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Article abstract

This essay examines the historical and discursive process that led various elites in Third Republic France (1871–1940) to interpret the modern mass media as vehicles for new, secular forms of religious experience. It argues that this interpretation owed its origins to fin-de-siècle theories about the links between collective behaviour, hypnotic suggestion, and "religiosity." It also demonstrates that this interpretation enjoyed cultural resonance because of the specific formal properties of new audio-visual media such as radio. Adopting the methodological framework of cultural history, this paper suggests that the symbolic relevance of the term "religion" actually expanded during this period, which is well known for its growing secularism. It thus maintains that secularization in this context was not a uniform or teleological process, but one fraught with ambiguity and complexity.

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Abstract

This essay examines the historical and discursive process that led various elites in Third Republic France (1871–1940) to interpret the modern mass media as vehicles for new, secular forms of religious experience. It argues that this interpretation owed its origins to fin-de-siècle theories about the links between collective behaviour, hypnotic suggestion, and "religiosity." It also demonstrates that this interpretation enjoyed cultural resonance because of the specific formal properties of new audio-visual media such as radio. Adopting the methodological framework of cultural history, this paper suggests that the symbolic relevance of the term "religion" actually expanded during this period, which is well known for its growing secularism. It thus maintains that secularization in this context was not a uniform or teleological process, but one fraught with ambiguity and complexity.

Résumé

Cet article examine le processus historique et discursif qui a mené diverses élites de la Troisième République française (1871-1940) à considérer les médias de masse modernes comme véhicules des formes nouvelles et profanes de l'expérience religieuse. Il fait valoir qu'une telle interprétation tire ses origines des théories de fin-de-siècle sur les liens entre le comportement collectif, la suggestion hypnotique et la « religiosité ». Il démontre également qu'une telle interprétation a joui d'une résonnance culturelle significative en raison des propriétés formelles spécifiques des nouveaux médias audio-visuels comme la radio. En adoptant le cadre méthodologique de l'histoire culturelle, l'auteur suggère que la pertinence symbolique du mot « religion » a pris de l'ampleur

au cours de cette période mieux connue pour sa laïcité croissante. Par conséquent, il soutient que la sécularisation dans un tel contexte ne s'est pas produite de façon uniforme ou téléologique, mais qu'elle représente plutôt un processus riche d'ambigüité et de complexité.

In 1939 the social theorist and former surrealist Jules Monnerot invited readers of the literary review *Volontés* to respond to an inquiry about whether new secular "spiritual directors" had replaced the religious ones of the past. His list of possible spiritual guides included political leaders "to whom the masses listen," journalists — "especially those working for newspapers with large circulations" — and publishers, who "grant or refuse the imprimatur, as the spiritual powers once did." Monnerot also asked respondents to address whether they saw "in the large post-war nationalist movements ... a return of the tribal religions" that had long ago been replaced by "victorious Christianity." The inquiry implied the likelihood of an important connection between secular mass phenomena and displaced religious impulses. It also raised the possibility that through modern rationalism society had "attained a sort of adulthood" that allowed it to dispense with spiritual direction.[1]

By the time Monnerot posed these questions, the modern media had dramatically transformed cultural, political, and social life in France and elsewhere. To the nineteenth century world of novels, illustrated magazines, and the press, the interwar years had added radio, comic books, and "talking" cinema. By the 1930s the evolution of photo-mechanical and printing techniques had also permitted the rapid and inexpensive production of photographic images in newspapers, such as *Paris-Soir*, and magazines, such as the popular *Vu*, which was akin to the American *Life* magazine. Indeed, mass-produced images and spoken words began to influence the public to the point that large-scale cultural transmission no longer necessarily required literacy as its foundation.[2] This fact alone was a considerable source of anxiety for many French elites. As the new

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1 *Volontés* was a monthly review devoted to the discussion of literature, the arts, and, to a lesser extent, social and political theory and philosophy. The slogan on its cover claimed it was "for the defense of values, for the free expression of thought, for poetry," and "against the commercialization of thought, art, and man." (All translations by author unless otherwise indicated.) The inquiry and the responses to it appeared in the February and June 1939 issues (nos. 14 and 18 respectively). For a portion of the inquiry and selected responses, see Denis Hollier, ed., *Le Collège de Sociologie*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 569-76, 762-96. Translation taken from Denis Hollier, ed., *The College of Sociology (1937–39)*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 51-2.

2 Statistical information confirms the growth of the audio-visual media in France during this period: the number of movie theatres increased by 75 percent between 1920 and 1929, from 2,400 to 4,200. Between 1930 and 1939, the number of radio receivers jumped more than tenfold, from 500,000 to 5.2 million. By 1938 *Paris-Soir* — the first daily newspaper to make

media became increasingly important to the propaganda machines of fascist and
communist regimes, it became ever more crucial to assess their real and poten-
tial impact on French society. If the mass media — and the political formations
using them — were vehicles for new forms of religiosity, what did that mean for
the hard-won secularism of the Republic? What did it say about the scientific
worldview that made the invention of media technology possible in the first
place? Had secular science helped create new religions? Was it possible that the
modern world was at once both secular *and* religious?

This paper reconstructs the historical and discursive process through which
the modern mass media placed the relationship between the religious and the
secular under stress. It argues that this process blurred the boundaries between
these domains, ultimately provoking a crisis in French republicanism, which
had idealized and instituted their separation. Although its focus is on the inter-
war period, it begins with an analysis of a *fin-de-siècle* medico-scientific
discourse on hypnosis, which, along with a more popular pseudo-scientific dis-
course on crowds and their alleged "religious" nature, shaped most interwar
interpretations of the mass media. These two discourses laid the groundwork
for the notion that the modern media promoted not rational communication, but
mass hypnosis and the development of secular religions. Together, they also
provide an early example of how scientific and religious vocabularies could
intermingle in explanations of collective or "mass" phenomena. As the second
section of this paper demonstrates, a similar blending occurred in assessments
of the modern media's ability to bring, in audio-visual form, faraway realities
into living-rooms and movie houses. This power to make the absent "present"
resulted from the ingenious exploitation of the physics of light and sound. But
it also invited comparisons between the media and religion or the occult, since
those domains had long held claims on the ability to conjure up in spiritual or
ghostly form realities that were not physically present.

These first two sections thus tell the story of how, when it came to the mod-
ern mass media, the term "religion" expanded its symbolic reach during the
Third Republic (1871–1940), even as France took secularism to new heights
with the positivist-materialist outlook and anti-clerical policies of the republic's
founders and many of its leaders. I offer a genealogy of the idea that the mod-
ern secular world has, paradoxically, produced new forms of "religious"

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extensive use of photography in France — boasted a circulation of two million, nearly one-
third of the total combined circulation for all Paris newspapers and double that of its rival, *Le
Petit Parisien*. On the history of the interwar French media, see Olivier Barrot and Pascal Ory,
eds., *Entre deux guerres: la création française entre 1919–1939* (Paris: François Bourin,
1990); Pascale Goetschel and Emmanuelle Loyer, *Histoire culturelle et intellectuelle de la
France au XXᵉ siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1995); Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Une histoire des
médias des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1996); Régine Robin, *Masses et culture de masse
dans les années 30* (Paris: Ouvrières, 1991); and Claude Bellanger, et al., eds., *Histoire
générale de la presse française*, vol. III (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972).

experience, and that secularism can not be adequately described without recourse to the language of religion. As shall be seen in the final section, many interwar commentators experienced that paradox as the symptom of a serious cultural and spiritual crisis, one that was exacerbated by the perception that the interwar dictatorships — and especially Nazi Germany — offered visions of the nefarious political forms that secular religions might take.[3]

The notion that interpretations of mass phenomena typically engage the category of the "religious" is not new. In an erudite intellectual history of theories of mass culture, Patrick Brantlinger argues, "The social and industrial processes that have created the modern mass media seem intrinsically bound up with secularization. But mass culture also can be viewed as a substitute for mythology or even as an ersatz religion."[4] Brantlinger takes the connection between secular mass culture and ersatz religiosity at face value and tracks its expression in the works of prominent Western intellectuals ranging from Nietzsche and Eliot to Marx and McLuhan. This paper in contrast draws evidence from a range of commentators — some of whom were little-known outside France — to address how, why, and to what effect that connection was generated in the more localized context of the Third Republic. In choosing this focus, my aim is not to argue for a specifically French response to the problem of mass culture, but to investigate a level of cultural production bypassed in Brantlinger's focus on transnational intellectual history. My methodological inspiration comes from the "new cultural history" — no longer so new — which distinguished itself by treating the meaning of categories such as "women" or the "working class" not as self-evident but as the outcome of broad historical-discursive processes.[5] Here, it is the often unquestioned link between

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3 I located many of the primary sources cited in this paper by searching the subject catalogues of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* using terms such as "fascism," "masses," "media," "radio," "cinema," etc. I also surveyed publications such as *L'Illustration*, *Psychologie et vie* (a magazine of popular psychology), and the *Encyclopédie française*. Though the evidence I gleaned from periodicals is not cited here, it has influenced my thinking in a general sense and plays a role in the larger study of which this paper is a part. My research revealed that most commentators on modern mass phenomena relied to some degree on the discursive framework of nineteenth-century crowd psychology in advancing their interpretations, which does not mean that they used that framework in the same way, only that its governing terms proved highly salient for many. More traditional social scientists, such as those in the Durkheimian school of sociology, paid surprisingly little attention to the modern media and their impact, tending instead to focus their research on exotic cultures.

4 Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 82.

5 Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1989). See also Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); and William J. Bouwsma, "From History of Ideas to History of Meaning," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1981): 279-91.

modern mass phenomena and displaced "religious" impulses that finds itself subjected to this form of analysis. The paper is organized thematically rather than chronologically in order to highlight continuities between *fin-de-siècle* and interwar discourses on modern mass phenomena.

By examining how the mass media disturbed the traditional meaning of secularity, this paper also uncovers a previously unexplored episode in the history of secularism in republican France. Historians of the Third Republic have mostly focused on debates over secularization within and between political parties, the secularization of public education in the 1880s, and the famous law of 1905, which ended Napoleon's *concordat* and instituted the separation of church and state, much to the dismay of the Vatican.[6] Shifting the focus away from politics, society, and law and toward the cultural production of meaning, this paper demonstrates that the discourse on secularism also suffered a symbolic crisis during this period — one that culminated in interwar assessments of the modern mass media and their effects. The fact that the meaning of the "religious" actually expanded during this period of growing secularism prompts a rethinking of how secularism itself is understood. The evidence from the French context suggests that this process involved more than the gradual removal of religion from public life; secular mass phenomena at least (and the ways they were interpreted) also gave to the term "religion" a measure of semantic fluidity and ambiguity that it had not previously enjoyed. In other words, secular culture did not simply marginalize religion. It also transformed what counted as religious experience.

I. "Hypnotism … takes place in everyday life"

Interwar cultural and political commentators regularly used the relationship between hypnotists and their subjects as a metaphor for the relationship between the mass media and the public, or, even more commonly, between the media-savvy dictator and the masses. Russian expatriate psycho-physiologist and committed republican Wladimir Drabovitch, for example, remarked that

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6 Major studies include Malcolm O. Partin, *Waldeck-Rousseau, Combes, and the Church: The Politics of Anticlericalism, 1899–1905* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1969); John McManners, *Church and State in France, 1870–1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Maurice Larkin, *Church and State after the Dreyfus Affair: The Separation Issue in France* (London: Macmillan, 1974); and Pierre Chevallier, *La séparation de l'Église et de l'école: Jules Ferry et Léon XIII* (Paris: Fayard, 1981). See also Maurice Larkin, "Religion, anticlericalism, and secularization," chap. in *Modern France 1880–2002*, ed. James McMillan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 203-27; and William Safran, "Religion and *Laïcité* in a Jacobin Republic: The Case of France," chap. in *The Secular and the Sacred: Nation, Religion and Politics*, ed. William Safran (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 54-81. Cultural historians have only recently begun to examine this topic. For example, see Caroline Ford, *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

"the modern dictator" controlled a series of modern "weapons … the press, the radio, the cinema, aviation," representing what he called "the means of collective hypnosis."[7] For his part, the physician and novelist Georges Duhamel — a well-known cultural commentator — wrote of movie-goers anticipating the beginning of a film: "They wait, their eyes troubled, already ready for the hypnosis that will soon seize them, in the enchanted shadows."[8] Finally, the little-known writer Marino-Bertil Issautier, in the context of interpreting the sway of political parties in terms of collective suggestion, wrote, "hypnotic sleep only makes evident — through exaggeration — [the suggestibility] inherent in the human mind. What happens in hypnotism," he continued, "also takes place in everyday life, albeit under other guises."[9] What was at stake in presenting hypnosis as the key to understanding how the mass media and mass politics functioned? And how were references to hypnosis linked to the process through which modern mass phenomena came to be viewed as sites where the secular domain converged with the realm of the religious or occult?

The history of hypnosis is complex and multifaceted, and it is not my aim to discuss it in a comprehensive way.[10] It bears emphasizing that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, members of the scientific and medical establishment for the first time began to take a serious interest in hypnosis. They gradually proffered a scientific, physiological, materialist explanation for the phenomenon that replaced earlier superstitious or "unscientific" ones. The most important scientific paradigm of hypnosis emerged in the 1880s out of the research of Dr. Hippolyte Bernheim, a respected physician and professor of medicine at the University of Nancy in France. In contrast to rival researchers such as the noted neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, Bernheim argued that the brain's physiology possessed inherent properties that rendered all people vulnerable to hypnotic suggestion. His clinical experiments focused mainly on male subjects, partly in order to dispel the notion that those susceptible to hypnotic suggestion were "all weak-nerved, weak-brained, hysterical, or women."[11] Bernheim also contended that previously hypnotized subjects were especially responsive to suggestion in the waking state. Thus, according to his theory, not

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7 Wladimir Drabovitch, *Fragilité de la liberté et séduction des dictatures: Essai de psychologie sociale*, with a preface by Pierre Janet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1934), 158-9.

8 Georges Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1931), 48.

9 M.-B. Issautier, *Les Grandes suggestions de l'histoire* (Paris: Sorlot, 1940), 49-50.

10 Histories of hypnotism include Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Gerrit L. Verschuur, *Hidden Attraction: the Mystery and History of Magnetism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers, *A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason: Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan*, trans. Martha Noel Evans (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), especially Chapter 1.

11 Quoted in Gauld, *History of Hypnotism*, 325-6.

only were all people vulnerable to suggestion, they could all potentially be manipulated to accept suggested ideas while fully conscious.

Bernheim contributed to a larger process that wrested hypnosis, or "animal magnetism" (as it had been previously called), from the various occult or pseudo-scientific discourses that had shaped its meaning, such as Allan Kardec's spiritist movement, which had been popular during the Second Empire.[12] The physician and physiology professor Charles Richet — writing in 1922 about an 1875 article in which he had advocated an experimental and scientific approach to hypnosis — claimed that his article had helped inaugurate the period in which "animal magnetism ceased to be an occult science." In that article Richet had argued that hypnosis was a "phenomenon of normal physiology" and that there was no need to "imagine any magical or magnetic action."[13]

Fin-de-siècle research on hypnosis challenged not only occult but also traditional religious definitions of the otherworldly domain. This challenge is evident in the writings of Catholics who opposed scientists' efforts to understand what they termed "supernatural phenomena" in terms of physiology and materialism. Pie-Michel Rolfi, an Italian priest whose book on hypnotism was translated into French in 1902, argued that scientific work on hypnotism only confirmed what the Church had maintained for centuries in theological teachings on spirits and possession: that such supernatural phenomena were real. A medico-scientific approach to hypnotism, he believed, mistakenly tried to understand it "in the framework of those physical, chemical or physiological phenomena which constitute material nature and to explain it in the same way and according to the same laws."[14] Rolfi castigated scientists for searching out materialist explanations for what he considered spiritual phenomena with religious origins and theological explanations:

> I will not allow that the materialists — the scientists — take possession of cases of this genre; or that they aspire to assimilate them as phenomena of physics or chemistry; or that they try to connect them to the laws that govern

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12 Allan Kardec was a pseudonym for Hippolyte-Léon-Denizard Rivail. For a description of his movement and its own scientific pretenses, see Thomas A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 143-62.

13 Charles Richet, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research: Being a Treatise on Metapsychics*, trans. Stanley De Brath (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 32; originally published as *Traité de métapsychique* (Paris: Alcan, 1922). A corresponding member of the English "Society for Psychical Research," Richet was part of an international group of scholars seeking to understand hypnosis and other "metapsychic" phenomena in scientific terms, thus avoiding what he called "religious or mystical speculation" (31). See Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

14 Le R. P. Pie-Michel Rolfi, *La Magie moderne ou l'hypnotisme de nos jours*, trans. H. Dorangeon from the 3rd. Italian ed. (Paris: Téqui, 1902), 3. The first edition was published in Italy in 1899.

the material world whether organic or inorganic; or that they speak to us of cathode rays, of Hertzian waves, of cerebral vibrations; or, finally, that confound classes of phenomena which must remain absolutely distinct and separate.[15]

Rolfi's text made clear that the scientific colonization of the supernatural had not gone unnoticed or unchallenged by the traditional custodians of that domain. Moreover, his reference to "cathode rays" (streams of electrons which can be manipulated to project images onto a fluorescent screen) and "Hertzian waves" (low-frequency electromagnetic or "radio" waves) indicated that the materialist interpretation of hypnosis was not the only scientific development thought to be intruding upon the religious or spiritual realm: indeed, at least two discoveries important to the technological history of the modern audio-visual media — cathode rays and radio waves — posed similar threats.[16] The research that posited the physiological basis of hypnosis was just one exponent of a broader historical process through which the materialist discourse of science stretched its interpretive reach to explain phenomena that had been understood by men such as Rolfi to be immaterial, spiritual, and religious in nature.

By the 1890s Bernheim's theory of hypnosis had become dominant both in France and abroad. It left an indelible mark on studies of collective and crowd psychology, which themselves were in their heyday during the same decade. In his influential 1895 book *Psychologie des foules*, Gustave Le Bon made an explicit connection between hypnosis and the production of collective values, whether those values were expressed in actual or "psychological" crowds, by which he meant groups of people whose members were not in physical proximity to one another:

> [A]n individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd...soon finds himself...in a special state which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotised individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotiser. The activity of the brain being paralysed in the case of the hypnotised subject, the latter becomes the slave of all the unconscious activities of his spinal cord, which the hypnotiser directs at will .... Such also is approximately the state of the individual forming part of a psychological crowd.[17]

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15 Ibid., 4.

16 On these and other discoveries important to twentieth-century technologies, see Vaclav Smil, *Creating the Twentieth Century: Technical Innovations of 1867–1914 and their Lasting Impact* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

17 Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, 4th Quadrige ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 13-14; *The Crowd*, intro. Robert A. Nye (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995), 51, translation modified. On the history of French crowd psychology, see Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: Sage Publications, 1975); Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven, CT: Yale

Similarly, the noted collective psychologist and criminologist Gabriel Tarde explicitly used hypnosis as a way to theorize the relationship between the psychological and the social: "Hypnotism is the experimental juncture of psychology and sociology; it shows us the most simplified sort of psychic life which can be conceived of under the form of the most elementary social relation."[18] In a stunning passage in his 1890 *Les Lois de l'imitation*, Tarde claimed, "The social, like the hypnotic state, is only a form of a dream …. Both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous."[19] The logic of hypnotic suggestion was thus not opposed to the logic of normal social relations but rather helped account for those relations.

Although the scientific model of hypnosis was overturning religious and occult categories, early collective and crowd psychologists' use of that same model to theorize the logic of collective phenomena ultimately helped to refigure and expand the meaning of the religious. Le Bon had understood the category of the crowd very broadly — even using it to make sense of the dynamics of parliaments and juries — and he consistently associated it with religiosity. "The crowd," he wrote, "demands a god before anything else," adding elsewhere that "a person is not religious solely when he worships a divinity, but when he puts all the resources of his mind, the complete submission of his will, and the whole-souled ardour of fanaticism at the service of a cause or an individual who becomes the goal and guide of his thoughts and actions."[20] He even implied that atheism, if expressed by a collectivity or group, could itself become a religion of sorts: "Were it possible to induce the masses to adopt atheism, this belief would exhibit all the intolerant ardour of a religious sentiment." The same was true for positivism, which Le Bon called an atheistic "religion."[21] Le Bon's logic thus cast the "religious sentiment" as universal, trans-historical and virtually co-extensive with any configuration of collective values whether espoused by crowds, "the masses," or even positivist social scientists. And since hypnosis rather than reason was the force through

University Press, 1981); and Serge Moscovici, *The Age of The Crowd: A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology*, trans. J.C. Whitehouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1985). Le Bon's book enjoyed a large and politically diverse audience between the wars. It reached its 41st edition by 1939 and thus became "one of the best-selling scientific books in history." Nye, *Origins of Crowd Psychology,* 3. On Le Bon's popularity and influence, see also Moscovici, *Age of the Crowd,* 49, 54-8.

18 Gabriel Tarde, *Penal Philosophy*, trans. Rapelje Howell (Boston: Little, Brown, 1912), 193, quoted in Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors*, 124. Tarde's statement originally appeared in "Qu'est-ce qu'une société?" *Revue Philosophique* 18 (1884): 489-510.

19 Gabriel Tarde, *Les Lois de l'imitation* (Paris: Alcan, 1890), 77, 87, quoted in Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors*, 139.

20 Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, 41, 39-40; *The Crowd*, 96, 94.

21 Ibid., 41; 97.

which those values were created and communicated, it was at once universalized and linked symbolically to the encroachment of the religious onto secular terrain.

Hypnosis, as Bernheim had theorized it, supplied crowd psychology with a paradigm for the communication process that dispensed with the category of rationality — or, rather, displaced it. If there was anything rational about communication, it was no longer located in the reasoning individual but in the workings of brain physiology. Reason, in short, was not centred in the mind, but in the body.[22] Once it was modeled on hypnosis, interpersonal communication appeared to be founded on categories that were opposed to reason: faith, belief, dreams, i.e., the stuff of religion and the occult. Moreover, even if collective consciousness was governed by physiology — its mechanism scientifically explainable — its manifestations were religious in character. When it came to explaining the "epidemic" of fervent support for military-general-turned-populist-politician Georges Boulanger in the late 1880s, Bernheim said it was "due to suggestion" (which, again, he understood as a physiological phenomenon).[23] Le Bon claimed that Boulangism demonstrated that religious feelings were not the "superstitions of a bygone age which reason has definitely banished."[24] Both men framed their arguments as scientific, physiological, and materialist explanations for what they saw as the heightened proclivity of social groups to incubate and be led by religious or quasi-religious sentiments. Their thinking formed a crucial part of the process through which the term "religion" expanded beyond its traditional meaning as a coordinated and collectively-held set of beliefs in the reality and meaningfulness of a supernatural order. At the heart of that process of semantic expansion was a collapse of the normal and the pathological: hypnotic suggestion was now at the centre of normal social interaction, while groups in general were prone to the same religious fervour as mobs. Once religion was defined in this expanded way, it could be interpreted as literally present in any affectively-charged collective formation or experience.

This line of reasoning was both reductive and extreme. It allowed Le Bon to articulate a conservative critique of democratic reforms such as universal male suffrage, which he believed were eroding individual autonomy and sacrificing political rule to "the crowd." Later, though, the metonymic chain he created between hypnosis, the crowd, the collective, and the religious shaped

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22 Le Bon, for example, subscribed to an evolutionary-biological paradigm that framed the reasoning process as "unconscious and involuntary." Nye, *Origins of Crowd Psychology*, 25. Reason, for Le Bon, was first and foremost a phenomenon of brain physiology. Nye, *Origins of Crowd Psychology*, 24-8.

23 Cited in André Pressat, "L'Hypnotisme et la presse," *Revue de l'hypnotisme* 4 (1889–1890): 230, quoted in Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors*, 124.

24 Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, 41; *The Crowd*, 96.

republican interpretations of mass culture and politics as homogenizing forces that gave expression to submerged religious longings. Remarks like the following from Wladimir Drabovitch, a member of the republican Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, were typical:

> Even in countries which have remained free, opinion is becoming more and more crowd-like. The modern world, thanks to the diffusion of the press, to the radio, to aviation, and to a greater population density — has become a huge crowd. Emotions, fears, hopes, beliefs, and suspicions spread themselves out, reverberate, and strengthen themselves immensely by contagion and suggestion.[25]

The commentator Lucien Romier, a political editor at *Le Figaro* until 1927 and an historian by training, devoted a chapter of his book *L'Homme nouveau* to the "mechanical action" that new communication technology was exercising on "the thought of crowds" — the term "crowd" referring here to the general public.[26] Arguably, the link between crowds and audio-visual media also found inspiration in Le Bon's view that the crowd "thinks in images" and was particularly susceptible to the influence of the spoken word.[27]

II. "Mystics and sorcerers …"

New media technologies marked yet another episode in the process through which the rational worldview of modern science replaced the outmoded cosmology of religion. Certainly, they reinforced public confidence in scientists' ability to know and manipulate the material world, whether visible or invisible. The early radio historian Arno Huth wrote in 1937 that the radio "is less an 'invention' properly speaking, than an ingenious exploitation of the phenomena of nature, a direct and synthetic consequence of scientific and technical research."[28] Charles Richet suggested in 1922 that telephone technology had made it possible to state what would have been "absurdly inadmissible" before 1875, except in an occult or religious context: that is, "that the voice of an individual speaking in Paris can be heard in Rome." Anyone making this statement in 1875, he claimed, "would have been thought a dangerous lunatic."[29] Richet made this point and others in the context of advocating scientific rather than religious/occult explanations for what he called "metapsychic" phenomena — from mental telepathy to levitation. In the case of telephony, his argument was

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25 Drabovitch, *Fragilité de la liberté*, 148.

26 Lucien Romier, *L'Homme nouveau: esquisse des conséquences du progrès* (Paris: Hachette, 1929), 180-201.

27 Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, 20; *The Crowd*, 61.

28 Arno Huth, *La Radiodiffusion: puissance mondiale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), 21.

29 Richet, *Thirty Years*, 9.

simply that what had seemed impossible to state rationally 50 years ago eventually became possible through science. His point was that phenomena such as levitation might also be scientifically explainable. "Metapsychic phenomena," he wrote, "should be treated as problems of pure physiology."[30]

For all their advocacy of science and reason, figures such as Richet unwittingly participated in a larger historical process whereby the modern media — from telephony to film — were culturally constructed as sites where the religious and the secular converged. Instead of eliminating religious or occult categories, new media reconfigured and displaced them, with the technology making it possible to imagine the experience of everyday secular life as imbued with a supernatural aspect. Even though Richet meant his remark about telephonic communication to demonstrate the ascendancy of science, he also made explicit the potential for the new medium to be compared to religious or occult phenomena. Telephony, after all, transforms the speaking person into a disembodied voice — into a "phantom reality," so to speak, that enters the receiver's experience as a phenomenological rather than as an ontological reality. It creates the experience, in real time, of a "presence" that is nonetheless absent. Even if everyone knew that modern telephony was a scientific achievement, the fact that it performed this particular function meant that it could evoke religion or the occult at a figurative level. The fact that Richet brought up telephony in a book intended to refute the occult did not necessarily eliminate the symbolic association between the two.

Analogies between the effects of the new media and religious or occult phenomena were common among cultural commentators during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even electricity, which made modern media technologies possible (with the exception of photography) figured as the "vehicle of diabolical action" or "the mask of the demon" in the imaginations of some Catholics during the Second Empire.[31] By the interwar period, it was radio that elicited comparisons with occult phenomena. In the context of discussing a 1928 doctoral thesis on the occult sources of romanticism, Gustave Cohen, a professor of French history and literature, posed a rhetorical question to radio listeners: "Are not all of you mystics [*illuminés*] and sorcerers, you who, with the slight turn of a button, arouse the distant waves?"[32] Such analo-

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30 Ibid., 45. For a discussion of how "psychic research" was connected to a fascination with communication technologies, see Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

31 See Le R. P. Xavier Pailloux, *Le Magnétisme, le spiritisme et la possession: Entretiens sur les esprits entre un théologien, un avocat, un philosophe et un médecin* (Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, 1863), 280-1.

32 Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris, France, Fonds Michel Leiris, MS. B-95, "Occultisme: Textes et notes. A la suite, coupures de presse," newsclip no. 4. This clipping is headlined "Les sources occultes du romantisme," by Gustave Cohen.

gies supplied a way of making sense of the new, wondrous, and remarkably varied technologies of representation from photography, telephony, and phonographs in the nineteenth century, to radio, film, and electromagnetic sound recordings in the twentieth. They circulated despite the fact that science could obviously explain how such technologies functioned.

There was indeed something magical or occult-like in radio's ability to separate the physical reality of the speaking or singing body, or of the musical instrument, from the simultaneous experience of those realities in multiple locations. That capacity to confound reality and representation — and to challenge traditional notions of experience — was not lost on the new medium's first promoters. In an early demonstration that took place at the Trocadéro Amphitheater, the commercial director of France's first private station, Radiola, placed a flute player in a soundproof glass dome along with a microphone wired to the station's studio on the boulevard Haussmann. When the flutist began to play, none of the 5,000 people in the theater could hear anything because of the dome. Next to the dome, however, was a radio equipped with a powerful amplifier and several speakers. Only when it was turned on could the spectators in the room hear the music. In order to further dramatize the event, the station had spread other speakers throughout the city so that those who could not fit in the theater could listen to the demonstration.[33] In this way radio producers literalized the formal principle of their medium's operation (the sound of the flute being literally both present and absent) and highlighted the novel relationships it established between senders and receivers, between listeners and events. It is perhaps no accident that the demonstration took place at a major French radio festival in 1923. Such an occasion furnished an ideal opportunity for radio to indulge in that precious capacity for self-reflexivity that often marks the early history of an invention, but which inevitably fades as the invention exchanges its novelty status for a place in the ordinary world of the taken-for-granted.[34]

Radio technology in particular may have lent itself to associations with religious phenomena because of the long-standing connection between orality and the sacred in both Western and non-Western religious traditions. As the theologian and cultural theorist Walter Ong pointed out, "the interiorizing force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence. In most religions the spoken word functions integrally in ceremonial and devotional life."[35] Considering Le Bon's construction of social groups as

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33 This event is recounted (but not interpreted) in René Duval, "Radio-Paris," chap. in *Entre deux guerres*, 136.

34 On this general idea, see Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

35 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 74.

essentially "religious" in character alongside his emphasis on such groups' vulnerability to orally-conveyed suggestions, it seems safe to infer that a subtle connection between religiosity and orality was operative in his paradigm, and that this connection played at least some role in shaping the discursive context in which interwar thinking on radio and radio audiences emerged, and through which the relationship between mass culture and religiosity would be articulated.

Many of the above themes came together in Marino-Bertil Issautier's little-known book *Les grandes suggestions de l'histoire*, published in 1940. Issautier had a strong interest in occult phenomena and later directed the review *Esprit et matière*, which appears to have had links to an esoteric religious group.[36] His book is of interest not only for the way it relied on Le Bon's framework to comprehend cultural phenomena from advertising to Nazism. It also yoked the spiritual or the sacred to modern technology even as it displayed a keen sense of the scientific — that is, secular and rationalist — discoveries that had made such technology possible.[37]

Fascinated by electricity and electromagnetic phenomena, Issautier argued that the work of modern physicists left no doubt "that electricity is the foundation of life itself."[38] Radio technology — which converted sounds into electrical impulses and transmitted them through the air at various wave frequencies — had demonstrated, for Issautier, "that sound and speech (and even images) can easily travel through space by means of simple electric waves," waves that he also described alternatively as "spiritual" or "suggestive."[39] He believed that while radio had "augmented and facilitated invisible communication through interceptible waves," such invisible communication was not new in and of itself. In certain periods of history, he argued, "this primitive and misrecognized force of human nature — manifested sporadically in phenomena like telepathy — took precedence over other, so-called artificial, modes of communication."[40] Electromagnetic waves, he added, might well explain a variety of natural and social phenomena "that exert their actions from a distance and whose mechanism is immaterial and invisible."[41] He added that history was

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36 The group was the "Grande Fraternité Blanche Universelle," founded at the turn of the century by a Bulgarian mystic. The term "blanche" was not a racial designation but referred to those who promote the world's spiritual advancement.

37 In a clear appropriation of Le Bon's framework, Issautier wrote that the characteristics of religious sentiment "find themselves, more or less adulterated, in the emotions and passions of crowds," *Grandes suggestions*, 91. Moreover, like Le Bon, Issautier claimed that "crowds" and "masses" were more similar than they were different in terms of their corrosive effect on individual autonomy.

38 Issautier, *Grandes suggestions*, 35.

39 Ibid., 35, 13, 15.

40 Ibid., 120.

41 Ibid., 35-6.

explainable through reference to various "currents of waves" whose character-
istics could be spiritual, moral, positive, negative, physical, or psychical. "Men
make history," he wrote, "but the instruments which they employ are above all
spiritual …. More than our Kings, it has been waves which have built our coun-
try, erected its cathedrals, spread our legends through the forests and our songs
through the air of France."[42] Later he added that "suggestions" were generated
"by invisible rays or vibrations, not material but spiritual, which pass through
man and orient personalities in the way they do crowds."[43] For Issautier the
new technology exploited forces that had always anchored the process of cul-
tural transmission, but had not been explained in scientific terms.

What distinguished Issautier's text was not so much its reliance on the con-
cept of "spirit" to explain culture and society — that concept had a long history
in religious thought and in idealist strains of Western philosophy and psychol-
ogy — but rather that electromagnetic waves now gave the spiritual its meaning
and foundation. "Spirit" in this context did not refer to a transcendental, meta-
physical entity such as God or Mind, but rather to electrical phenomena active
in both material nature and the human body. Issautier pointed to the invention
of the electroencephalograph as proof that the activity of the brain was electri-
cal in nature. He speculated that human thought itself could be reduced to a
calculus of electromagnetic oscillations. This device, which monitored and
recorded the electrical impulses in the brain, had been touted, according to
Issautier, as a "machine for recording thoughts" and as a "detector of cerebral
waves."[44] "The press," he wrote, "announced that it would reveal lies as well
as the secret thoughts of individuals...that it would diagnose all of the mental
illnesses."[45]

At this point Issautier concocted a series of fantasies about such technology,
which, though far-fetched, offer insight into how at least one interwar commen-
tator imagined the impact (or potential) of new media. He called attention to the
Italian scientist Cazamalli's experiments with "thought photography." These
experiments used a mechanism similar to the cathode ray tube of the television
to record cerebral electromagnetic discharge. The idea was to create and cata-
logue visual representations of various thoughts (and thus, on some level, to
reduce the importance of written language). Issautier imagined that the Italian
thinker's work would lead to a kind of photographic dictionary of the principal
brain reactions:

> Anything is imaginable! Judges will no longer interrogate the accused; they
> will place them under a revelatory antenna. The jealous wife, upon seeing her

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42 Ibid., 14.
43 Ibid., 16.
44 Ibid., 37.
45 Ibid.

husband thinking contemplatively, will no longer inquire: 'What are you thinking about?' She will simply lead him, without his knowledge, beneath an antenna carefully hidden in a chandelier; then, upon developing the film of his thoughts, she will consult the chapter entitled 'infidelity' in her photographic dictionary.[46]

The conclusion, wrote Issautier, was that "your brain is no longer your own!"[47]

What is important here is the notion that the electromagnetic basis of thought, reason, and consciousness meant that these could be harnessed and controlled by technology, and particularly by new technologies of representation. This possibility added another dimension to the fear that the autonomous subject of liberal humanism was vanishing under the weight of modern technology. Shorn of its religious and metaphysical connotations, "the spiritual" now not only fell under the purview of physics and brain physiology, it became subject to technological manipulation in a way that was previously unimaginable. This possibility was precisely what had motivated Issautier's study:

> The spectacle of our twentieth century pummeled by profound social, political and economic upheavals, by civil wars and revolutions, has left nations forgetful and scatterbrained. We watch them deliver themselves drunkenly to the whims of fashion, sports and speed, nourish themselves on empty dreams, cultivate utopia with a passion, but act as somnambulists in the ignorance of these 'universal suggestive waves' which, better understood, would enlighten us about both our past and present errors. The radio has already revealed tremendous prospects. Other secrets are anticipated. Our study is an effort to understand the latent intellectual and moral forces that explain certain collective currents and phenomena throughout history.[48]

Both Tarde and Issautier also evoked modern technology and the spiritual in their respective descriptions of how human thought operates, suggesting continuity on this issue between the *fin-de-siècle* and the interwar years. In particular they used visual media as metaphors for the relationship between consciousness and society. Tarde defined his most fundamental social-psychological category — imitation — as "an action of one mind [*esprit*] over another from a distance, which consists of the quasi-photographic reproduction of a cerebral image [*cliché cérébral*] by the sensitive plate of another brain ... whether it is desired or not, whether passive or active."[49] Tarde's choice of photography as a metaphor for the process through which meaning is disseminated

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46 Ibid., 45.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 15.

49 Gabriel Tarde, *Les Lois de l'imitation: étude sociologique*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1895; reprint, Paris: Slatkine Reprints, 1979), viii.

— and the reference to that process as "inter-spiritual" — is evidence of the way in which French social theorists began to conceptualize the meaning of the spiritual in terms of media technology. Issautier, for his part, wrote that "the unconscious closely resembles cinematographic film …. It records spontaneously and incessantly all the impressions, all the waves, all the images, all the notions which present themselves."[50] Media technologies, in short, became metaphors for the very process of cultural production and transmission. Linked both to hypnosis and to religious/occult phenomena, the media could be thus conceived as at once products of science and as engines of religiosity in the social world.

From one point of view the media were the fruits of a relentless scientific effort to understand and manipulate light, sound, electro-magnetic waves, and so on, and to empty those forces of whatever associations they might have enjoyed with the supernatural, the religious, or the occult. At the same time, however, the media could be linked figuratively to religion and the occult because of their logic of presence and absence, as well as their alleged ability to collectivize consciousness. What emerged from this curious syncretism of scientific and religious/occult categories was a paradoxical conception of mass media culture as at once the product of a secular and scientific worldview *and* as a force through which that worldview generates its opposite. Secularism, in this discourse at least, was thus not opposed to the "religious," but responsible for its literal and figurative proliferation. This circumstance suggests that secularization has not always been a uniform or teleological process, but rather has been fraught with ambiguity, complexity, and the efflorescence of new forms of social experience that secular discourse itself would qualify as "religious."

III. "… and the State will be God."

The argument that fascism and communism were secular religions was not a difficult one for interwar commentators to make, partly because *fin-de-siècle* collective and crowd psychologists had already framed modern mass political movements, such as Boulangism, as displacements of religious instincts. The great leaders of crowds, wrote Le Bon, held power because they enkindled "faith — whether religious, political or social."[51] Modern leaders, he wrote, "no longer have altars, but they have statues, or their portraits are in the hands of their admirers."[52] For his part Tarde developed a theory of the spiritual aspects of power in *Les Transformations du pouvoir*. In that study he argued that the most powerful political figures do not "emerge from a ballot box — from a real election — but rather from an imaginary and mystical election. To

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50 Issautier, *Grandes suggestions*, 55-6.
51 Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, 70; *The Crowd*, 141.
52 Ibid., 41; 96.

all the positive forms of the election, in fact, it is necessary to add and super-impose its sacred forms."[53]

Unlike the communists, who saw their movement as the embodiment of a scientific and rational worldview, interwar fascists often described their movements using religious language.[54] It was not surprising that interwar elites viewed fascism as the worst-case scenario of what the complete embrace of secular religion could mean in the sphere of politics. A 1935 pamphlet published by a group of republican and left-leaning intellectuals characterized fascist nationalism as "official nationalism, codified in law, and invested with a sacrosanct dignity."[55] Novelist and political commentator Henri Pollès wrote in 1937 of fascism as "a type of religion or imitation of religion," adding elsewhere that "the occult element is the same in false religions and false political programs." In arguing that fascism is "opposed to true, rational theology, but uses all the smoke of religion," Pollès, who supported the Popular Front, called attention to the irony of official fascism's anti-religious ideology.[56]

For his part Issautier believed that a "certain vague religiosity" existed in the "collective soul" apart from formal religion. This religiosity could be easily channeled toward "popular heroes, social idols, social myths or race." Germans, he wrote, "convinced of the physiological and psychological superiority of their race," have made of race "the figure of an idol." He believed that modern objects of "spiritual idolatry" had taken on new and extraordinary forms:

> Today we make social forces divine in the way we used to make the forces of nature divine. We could look at this *divinisation* of abstract ideas as a vague rebirth of paganism, but this new religion involves neither altars nor well-defined rites: speeches take the place of prayers, and the canticles are replaced by melodies of a different sort — patriotic hymns, revolutionary songs.[57]

The widely-read Catholic commentator Georges Bernanos combined various tropes of collective psychology in his analysis of the "Pagan State," which he defined as a secular regime that paradoxically made a religion of the state.

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53 Tarde, *Les Transformations du pouvoir* (Paris: Alcan, 1899), 45.

54 For example, the future collaborator Alphonse de Châteaubriant referred to Nazism as a "Germanic cathedral" set up in the "interior of souls," and to Hitler as "an edifier of minds … who has addressed himself to the profound forces of love and faith." See his *La Gerbe des forces: nouvelle Allemagne*, 7th ed. (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1937), 345-6.

55 Comité de vigilance des intellectuels anti-fascistes, *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme? Le fascisme et la France* (Paris, 1935), 13. This group emerged in early March 1934 as a response to right-wing riots that broke out in Paris on 6 February 1934. The pamphlet lists thirty members, mainly professors in various disciplines, but also including writers and *lycée* instructors.

56 Henri Pollès, *L'Opéra politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), 156, 145n1, 14.

57 Issautier, *Grandes suggestions*, 92-4.

The "Pagan State," he argued, could be fascist, communist, or democratic; its creation depended less on ideology than it did on the abdication of individuality in favor of the collective. In turn he associated this reality with the loss of heroism and the triumph of mediocrity. In his war-time *Plea For Liberty*, he warned:

> an ever-growing number of men refuse the heroic part in life …. [T]hey try hard to lose themselves in the herd. The moment men have made up their minds thus to share their mediocrity, the Pagan State is conceived …. When they reach a certain level of perfection in mediocrity, in uniformity, in the discipline of the herd, they will have lost their dignity as men, and the State will be God.[58]

He linked massification and collectivization, as well as the loss of male dignity, to the production of secular religions, whatever they might be called.

For Bernanos the "free man" of liberal individualism was threatened not only by the "deification of fuehrers" in secular religions such as communism and fascism, but also by liberal regimes that ignored the importance of traditional religion. Though Bernanos was a republican who opposed clerical domination, he believed that the well-being of a free society depended on traditional religious beliefs: "We expect of the Church what God Himself expects: that she shape men truly free, a breed of free men peculiarly effective because freedom is for them not only a right, but an obligation, a duty, for which they must render God an accounting." A democratic "Pagan State" was thus in some sense just as pernicious as a totalitarian one. Through this formulation, Bernanos synthesized Christianity with liberal freedom and offered a way to conceptualize threats to freedom in terms of the displacement of traditional religious impulses onto the secular realm of politics. "The free man has but one enemy, the Pagan State, by whatever name it may be called, and be it embodied in the person of a tyrant or hidden deep in the thick of the sensual and cowardly mob."[59] In other words, the way to escape the danger of secular religion lay in reconciling republicanism with traditional revealed religion — a project that French Christian democrats had called for since the turn of the century and that later found expression in the Mouvement Républicain Populaire, the Christian democratic party founded in 1944 that ruled in a "tripartite" coalition with the communists and socialists after the war.

Ample evidence confirms that interwar elites also viewed the success of fascism as intimately connected to the emergence of the mass media, and that they thought the mass media, in turn, were the tools through which fascism cre-

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58 Georges Bernanos, *Plea for Liberty: Letters to the English, the Americans, the Europeans*, trans. Harry Lorin Binsse (New York: Pantheon, 1944), 242-3.

59 Ibid., 240, 270, 263.

ated itself as a secular religion. Drabovitch wrote of "the radio speeches of the dictators … which an entire people is obligated to listen to in religious silence."[60] However its economic, political, and social aspects were conceptualized, fascism consistently figured as the spectre of a society whose media were monopolized by the state in the service of homogenizing the population, robbing individuals of their autonomy, and making its authority sacred. The media were considered agents that eroded the boundaries between individual and society, public and private, secular and religious.

Some commentators thought that the formal properties of fascist political technique were identical to the formal properties of the mass media. Pollès, for instance, wrote, "Fascism's daily history unfolds like a serialized novel; is not the newspaper the essential form of fascism?" Later he confirmed that the formal aspects of fascism were not similar to those of just any newspaper, but to those of the visually-oriented *Paris-Soir* — a newspaper that many elites construed as more of a spectacle than a news source. "A newspaper like *Paris-Soir*," continued Pollès, "having a sports director as its head, could very well ... form the core of a fascist movement, and recruit ranks for it." As if to further reinforce the analogy between fascism and the mass (visual) media, Pollès contended that fascism "is a politics of projectors: the projector displaces attention from one fragment [*parcelle*] of a problem onto another fragment; one silences oneself, one repairs nothing, one makes no progress: it is cinema."[61]

Drabovitch argued that modern technology, and particularly media technology, could assault individual liberty rather than increase it. In the hands of Nazis or Soviets, modern technology was not a sign of human progress but rather a form of instrumental rationality whose overall effect was irrational — to the point of being comparable to the rule of a despotic theocracy. "Technology," he wrote, "can be used to produce the unlimited servitude of the individual, as well as forms of physical and spiritual oppression more profound than any of the oriental theocracies." A behind-the-scenes rationality, in other words, underpinned, for Drabovitch, the production of fascism and communism as religions. This reality both dislocated the meaning of rationality, science, and technology as ultimately progressive forces and challenged definitions of "the religious" as either other-worldly or rooted in nature. Perhaps this line of reasoning explains why Drabovitch thought his age was in the midst of a "spiritual crisis," which he characterized in terms of blurred binaries: "the true and the false, the good and the bad, the normal and the pathological become indistinct."[62]

In lectures he delivered at the École des Sciences Politiques in Paris, the scholar Max Hermant advanced an interpretation of Hitler's Germany that

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60 Drabovitch, *Fragilité de la liberté*, 147.
61 Pollès, *L'Opéra politique*, 193, 206, 216.
62 Drabovitch, *Fragilité de la liberté*, 160, 230-1.

relied on collective psychological categories to argue that the Nazis used the media to create Nazism as a "popular religion." He suggested that Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (a depiction of the September 1934 Nazi Congress and rally at Nuremberg) offered a "clear vision" of the German collective "racial soul." The notion of the German collective racial soul — what Nazi philosopher Alfred Rosenberg called the *Rassenseele* — had origins, according to Hermant, in thinkers such as Novalis, Fichte, and Hegel, but, in Nazism, had left the "restricted arena of thinkers in order to spread itself through the crowd," thus becoming "properly speaking, a religious notion." Hitler, he argued, took power because he was able to perceive and understand the "fundamental needs of the German soul" and then "incarnate" those needs in his person. This ability permitted him to make himself at once "the apostle and Messiah" of the German people.[63] Yet Hermant's analysis also figured the "religious" aspect of Nazism as an outcome of too much rationality rather than as a sign of the absence of rationality. Germans, he thought, made a religion out of technology; they worshipped the machine like a god. Nazism's "religion of activity is a vain attempt to dethrone the beautiful and aestheticize the algebraic"[64]; it is "nothing more than a certain rationalization of minds and hearts."[65] The antidote, he wrote, was a program of secular humanism under-girded by the recognition of human limits. He advocated:

> A sociology which is founded upon natural law and upon an exact knowledge of our limits and capacities;...which observes that we are not masters of time and that movement that accelerates without end is condemned to stop eventually; which refuses the dictatorship of the machine and the abdication of thought in favor of rational calculus; and which, finally, reacts against the abuse of power which resolves itself in powerlessness [*puissance qui se résout en impuissance*].[66]

On this point Hermant's logic strongly resembled Drabovitch's. In this symbolic universe, too much power paradoxically resolves itself in powerlessness; the hyper-extension of at least a certain kind of rationality (opposed here to "thought") both reflects and produces irrational or "religious" impulses (the religion of technology creates the religion of Nazism).

Most of the commentators examined here not only thought the individual was vanishing in a thicket of mass culture and politics, they experienced the waning of individuality as a serious cultural and spiritual crisis. This paper has tried to account historically for the discursive production of that crisis, a crisis

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63 Max Hermant, *Hitlérisme et humanisme* (Coulommiers and Paris: Impr. Paul Brodard et Joseph Taupin, 1936), 15.

64 Max Hermant, *Idoles Allemandes*, 8th ed. (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1935), 348.

65 Hermant, *Hitlérisme et humanisme*, 28.

66 Hermant, *Idoles Allemandes*, 329.

characterized by the paradox of secular-scientific phenomena such as the modern media seeming to displace "religious" impulses onto culture and politics instead of mitigating or eliminating those impulses. I have attempted to trace the construction of that paradox — from its beginnings in *fin-de-siècle* discourses that shaped later conceptions of collective phenomena, to its interwar development in various commentaries on the mass media and mass politics. The blurring of the secular and scientific with the religious and occult played a key role in fortifying the belief that the spiritual realm could no longer be considered necessarily transcendent, or other-worldly, or unknowable — indeed, that it could perhaps lie at the very centre of the knowable, secular, material world. At the same time, this fluid boundary between the secular and the religious was also attributable to the fact that new technologies began to do things that were previously unimaginable except as supernatural phenomena (e.g., the voice in Rome being audible in Paris).

Responses to this crisis varied, but one theme remained constant: the persistent call to reinvigorate, restore, or resurrect the autonomous, rational, implicitly male individual of liberal humanism as an antidote to collectivizing forces such as fascism and communism. Bernanos argued, for example, that "it is not Society which today is in the greatest peril, but rather Man, and assuredly it has always been thus. But such a truth finds few to preach it, for the defense of Society certainly pays better dividends than the defense of Man."[67] For his part Hermant argued that a resurgence of universalistic liberal humanism was necessary to combat fascist tendencies. Humanism, he suggested, should be more than an ideal; it should carry the weight of a forceful and absolute "certainty" reinforced by passion.[68]

Issautier was most troubled by the fact that mental suggestions — his "spiritual waves" — were "creators of real physical phenomena as well as the directors of social life." "We find ourselves," he argued, "unwittingly swept toward the craziest of fantasies even as we believe that we live in the realm of the real and the true." In this way he implicitly positioned media representations — the carriers of mental suggestions — between the material and the immaterial, between the real and the fantasmatic. But instead of formulating a conception of cultural production that would take this ambiguity as constitutive of culture and thus as a point of departure, Issautier anxiously insisted on the fundamental separation of the real and the fantasmatic and called for the restoration of the Cartesian subject. He warned that without that distinction and that model of subjectivity, society would fall into skepticism and relativism, which he accused of denying "purely and simply the reality of all phenomena."[69] His

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67 Bernanos, *Plea for Liberty.*

68 Hermant, *Hitlérisme et humanisme*, 35-7.

69 Issautier, *Grandes suggestions*, 30.

antidote to the "real and occult influence of suggestion and invisible waves" was thus a strong Cartesian cry: "I think, therefore I am."[70]

In addition to calling for a renewed individualism, most of the individuals examined here expanded and transformed the meaning of religiosity. They positioned it as immanent in the social and human world rather than immanent and mystified in Nature, or alternatively, as transcendent in an other-world. Widespread was the sense that the religious or spiritual could now be found either literally or figuratively at the heart of the secular domains of mass culture and politics.

Some interesting theoretical issues arise when considering the fact that commentators used the term "religious" both literally and figuratively in their accounts of modern mass phenomena. As I have tried to argue, it was precisely the definition of literal, true, or authentic religion that was in flux in the discourse I have tried to parse. If one thought, like LeBon, Bernheim, and many of their followers, that religiosity could mean the collective expression of an affective allegiance to a person or an idea regardless of whether the object of devotion was supernatural or "this-worldly," then mass phenomena could be and were interpreted quite literally as new religions in secular form. But if one thought, as a religious man such as Bernanos did, that true religion required a more traditional belief in the reality and meaningfulness of a supernatural realm, then fascism, communism, or the media-generated "star system," could be interpreted quite easily as inauthentic substitutes for the real thing. Religion, for such commentators, was a convenient metaphor through which to describe new mass phenomena. The point is that the slippage between the literal and the figurative is precisely what was at issue in republican discourse on mass phenomena and in the cultural crisis it provoked. It accounts for why a figure such as Henri Pollès could present fascism as either a "type of religion or an imitation of it," without actually deciding between the two alternatives.

Something slightly different occurred when commentators wrote about the formal similarities between new media, such as the radio, and religious or occult phenomena. Here the evidence suggests much less slippage between literal and figurative usage: virtually no one argued that the telephone had a *literal* connection to the supernatural or that it was generating ghostly presences with the help of anything other than modern physics. Comparisons with the occult were simply used to convey the fascination with new technology. In this context, science (as opposed to traditional religion) guaranteed the separation of the literal and the figurative, between real ghosts and their technologically-generated modern analogues.

The conclusion to draw is that, ironically enough, what counted as literally "religious" expanded at the very moment when secular republicans were trying

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70   Ibid., 19, 30.

to remove traditional religion from public life. Though the main story is one of blurred boundaries between the religious and the secular, it is plausible, however, that the new fluidity given to the term "religion" was contained to some degree — the stability of its more restricted conventional meaning bolstered — in contexts where only traditional religions counted as religions *or* in contexts where science enjoyed an exclusive right to describe the truth of reality.

The social theorist Jules Monnerot, we recall, asked the readers of *Volontés* to consider two opposing possibilities: whether new spiritual leaders had replaced the religious ones of the past, or whether society had reached a kind of adulthood that permitted it to do without such leaders. But in framing his inquiry in these terms, he, arguably, mischaracterized the dilemma facing his contemporaries. If the evidence put forth here is any indication, interwar commentators did not think they faced an either-or situation. Instead they struggled to articulate their sense that the world had indeed reached a kind of adulthood in its secularism, rationalism, and scientism, at the same time it had also — and as an ominous consequence of that very adulthood — rekindled precisely the religiosity they thought they had left behind. In other words, they experienced and grappled with what philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer later theorized, not without controversy, as the "Dialectic of Enlightenment," their name for that fearful process through which the limitless extension of Enlightenment impulses produces precisely the undoing of Enlightenment.[71]

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71 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993). This is a translation of the 1947 revised edition of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. The original edition appeared in 1944.