utopian socialism, important especially because of its formative effect on and continued appeal for modern socialism, precedes the final treatment of Marx and Engels. Not only does this structure anticipate the later approach of Bloch, but it also generates its own problems concerning its apparently evolutionary and teleological nature. And it raises the tension that first faced Engels and Kautsky, namely, between the rupture offered by Marxism in relation

¹⁶ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1* (Moscow: Shipovnik, 1908); and Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2* (Moscow: Shipovnik, 1911). Even so, he is all too conscious that the task remained incomplete, allowing him to give a general outline and touch on the most important points. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 8. Another work written at the time, “Ateizm,” provides a concise statement of his position. Lunacharsky, “Ateizm,” in *Ocherki po filosofii marxizma [Essays on the Philosophy of Marxism]*, ed. V. A. Bazarov, M. Berman, A. V. Lunacharsky, P. S. Yushkevich, A. Bogdanov, I. Gelfond and S. Suvorov (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1908), 107–61.

¹⁷ See also Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 15–47, 147–51.

¹⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 216–27. Thus, Plato, usually seen as the pinnacle of Greek thought, is brought down to earth: “Platonism was an aberration of the life instinct.” Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 219.

to earlier forms of religiously-inspired communism and continuity with those earlier traditions. I will return to these matters in the conclusion.

The work itself was the result of long periods of often intense study. Despite his frequently avowed atheism and denial of a supra-sensory world,¹⁹ he had studied the history of religion in depth on more than one occasion, beginning with works available in the Paris libraries, especially the Musée Guimet in Paris in 1897, escaping there after he had managed to avoid Russian military service due to his extreme short-sightedness. He returned once again to the subject during the six months of solitary confinement he spent in the Taganka prison in Moscow in the second half of 1899. Here, despite insomnia through bad food and lack of exercise, he felt that he had clarified his “personal religion,” which was to be expounded almost a decade later in *Religion and Socialism*. His poetry, plays, stories, literary and art criticism, and even reflections on education also evince a preoccupation with religious and often biblical themes (along with, apparently, social reform and married women), which may be read both in terms of the influence of those studies and the cause for them. Again and again the settings of his creative writings are populated with spirits, angels, and demons, if not the gods themselves, or they are set in epochs, usually the Middle Ages, saturated with religion.²⁰ An attentive reader also finds theological themes laced throughout his writings on education, art, and literature. So we find reflections on Alexander Blok’s Christian communism and left-wing Narodnik dreams; Tolstoy’s mythical peasants as the model of his man “born of God” and the source of his retirement from the world to his little cabbage patch; Titian’s sensitive paintings of Pope Paul III, which bring out his drive for temporal power alongside his doubts; and critical notes on the intersections of pagan and Christian themes in the opera “Legends of the City of Kitezh.”²¹

¹⁹ He makes the point clearly in *Religion and Socialism* (Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 45), and found himself called upon to repeat it — see especially the lecture, “Why I Do Not Believe in God” (Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 146–64), as well as his argument against a spiritual world (Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 206–14). Lunacharsky claimed that he could not remember a time when he believed in God, already deriding religion and the monarchy among his school friends. He relates an occasion when he was playing in the workshop of a silversmith: taking up the ubiquitous icon, he bashed it on the table and called on God to prove his existence with some suitable punishment. Instead of the Almighty, the silversmith grabbed him by the ear and sternly took him to his mother, who refused to stand in for God’s wrath (Tait, *Lunacharsky: Poet of the Revolution*, 6).

²⁰ For instance, in an early and semi-autobiographical poem *Temptation* from 1896, the hero is a youthful Manuel, a medieval Dominican monk in Ravenna, who also happens to be an inspired preacher. Enraptured by the young Duchess, urging social reform, the passionate monk is tempted by a gleeful Satan by means of the sensuous sprite, Foletta. Manuel initially resists her charms, only to have rampaging sex with her. But now Foletta herself is converted, renounces immortality and joins Manuel, who throws aside his orders, to establish a League of the Joyful that will conquer even death (Tait, *Lunacharsky: Poet of the Revolution*, 25–27). Other such examples include the stories *Wings*, published in *Pravda*, issue 4 (1904), *Charudatta the Wise*, from *Pravda*, issue 9 (1904), *The Funeral*, appearing in *Kur’er*, issue 27 (1903), *Smiling Philosopher* (an attack on Bulgakov), from *Kur’er*, issue 27 (1903), *An Interview With the Devil*, from *Vestnik zhizni*, issue 3 (1906), and the play, *The King’s Barber* (Lunacharsky, *P’esy [Plays] Pesy* [Moscow: n.p., 1906], 37–129). Somewhat different is the poem, “In Commemoration of the Ninth of January,” which deals with the contemporary event of Bloody Sunday (Lunacharsky, “K iubileiu 9 ianvaria [For the Anniversary of January 9],” *Proletarii* 13 (August 9, 1905): 3–4). See Tait’s comments on these works in Tait, *Lunacharsky: Poet of the Revolution*, 64–69, 80–82, 86–92, 101–102.

²¹ Lunacharsky, *On Education*, 45–58; Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress, 1973), 159, 170–85, 210–17; Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 105–10.

Back to *Religion and Socialism*: the primary motivation for the work is at least twofold. To begin with, it seeks to explore the relations between religion and socialism, or, more specifically, to “determin[e] the place of socialism among other religious systems.”²² Note that he entitled the study *Religion and Socialism*. The arrangement of the two nouns is not accidental, with religion the prior term. It may be seen as a direct response to Lenin’s “Socialism and Religion,” in which socialism is the all-encompassing frame.²³ More arrestingly, Lunacharsky wishes to locate socialism within other religious systems, or at least understand it in those terms. Here apparently is grist for the critical mill that charges socialism with being a secularized form of (especially Jewish and Christian) theology. Apart from the facetiousness of that suggestion, Lunacharsky outflanks it by arguing that socialism may be seen as another form of religion. But what does he mean by “religion”? I will allow his complex understanding to emerge through the following points.

A second motivation is the need to provide a dimension to Marxism that goes beyond the focus on cold, “‘dry’ economic theory.”²⁴ Instead, Lunacharsky prefers to emphasize enthusiastic, emotional, and ethical elements — what Ernst Bloch would later call a “warm stream” to Marxism. As for the cold stream, the man largely to blame was Plekhanov, the “father” of Russian Marxism. Lunacharsky has little time for Plekhanov,²⁵ finding him locked into a pure rationalism, a feature he also found among the Mensheviks who held to a rigid theory of the stages of revolutionary development, moving via the maturity of the bourgeois revolution into an eventual communist revolution. Lunacharsky blamed this on Plekhanov’s heavy reliance on Engels, although I would add that this was a partial Engels, mediated through the works read widely by the first generation of Marxists after the founders, works such as *Anti-Dühring* and *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*,²⁶ rather than the enthusiastic and optimistic Engels of *On the History of Early Christianity*, his amusing and youthful *Letters from Wuppertal*, or the entertaining and voluminous correspondence.²⁷ Even the Bolsheviks tried to accommodate themselves to an “orthodox” Plekhanovite Marxism that was not really Marxism at all, or at best a one-sided distortion of Marxism.

²² Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 8.

²³ Lenin, “Socialism and Religion,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (Moscow: Progress, [1905] 1966), 83–87.

²⁴ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 9.

²⁵ Towards the close of the second volume of *Religion and Socialism*, Lunacharsky at first suggests that Plekhanov’s willful distortion of the first volume may be due to weak eyes or a weak mind, but then settles on the point that the old man is blinded by polemical fervor (Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 397).

²⁶ Engels, “Herr Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft (Anti-Dühring),” in *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 20 (Berlin: Dietz, [1877–78] 1987); Engels, “Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 25 (Moscow: Progress, [1877–78] 1973), 3–309; Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24 (Moscow: Progress, [1880] 1989), 281–325; Engels, “Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft,” in *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 19 (Berlin: Dietz, [1880] 1973).

²⁷ Engels, “On the History of Early Christianity,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27 (Moscow: Progress, [1894–95] 1990), 445–69; Engels, “Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums,” in *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 22 (Berlin: Dietz, [1894–5] 1972), 447–73; Engels, “Letters from Wuppertal,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Progress, [1839] 1975), 7–25; Engels, “Briefe aus dem Wuppertal,” in *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1:3 (Berlin: Dietz, [1839] 1985), 32–51.

The problem was that they had lost what may be called the warmth of Marx's own thought and practice.²⁸ This was the sensitive, enthusiastic, ethical Marx, the one who, alongside his deeply scientific practice, also provided an emotional appeal as a moral philosopher, the one who, according to Lunacharsky, "said that poets need many caresses."²⁹ Lunacharsky speaks openly of his enthusiastic "conversion to Marxism" and describes that system as a "deeply emotional impulse of the soul."³⁰ The key to Marxism was, then, a synthesis of science and irrepressible enthusiasm.

How to recover this lost warm stream of Marxism, full of enthusiasm and emotional appeal? One avenue was art, a lifelong passion for Lunacharsky, and the other was religion. In fact, he saw religion as the necessary groundwork for a full treatment of materialist aesthetics, regarding them here as intrinsically linked rather than as two discrete zones.³¹ By religion, he meant not the belief in divine figures or a supernatural world that determines this one,³² but rather the emotive, collective, utopian, and very human elements of religion. He formulates this definition in different ways. It may be in the form of a question: how does religion answer the fundamental needs of the human spirit?³³ Or, "religion is enthusiasm and 'without enthusiasm it is not given to man to create anything great'" — understanding "enthusiasm" here in its full sense of being full of the spirit and of eschatological hope.³⁴ It may be expressed in the words of the Apostle Paul, "we are saved by hope."³⁵ Or, the "dreams of humanity" are expressed in nothing less than "religious myths and dogmas,"³⁶ and thereby religion marks the contradiction between the ideal of those dreams and the reality.³⁷ If the latter point

²⁸ "The ethical appeal in scientific socialism is tremendous; on the surface cold and exact, it harbours tremendous reserves of practical idealism. And so all one has to do is bring out in a semi-poetical, publicistic manner this latent content of the teaching of Marx and Engels for it to acquire a new attraction for such elements." Lunacharsky quoted in Yermakov, A. *Lunacharsky*, 34–35. In *Religion and Socialism* he stresses the need for both elements: "The socialist ideal and socialist science prop up each other like the two halves of a magnificent arch." Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 17. Much later, when he was Commissar for Enlightenment, he would make the same point: "The clearest of intellects can and should be joined with a warm and responsive heart" (Lunacharsky, *On Education*, 198). Yet he always tended to side with the latter.

²⁹ *The October Storm and After*, 274.

³⁰ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 9.

³¹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 18. Over time, his position on religion and art would vary. At times, he sees a strong overlap between the two, with mutual rubbing together producing some of the great works of art, which need to be defended and preserved against the desires of the puritans within the Soviet government. Thus, both religious and artistic treasures need to be preserved and restored, since communism draws upon and raises to another level all that is best from the past. After all, "God is good when he is dead." Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 233–53. At other times, he argues that art, which can be either religious or anti-religious, may be used in the struggle against the churches. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 170–71, 274–76.

³² Describing these items as peripheral features that are often taken as the core, Lunacharsky impressively tackles head-on what was becoming an orthodox position in Second-International Marxism. He cites Plekhanov, Pannekoek, and even Engels in one of his atheistically doctrinaire moments. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 22–25. Joseph Dietzgen fares better, but ultimately he, too, falls short. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 32–37.

³³ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 21.

³⁴ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 228.

³⁵ Romans 8:24, quoted in Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 49.

³⁶ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 7.

³⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 42. Or, more neutrally, religion is "a way of thinking about the world, a feeling in which the laws of life (the human tendency) and the laws of nature are (or seem) to be reconciled. Every new relative balance between working people and nature brings with it a new form of religion." Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 213. These efforts at redefinition should not be understood as either another approach to the old shape of religion nor as the anti-religious position that attacks that old form, but as a new shape of religion itself.

comes close to Marx's idea of religion as providing a heart and soul in heartless and soulless conditions, the former is more heavily influenced by Feuerbach.³⁸ It is worth noting that Lunacharsky is far from seeing religion in a utilitarian manner, as useful for socialism, whether in terms of appealing to those with a religious bent or in terms of appropriating some peripheral elements of religion. Instead, he seeks the core of religion, its workings, contradictions, and possibilities. To this end, he focuses not "so much on the external socio-economic fate of institutions,"³⁹ but on the analysis of the main religious ideas and sentiments, "the meaning of which must be comprehended in the light of our religious consciousness," a consciousness that is found in the connection between collective ideals of socialism and the organic and conscious needs of one's own life.⁴⁰ The result is rather remarkable, for the reader encounters a Bolshevik discussing at some length on theological matters such as Christology, justification by faith, salvation, and eschatology.

The main feature — to my mind — of Lunacharsky's contribution is the sustained awareness of the political ambivalence of religion, which thereby requires a strategy of discernment. That is, while he deeply appreciates Feuerbach's (and implicitly Durkheim's later) effort to see religion in a positive light, Feuerbach's religion is ultimately a little too romantic. In religion, human beings may well project the best of themselves, yet Lunacharsky is all too aware that religion can be brutally oppressive. In this respect, he sets out to counteract the oppressive forms of religion, in which it may easily become an ideological means of ensuring subservience, resignation to one's lot, punishment for sin by a vengeful God, and the offer of a reward in the next world.⁴¹ However, before I deal with this feature of his analysis in more detail, I will focus on a number of other items: the role of myth and poetry; the religious drive for collective life,

³⁸ Of course, Marx's own discussion in the Introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* draws its inspiration from Feuerbach. One of Lunacharsky's formulations quotes Feuerbach: "religion is the grand revelation of the hidden treasure in man, the recognition of his inner thoughts, the open confession of his secret love." Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 32. Unlike the tendency among many of his comrades, who followed Engels in feeling that they had moved well beyond the limitations of Feuerbach, Lunacharsky openly relies heavily upon him, stating that he "cannot recommend strongly enough" Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, for it penetrates to the heart of religion. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 21. See also the whole section on Feuerbach, which follows that on Marx and Engels in Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 293–306.

³⁹ When called upon to make some socio-economic points, Lunacharsky is content to quote significant sections from the work of Karl Kautsky. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 27–31. The quotations are drawn from Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity*, trans. H. F. Mins (London: Socialist Resistance, [1908] 2007); Kautsky, "Social Democracy and the Catholic Church," *The Social Democrat* 7 (1903): 162–69, 234–43, 359–62, 430–36; Kautsky, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die katholische Kirche* (Berlin: n.p., 1903); and Kautsky, *Ethik und materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, trans. John B. Askew (Whitefish: Kessinger, [1906] 2010). All of which leads Lunacharsky to observe: "Someone like Kautsky is essentially closer than many others to the position defended in this book. Yet, he would be the one to judge against this position [...] In a mild form but he would still do exactly that." Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 378. The problem: Kautsky emphasizes too heavily the scientific side of socialism, relegating "socialist idealism to a position most humble and unnoticed." Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 380. However, such an approach is like "saying that the telescope is more important than the eye; or the pharmacological mixture produced in strict conformance with the rules of pharmacology is more essential than the ill stomach that this mixture is supposed to cure." Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 382–83. In his debate with Lunacharsky in 1925, the Orthodox Metropolitan, A. I. Vvedensky, notes Lunacharsky's links to Kautsky. A. I. Vvedensky, "Sodoklad A. I. Vvedenskogo [Co-Report of A. I. Vvedensky]," in *Religia i prosveshchenie*, ed. V. N. Kuznetsova (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1985), 187.

⁴⁰ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 126.

⁴¹ Lunacharsky, *On Education*, 84–85, 150–51; Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, 99–100; Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 233.

especially in Christian communism; and the revolutionary tradition, in its continuities and ruptures, from the ancient prophets to Marx. Each element may be found in both the early *Religion and Socialism* and many of his later, post-revolutionary works.

Myth, Poetry, and Human Ingots

In a word — one who is not yet a species being.⁴²

One matter does need to be clarified before I discuss these points and that is the supposed worship of human beings. God-building tends to be understood by some who have commented upon it as a proposal to replace the traditional gods with human beings.⁴³ We are the new gods, it is suggested, and should focus all our religious energies upon ourselves. Some isolated statements may be understood in this sense, but to do so is to misunderstand the nature of Lunacharsky's proposal. It is *God-building*.⁴⁴ That is, the gods provide ideal models of human desire and achievement (goodness, hope, knowledge, social transformation), models to which we aspire. However, we are in our current state far from such an achievement — hence the need for a long process of construction. Or, in his own terms, we are living ingots, still to be shaped: “Our ideal is the image of man, of man like a god, in relation to whom we are all raw material only, merely ingots waiting to be given shape, living ingots that bear their own ideal within themselves.”⁴⁵

In the very language used, Lunacharsky's poetic flair shows forth in such statements. This poetic, image-laden language is characteristic of all his writing. But he also reads texts in terms of the same sensibility, especially the Bible (which features strongly in both volumes). The Gospel narratives of Jesus are full of drama, linguistic power, tragedy, and triumph.⁴⁶ Above all, he finds the

⁴² Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 337.

⁴³ Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 1; Bergman, “The Image of Jesus,” 220–48.

⁴⁴ For example, “Man is a god. Yes, we will not be other gods, nor worship them or serve them.” Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 90.

⁴⁵ Lunacharsky, *On Education*, 57. This quotation comes from a published lecture entitled “What is Education?,” 45–58. See also similar observations in other writings on education in Lunacharsky, *On Education*, 165, 245, 247. Other statements make a similar point: “If there is a God — understood as life and its high representative — it is the human species. Serving science, labor, and, for the present age, the struggle for socialism, breaking up the old system and the old order of society and of the soul and creating a new society and a new soul — that is the religious purpose of the new man.” Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 95. Note also: “I saw before me an omnipotent God who embodied not only absolute power, but an infinite lust for life. This God is transposed into his antipode — dark, mindless matter, a God in embryo as it were, the world-egg of the Hindus, out of which worlds gradually emerge, crystals and organisms develop, spirit is formed and soars ever higher. Fragmented into myriad finite beings he experiences thousands of destinies. There is no torment which he does not endure, no humiliation to which he is not subjected, no crime which he does not commit. But in the play of light and darkness, light always prevails; in the play of good and evil, the good is exalted until at last, at the price of all his strivings and sufferings, my God rises to his earlier eminence and is enthroned in glory. And all of us are revived in him and are resurrected. All of us are now God and remember ourselves, and the life of the Deity is enriched by the memory of his peregrination from absolute darkness to absolute light.” Lunacharsky, *Etiudy kriticheskie i polemicheskie [Studies Polemical and Critical]* (Moscow: n.p., 1905), 262.

⁴⁶ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 18–22.

Apostle Paul a writer of remarkable skill, the bright and sparkling poet of early Christianity, the internationalist democrat who at the same time spiritualizes Christian thought.⁴⁷ The fact that accurate historical evidence of Jesus outside the Gospels is not available⁴⁸ provides Paul with great scope to reshape the myths of Christ at the right hand of God, as the dying and rising God who acts as the culminating point of all that has gone before.⁴⁹ By contrast, the Gnostics — or at least some of them — produce poetic gibberish that rubs all of Lunacharsky's sensibilities up the wrong way. It should come as no surprise, then, that he should see the importance of myth (anticipating Ernst Bloch by many decades). With its metaphoric language, its ability to speak of matters that cannot be expressed in ordinary language, myth points us to the ineffable appeal of religion. Indeed, religion itself may be characterized as myth, a “wonderful, graceful interweaving of tales.”⁵⁰ And these myths are full of the strange, the savory, the comic, and the scandalous nature of stories that produce delight and awe. Only in such language do the artists of tomorrow reach out to the new, or rather bind the gold of the past with the art of the future.⁵¹

Christian Communism

Christian ideals are to such an extent contrary to the established order of things, that a sincere Christian cannot fail to notice this and not feel the greatest hatred and contempt for those imaginary servants of Christ.⁵²

Within that framework, Christian communism looms large in Lunacharsky's analysis. He would never relinquish the point that early Christianity was characterized by comradeship, equality, and honesty, that the early message was a “Gospel of the poor,” of the slaves, artisans, and proletarians,⁵³ and that the early communities were “permeated by a spirit of collectivism,” sharing what little property they had.⁵⁴ On this matter, he draws upon all of the key texts in the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospels concerning such communism and the resolute

⁴⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 27–60.

⁴⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 13–14.

⁴⁹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 38–40.

⁵⁰ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 191.

⁵¹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 102.

⁵² Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 158.

⁵³ Here he follows what was already an established line on the Left, deriving from Engels, which he drew from none other than Bruno Bauer, and especially Karl Kautsky. See Engels, “On the History of Early Christianity,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27 (Moscow: Progress [1894–95] 1990), 445–69; Engels, “Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums,” in *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 22 (Berlin: Dietz, [1894–5] 1972), 447–73; Engels, “Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 24 (Moscow: Progress, [1882] 1989), 427–35; Engels, “Bruno Bauer und das Urchristentum,” in *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 19 (Berlin: Dietz, [1882] 1973), 297–305; Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity*, trans. H. F. Mins (London: Socialist Resistance, [1908] 2007); Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums: Eine historische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Dietz, [1908] 1977). See also Boer, *Criticism of Earth: On Marx, Engels and Theology, Historical Materialism Book Series* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Lunacharsky also follows Kautsky in arguing that it was a communism of consumption, rather than production, which was a crucial reason why it did not become a central feature of Christianity.

⁵⁴ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 111. Indeed, one of the ways of characterizing this collective dimension is through the tradition of defining religion in terms of the Latin etymology of the term: “religion is a ‘bond’ [религия — ‘связь’; *religiia* — ‘sviaz’].” Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 14.

opposition to acquiring private property.⁵⁵ Lunacharsky has no hesitation in calling this a form of “democratic, egalitarian socialism” throughout *Religion and Socialism*.⁵⁶ A number of elements play a role here, including the democratic virtues of the God of the Hebrew Bible, offering a sense of justice, aversion to power, to luxury, and to the associated vices and crimes;⁵⁷ the role of the Essenes and their monastic communism, as well as the Ebionites, “the poor”;⁵⁸ the subsequent history of Christian socialism, with all its continuities and breaks.⁵⁹

At times he qualifies these statements, pointing out that the communist dimension tended to be other-worldly, that the communism in question did not address the question of production, remaining within the realm of consumption, and that the democratic element lasted only as long as the early church was made up of the lower classes. All of which enables him to deploy a narrative of betrayal, if not a fall from grace. Soon enough, it becomes a religion of power and hierarchy, ready to assume that God justifies the rich and mighty so they may assert their influence over the masses, promising reward in heaven in exchange for subservience on earth. How did this happen? Lunacharsky’s answer focuses on Gnosticism, which is the aristocratic answer to the democratic and revolutionary forms of Christianity.⁶⁰ Here may be found the sources of the doctrine of the Logos, so crucial to Orthodox Christianity, and of individualism and thereby of individual power (which he is clear does not derive from Paul).⁶¹ Above all, it enables an aristocratic takeover of the church and the marginalizing of the revolutionary communist side of Christianity.⁶² In other words, Gnosticism did not fail, as the conventional narratives of the early ecumenical councils would have us believe, but succeeded in gaining control at structural and doctrinal levels. The last chance for an alternative lay with the ambiguous work of Clement and Origen, especially in their efforts to produce syntheses of communist and aristocratic elements, but they failed, as may be seen in the full statement of orthodox Christianity in Augustine and the clear class identification of the clergy with the ruling class.⁶³ As he sums up in the later debates with Vvedensky, a transformation took place from a “chaotic primitive church into a strong, cunning, subtle instrument of oppression.”⁶⁴

Whether this account holds up is another matter, but Lunacharsky needs what may be called a narrative of the Fall from that early communism (found in its classic form in Genesis 2–3). Class is inextricably tied up with this development, for although the original church may have appealed to poor peasants and workers, it soon attracted a morally-bereft aristocracy and propertied classes, who then

⁵⁵ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 65.

⁵⁶ See also Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 114, 76, 84–85, 92, 120–21, 173–76.

⁵⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 7.

⁵⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 11, 23–26, 35–36, 61.

⁵⁹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 139–82.

⁶⁰ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 69–101.

⁶¹ A wonderful doctrine for the bourgeoisie, which “seeks mystery and faith. Gnosticism is deep, beautiful, and flexible.” Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 104.

⁶² Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 104–39.

⁶³ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 106–22.

⁶⁴ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 92.

smoothed the passage for Christianity to become a religion of empire.⁶⁵ While the need for some account of how early Christianity became the church of today is necessary, a Fall narrative is problematic for a number of reasons. It assumes a betrayal of an initial, original impulse that one must seek to restore. In that respect, Lunacharsky's argument falls into the perpetual logic of Christian reform movements, which seek the elusive origin to justify their own positions. Further, it substitutes a linear narrative for a more subtle analysis that recognizes the tensions at the heart of a religion such as Christianity. This subtlety emerges in Lunacharsky's concern with the theological and political ambivalence of Christianity — a theme that is in many respects more important in his study (see below).

More astutely, Lunacharsky introduces a crucial distinction into his discussion of Christian communism: communal, democratic, and radically equal living constitutes only one dimension, for the other element is revolution itself. Christianity may have exhibited elements that qualify it as communist in the first sense, but what about revolution? Here Lunacharsky is unequivocal: Christianity was also revolutionary, since it included a rough justice for the wealthy and ruling class:

The communist spirit of early, popular Christianity is not in doubt. But was it revolutionary? Yes, of course. In its negation, the radical, merciless negation of the civilized world of the time, in posing in its place a completely new way of life, it was revolutionary. Any ideology that truly reflects the mood of the oppressed masses can only be revolutionary in its depth.⁶⁶

He deploys this distinction between communist living and revolution in a number of ways, at times combining them and at others exploring their contradictions, but here he sees enough similarity on both counts between Marxism and Christianity to call them communist, for “their ideals are partly congruent.”⁶⁷

Revolution and the Revolutionary Tradition

In a religious society one cannot make a revolution or a broader reform that is not a revolution in the field of the relationship with God.⁶⁸

Not only do Christianity and Marxism share the communist and revolutionary drive, but revolution itself becomes the key moment of God-building, constituting a heightened time in which the new person may be constructed. But how exactly do they relate to one another, given the historical gap between the time of early Christianity and modern Marxism? Is it a continuous tradition, with the earlier manifestation feeding eventually into Marxism? Not quite, for the connection between them is somewhat more complicated. Given that there are traditions of

⁶⁵ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 121–24.

⁶⁶ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 139. See also his later statements in the same vein in *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 177–78.

⁶⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 159.

⁶⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 70.

Christian communism, the best way to understand his approach is to distinguish between the false and true traditions of Christian communism.

The false tradition is precisely the recent Christian socialism that appealed to so many. In England it may have been Carlyle and the radical clergy; in Germany Naumann and Kutter led the push; in Russia Tolstoy was the great proponent, but it also included Bulgakov for a time, Merezhkovsky, and Metropolitan Filaret.⁶⁹ But why are they false? One reason Lunacharsky states clearly: they may have picked up certain radical elements of earlier Christian revolutionary forms, but they offer aberrations — a cold and drab alternative, a tendency to adopt all of the secularist and free-thinking approaches so that they are hardly Christian at all, an ineradicable bourgeois sentiment, if not actually a counter-revolutionary one. The other reason is not stated directly, but I would suggest that Lunacharsky had to make such an argument in order to claim the ground for Marxism. If he had granted them too much legitimacy, then one would wonder at the need for modern socialism at all. These Christian socialists would be enough. Instead, he seeks to show that they are not the true inheritors of radical and revolutionary religious traditions, for that honor belongs to Marxism, the “great new religion” that will replace all the others.⁷⁰

By contrast, the true tradition of revolutionary religious communism is ancient indeed, running all the way back in the Bible to a dimension of the Hebrew God, Yahweh. Quoting the Bible extensively, he traces Samuel the staunch anti-monarchist, the rebellious people after the death of Solomon,⁷¹ but above all the Hebrew prophets: “Great prophets are always on the borders, among seething social struggle. With eagle eyes peering into the future, they provide a slogan, generalize the struggle, scourge the enemies of their ideas, console supporters.”⁷² So we find Amos the firebrand, bright Hosea, Isaiah the democrat, Jeremiah the furiously eloquent, elements of the Law, the Apostle Paul as the revolutionary, democratic internationalist, and of course Jesus the scourge of the propertied and wealthy.⁷³ Beyond the biblical text, Lunacharsky also discerns this prophetic tradition in the “everlasting Gospel” of Joachim of Fiore (a favorite of Ernst Bloch), adding Francis of Assisi, Fra Dolcino, Thomas Müntzer and the Peasant Revolution, the Münster Revolution of 1534–35,⁷⁴ even the Puritans of the English

⁶⁹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 155–82.

⁷⁰ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 182.

⁷¹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 163–64.

⁷² Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 70.

⁷³ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 165–78. “Christ, according to the Gospel, not only heralded the demise of the world, but the overthrow of the proud and the exaltation of the poor and downtrodden.” Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 15. Notably, the prophet Ezekiel is not among the prophets, for he is the conservative purveyor of the priestly spirit. Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 183.

⁷⁴ From February 1534 until June 1535, Münster was under the control of radical Anabaptists. During this brief and tumultuous period a communism of goods was instituted (based on Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35); all non-Anabaptists were expelled or executed; twelve judges were appointed as in Israel of old; the kingdom of David was proclaimed, and the self-appointed king, Jan van Leyden, took many wives; Münster was declared the “New Jerusalem”; everyone believed that Christ was about to return to earth with a massive army to wipe out all their enemies; and there were myriad dreams, visions, and direct encounters with God. Not content with taking over the government of Münster, these radicals set about organizing campaigns to conquer the rest of the world. In less than 18 months it was all over. See Boer, *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 9–13.

Revolution.⁷⁵ Here indeed are the fiery preachers of the three ages — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — in the spirit of the prophets, with the last, eschatological age about to happen. And (once again like Bloch) he is not afraid to claim the millenarian, eschatological dimension of all these prophets for Marxism.⁷⁶

All of which leads Lunacharsky to mention “the greatest of the prophets — Karl Marx.”⁷⁷ Lenin may have let such a statement pass, but one can only imagine his hackles rising with the observation that “Marx bowed deeply to the manger-born proletariat.”⁷⁸ Yet Lunacharsky was not one to shy away from a provocative statement or two, although he does add the caveat that all of these prophets, in their inability to discern the progressive feature of the current situation, manifest the radicalism characteristic of the small proprietor, much like the Tolstoy, the Narodniks, and Socialist-Revolutionaries of his own day.⁷⁹

This complex tradition, with its shortcomings and achievement, leads ultimately to revolution, but I have not yet explicated how Lunacharsky understands such a revolution. In this case, since the only revolution he had experienced at the time of writing *Religion and Socialism* was the failed one of 1905, with 1917 yet to come, I draw on some other words to gain a sense of his approach to revolution.

One approach was to draw on the theme of sinless sacrifice, specifically in relation to the 1905 revolution. Soon after Bloody Sunday, Lunacharsky penned an extraordinary poem, “On the Anniversary of the January 9th.”⁸⁰ The poem takes the voice of a young man who relates both his and his father’s participation in the march, led by Father Gapon, to present a petition to the tsar. Despite what the two protagonists initially believed — having followed the advice of the “good priest Gapon” who spoke to these workers every Sunday afternoon “in a workers’ meeting” — the march was to turn bloody. Gapon had convinced the workers that all they need do is be good Christians and address their grievances to the earthly father, the tsar. Biblical allusions appear throughout, marking key theological and liturgical moments. It begins with the lamp of hope that “has not been extinguished” (Exod. 27:20–21; Lev. 24:2–4), which is also the lamp in a home’s icon corner. The icon-image itself is carried in the march (Gen. 1:26) and the people give voice to their suffering, murmuring against their rulers (Exod. 15:24 and throughout the wilderness wanderings). Thus, with the icons before them, anticipating God’s representative on earth to respond to their prayer of supplication, the crowd sings hymns and smiles. They are in for a rude shock, for the commander of the Cossack regiment does not wish to listen. He has his orders: to talk to the tsar directly, like the nobles do, is not for ordinary men. On that terrible day, the “clouds poured blood”

⁷⁵ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 55, 141, 145–55; Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 183–84. See also Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 92–102, 120–25, 181–83.

⁷⁶ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 171–72; Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 34–35, 61–69.

⁷⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 188. Note also: “we propose in relation to our prophets not only the requirements of passion, energy, warm love, poetic imagery of speech, the ability to create slogans — we also require of them calm and cold reflection, restraint, objective analysis. Can one person combine and do both? Yes. Because we witnessed such a miracle: we were taught by the greatest prophet of the world — Marx.” Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 72.

⁷⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 101.

⁷⁹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 161, 179–80; Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 153.

⁸⁰ Lunacharsky, “K iubileiu 9 ianvaria [For the Anniversary of January 9th].” *Proletarii* 13 (August 9, 1905): 3–4.

(Joel 2:31; Acts 2:20; Rev. 6:12), the Cossack regiment fires on the sinless workers (Isa. 52–53) and the old man is killed. The white snow, a symbol of sinlessness, is turned red with innocent blood (Isa. 1:18). Broken icons lie scattered about. Of course, the whole father–son relation is deeply theological, except that on this occasion the father dies a sinless death. In response, the son now vows that next time, instead of religious banners, he will be carrying a red flag; instead of icons he will be taking to the procession “bombs, guns, and dynamite,” and they will be singing not church hymns but *La Marseillaise*.⁸¹

The successful revolution was yet to come. October 1917 was indeed an ecstatic moment for a man given to an intensity of feeling. In the midst of the revolution itself, he shared his excitement, his profound spiritual ecstasy, with all around him. To Sukhanov, he exclaimed, “These events are epoch-making! Our children’s children will bow their heads before their grandeur!”⁸² He wrote that life was “colossal in everything, tragic, and significant,” indeed that it was “the greatest, most definitive act of ‘God-building,’ the most dazzling and decisive step towards fulfilling the program laid down by Nietzsche — ‘the world is without meaning, but we must give it meaning’.”⁸³ Caught up in these immense, strongly felt experiences, he was not afraid to speak of God, albeit a God that has now given himself to the world. All this should make it clear that the revolution constituted not so much the worship of human achievement, but a heightened process during which human beings took a leap forward in the process of shaping those living ingots.

Ambivalence: Between Democracy and Oppression

The gap between the old and new image of God becomes so deep that the deity was divided into two gods.⁸⁴

⁸¹ A comparable interweaving of biblical allusions may be found in a much reworked piece, originally three articles, on Vladimir Korolenko. Lunacharsky, “Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 376–81. Available at <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-1/vladimir-galaktionovic-korolenko>. Korolenko had written a series of letters to Lunacharsky, drawing attention to the injustices occurring under the new government. Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko, *Pis'ma k Lunacharskomu* (Moscow: Sovremennik, [1920] 1990). Available at http://az.lib.ru/k/korolenko_w_g/text_1080-1.shtml. Lunacharsky forwarded one of these letters to Lenin, at the latter’s request. Lunacharsky, “Lunacharskii — Leninu (20 iulia 1907 g.),” in V. I. *Lenin i A. V. Lunacharskii. Perepiska, doklady, dokumenty (Literaturnoe nasledstvo, tom 80)* (Moscow: Nauka, [1920] 1971). In his reflections on Korolenko, Lunacharsky writes: “should we win, we will by no means chastise him [for his errors], but will say to him with all kindness and love: Our father [Matthew 6], our dear apostle of pity, truth, and love. Don’t be mad at us that freedom and brotherhood have to be obtained through violence [Mat 11:12] and civil war. Yet the task has been accomplished [Jn 19:30]. Having engaged in this war, the butchers of all people have signed the verdict against themselves [like Pilate]. The world congress of the Soviets of Labour is being summoned [Isaiah 43:1; 51:4]. Russia who has been torn by the battle yet is victorious and is now venerated by all, is signing new treaties with her sisters who are free [Ezekiel 16, 22–3]. Behold now [Genesis 12:11 and throughout the Bible to 2 Corinthians 6:2], the spring of beauty, and love, and truth is drawing near [Hosea 6:2; Ezekiel 16:60] — so be creative, oh father [Genesis 1], and teach us [Torah]. The dark period when you, being soft of heart, got confused without really willing it, is gone now [Psalm 23]. The flood has passed. Behold, here’s the pigeon with an olive branch [Genesis 6–9], so go out and plant roses upon the earth that has been renewed [Hosea and the prophets].” My thanks go to Sergey Kozin for directing me to these texts and providing the translation. On the high regard held by the peasants for Korolenko, who criticized in a similar fashion the excesses of the autocracy, especially through his journal, *Russian Wealth*, see William English Walling, *Russia’s Message: The True World Import of the Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1908), 237–41, 344–46.

⁸² Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 1.

⁸³ Lunacharsky, *Velikii perevorot [The Great Upheaval]* (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1919), 31.

⁸⁴ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 75.

I have left the most significant contribution of *Religion and Socialism* until last, namely, the consistent uncovering of the political and theological ambivalence of religion and the consequent need for discernment. Again and again, Lunacharsky points out that a religion like Judaism or Christianity faces an inescapable tension between the revolutionary and the counter-revolutionary. The gods themselves may be the embodiment of democracy, the aspirations of the poor, and of resolute hatred for the rich and powerful; yet the gods may also sit very snugly in the seat of power.⁸⁵ At times this awareness takes less insightful form, such as the argument that early Christian communism was systematically marginalized and that the church fell from grace to become a religion of empire (as I noted earlier). At other times, he may follow a conventional opposition, such as that between the priests and the prophets, between ideologues of power and their fiery critics.⁸⁶ And at times he may lose his dialectical sharpness, as when he lumps the Reformation in with liberal Christianity, an expression of the new power of the bourgeoisie (here he follows Engels).⁸⁷ Yet, even here, a glimmer of dialectical analysis appears, for the Reformation failed to live up to its initial agenda — freedom of the individual, reading the Bible, freedom of faith, absence of ritual and external piety.

This glimmer opens up the full exercise of a dialectical approach to political ambivalence, in which revolutionary and reactionary elements are inseparable, the one enabling the other. This is a tension internal to the logic of the biblical material in which those texts may simultaneously side with power and become a source for protest. The examples are many, of which his favored prophets are one:

The prophets were *revolutionaries* because they fought for the people who were oppressed and they sought a social upheaval in the spirit of egalitarianism. They were [also] *reactionaries* because they placed their ideal in the past, in the simplicity of the morals and in the patriarchal equality of the pastoral period, and they fought against economic progress that had to go through concentrations of land and of capital.⁸⁸

It is no surprise, then, that a great prophet like Isaiah (whom Lunacharsky quotes extensively) was both a democrat and compromiser with the ruling class.⁸⁹ In other words, the revolutionary impulse of the prophets is itself enabled by a backward-looking, pastoral, small-proprietor, and anti-progress perspective. Without the latter, they would not have been revolutionary, yet that reactionary element ultimately restricts the unleashing of a full revolutionary approach.

A comparable tension appears in the poet of early Christianity, Paul.⁹⁰ In response to the delay in Christ's return, Paul constructs an idealized, mystical, and other-worldly theology that spiritualizes a very earthly and political movement. The heavenly face of Christ now overshadows the worldly person.⁹¹ At the same

⁸⁵ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 64.

⁸⁶ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 68–69.

⁸⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 193–99.

⁸⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 165.

⁸⁹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 169.

⁹⁰ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 41–45, 53, 58–60.

⁹¹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 53.

time, by means of that spiritualization, Paul breaks through to a more international and democratic form of Christianity. Christianity is no longer ethnically and nationally limited, for it belongs to all. The analysis of Paul becomes even more subtle, for in internationalizing Christianity, he overcomes yet another tension, now within early Christianity. That form, which Lunacharsky admires, may have been resolutely communistic, yet it was trapped within a fierce nationalism and hatred of foreign oppressors. Paul's response both moves away from that early communism and negates its fiercely nationalistic focus. Indeed, he was able to do so only through an anti-communist spiritualization. And yet, at this higher level (*Aufhebung*), Paul offers a new revolutionary doctrine: justification by faith is itself deeply revolutionary, for it destroys the privilege of the rich and powerful.⁹² Finally, it is precisely this mystical theology that makes Paul a great myth-maker, producing a reshaped myth of the dying and rising Christ, a myth that Lunacharsky admires for its sparkling poetic power.

One may even see this tension embodied in the deity. The aspirations of the people of the Old Testament for freedom, social justice, and equality, if not communism, are inspired by none other than God. Yet, with the establishment of a new order, this revolutionary God turns into a conservative or moderate liberal.⁹³ Or, as Lunacharsky puts it later, the tribal god, Yahweh, appears as "ally of the lower classes, the god of revolution," one who overthrows tyrants and those who have grown fat on the bones of others. At the same time he is a "cruel commander," one who demands bloody sacrifice (the first-born and circumcision) and the complete extermination of whole peoples, even down to the children.⁹⁴ Christ too embodies these two faces, being both a "communist," "a humble teacher of wisdom," full of life and the desire for a higher good. Yet he is also "horrible and grim," fostering in the hearts of people a desire for revenge.⁹⁵

A religion like Christianity, therefore, may take oppressive forms, all too often an expression of the dominance of nobles and priests, and it may also be "essentially a complete denial of all noble rank, of all noble birth, of any war, of any vengeful feeling."⁹⁶ Or, to echo Ernst Bloch many years later, Christianity may be both a "creed of democracy" and a justification for "meekly bearing the yoke" of oppression.⁹⁷

I close with a slightly different example, from Lunacharsky's literary analysis, but one that expresses this awareness of the ambivalence of Christianity in a unique way. It appears in the midst of a long engagement with Bakhtin's study of Dostoyevsky.⁹⁸ Here he offers a sharp analysis of Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky. He locates the first two at either end of the political spectrum,

⁹² Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 55.

⁹³ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 76.

⁹⁴ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 50.

⁹⁵ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 139-40.

⁹⁶ Lunacharsky, *On Education*, 150.

⁹⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 92. For a full discussion of the political ambivalence at the core of Christianity, see my *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology. V. Historical Materialism Book Series* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

⁹⁸ Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, 79-106.

Gogol as a supporter of the landowners and Tolstoy as an implacable warrior against such slavery. Both can easily justify such positions by resorting to the Gospels. In between we find Dostoyevsky, who both avoids a spiritual break with socialism while anathematizing materialist socialism. This tension becomes the key to Dostoyevsky's polyphony, characterized in a brilliant passage by Lunacharsky worth quoting in full:

He devoted all his genius for thought, feeling and character-drawing to the erection of altars rising to heaven. There is something of everything: the subtlest sophism and the faith of a charcoal-burner; the frenzy of the "fool in Christ" and refined analysis; the poet's facile gift of winning over the reader by the acute insight attributed to the religious characters, etc. Yet Dostoyevsky returns in doubt again and again to survey his many-storied edifices, understanding that they are not built to last and that, at the first underground tremor caused by the movement of the fettered Titan whom he has buried in his own heart, the whole pile of spillikins is going to collapse.⁹⁹

"At the first underground tremor caused by the movement of the fettered Titan whom he has buried in his own heart" — only Lunacharsky could express the deep, internal ambivalence of Christianity in such a fashion.

Conclusion

It is not necessary to look for God. Let us give him to the world! There is no God in the world, but there might be. The road of struggle for socialism [...] is what is meant by God-building.¹⁰⁰

In looking back over the extensive project that is *Religion and Socialism*, Lunacharsky was all too aware of the partial nature of the work, yet he felt he had achieved some clarification concerning religion in relation to Marxism: "I tried to open wide the door of the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies of emotional Marxism. My book is at the threshold of the doorway."¹⁰¹ In concluding this analysis of his project, I would like to raise three points: his argument that Marxism offers a culmination and higher synthesis of religion; the tension between old and new; and the subsequent fate of God-building.

To begin with, what does it mean to say that communism offers the highest synthesis of religion? Lunacharsky speaks of Marxism as a new religion, the most complete synthesis, the fifth great religion that emerged out of Judaism. He describes Marx as a prophet in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, of Zoroaster, and of Jesus. These are arresting formulations, yet they raise some questions. Those who ascribe to the hypothesis that Marxism is merely a secularized form of Jewish and Christian salvation history will sagely nod their heads, for Lunacharsky expresses an obvious truth. The catch here is that this common perception, which

⁹⁹ Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, 104.

¹⁰⁰ Lunacharsky quoted in Yermakov, A. *Lunacharsky*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 394.

has become a given due to a thousand repetitions, collapses under the weight of evidence. As I have argued elsewhere, this was precisely the religiously-saturated and deeply apocalyptic version of socialism that Marx and Engels resolutely opposed.¹⁰² The fact that Lunacharsky feels called upon to introduce these elements into Marxism indicates their absence within that system of thought and action. Further, the argument that Marxism offers a new and higher synthesis of religion faces the thorny problem of Marx's own largely negative understanding of religion, as the sign of a world out-of-joint, as the response to real suffering which must itself be overcome for religion to fade away, as an other-worldly and empty belief in God, and as the expression of bourgeois individualism.¹⁰³ On this matter, Lunacharsky feels called upon to redefine religion and take a step beyond Marx to suggest that Marx's sense of religious feeling is "the personal understanding of the value of life only in connection with a grand sweep of collective life."¹⁰⁴ Another problem is that the grand narrative, from the prophets to Marx, follows an evolutionary, if not teleological, path that can only culminate in Marxism. On this matter, Lunacharsky is wary indeed, avoiding such a framework and preferring to describe Marxism as a search for what is already almost found.¹⁰⁵ We search for a lost item, at times coming close to finding it, at others being far away. Marxism comes closest of them all.

I suggest, however, that Lunacharsky touches here on the perpetual problem facing revolutionaries, that of rupture and continuity. A new movement, especially one that achieves revolutionary success, must of necessity define itself against all that has gone before, for otherwise it would not be so new. Yet new movements do not appear *ex nihilo*, for they build upon what has gone before. Indeed, in his approach to art, architecture, and literature, Lunacharsky was a strong proponent of drawing up the best of the past and transforming it in light of the new situation. This tension between rupture and continuity shapes Lunacharsky's formulations of the prophetic, religious communist heritage of Marxism, but it also enables one to understand his arguments for breaks and discontinuities, as appears in his effort to show that modern Christian socialism is not the inheritor of earlier revolutionary currents, and is thereby also not the forerunner of modern socialism.

A similar approach appears in Lunacharsky's disavowals of the connections between Christian and Marxist forms of communism. These are more common after the October Revolution, when he was Commissar for Enlightenment. For example, in his debates with Vvedensky in 1925, he felt the need to tone down his enthusiastic assertions concerning the connections between Christian communism and Marxism. While he admits that in certain respects, Christianity "is closely linked with communism," especially in its early forms but also in Christian sects of the sixteenth century, all these likenesses still do not mean that Christianity "really rotates around the axis of socialist ideas." Now the other side of Christianity comes to the fore — its "colossal historic privilege," and its tendency to split into

¹⁰² Boer, "Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered," *Mediations* 25, no. 1 (2011): 39–60.

¹⁰³ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 337.

¹⁰⁴ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 347; see also 335.

¹⁰⁵ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 2*, 365.

many groups all claiming the truth, make it impossible to find any type of Christianity “that could be called true.”¹⁰⁶ In order to drive his point home, he invokes nothing less than the saying of Matt. 19:24: “And I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” The camel becomes the church, “loaded with its religious treasures” and the kingdom of heaven on the other side of the revolutionary eye of the needle is, of course, socialism.¹⁰⁷ In short, the very idea of a contemporary communist-Christian such as Vvedensky is an “absurd phenomenon.”¹⁰⁸

At one level, these arguments may be seen as tactical. With the erudite Vvedensky threatening to trap him with the point that socialism must be seen within the broader framework of religion, invoking Lunacharsky’s arguments from *Religion and Socialism* to do so,¹⁰⁹ Lunacharsky opts to retreat from some of his earlier formulations. Yet, in doing so, he manifests once again the tension between rupture and break. Emphasize too much the break and you lose all contact with what has gone before, attempting to construct the new order from a clean slate. Move in the other direction and stress the continuity with various streams that have preceded your own movement and you lose the newness of your own cause. Depending on the circumstances, Lunacharsky leans now on one side, now on the other, attempting mediation between them. Occasionally he does achieve such mediation, as when he subtly reinterprets Marx’s eleventh thesis: “The old philosophies sought to interpret the world, the new aim is to remake it.”¹¹⁰ If we understand the old philosophies as religious ones, then their *remaking* (and not creation) is what he seeks with God-building.

Finally, I cannot emphasize enough a point that will become important as Lunacharsky’s encounter with Lenin unfolds: Lunacharsky *maintained much of the language of God-building well after the condemnation by Lenin*, especially during his time as Commissar for Enlightenment after the October Revolution. The appearance in my treatment on Lunacharsky of citations from later works, particularly from his texts on education and art, indicate quite clearly that he did so. He may have made occasional half-hearted mentions of his former “errors” but the reality was that he saw his role as commissar very much in light of the God-building project. Why? Unlike a bevy of Marxists, Lunacharsky was simply not persuaded that religion would fade away, whether before the inexorable march of science, or reason, or even through revolution — as held by so many of his comrades.¹¹¹ In this respect, he was prescient indeed, foreseeing the complex questions posed by the situation after October 1917. Is this perhaps why he persisted with his God-building?

¹⁰⁶ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 194.

¹⁰⁷ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 201.

¹⁰⁸ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i prosveshchenie*, 111.

¹⁰⁹ Vvedensky, “Otvetnoe slovo A. I. Vvedenskogo [Response by A. I. Vvedensky],” in *Religia i Prosveshchenie*, ed. V. N. Kuznetsova (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1985), 220.

¹¹⁰ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 148.

¹¹¹ Lunacharsky, *Religiia i sotsializm: Tom 1*, 22–30.

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