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Henri Barbusse and the Quest for Faith: A Study of Religion in Selected Works
by Henri Barbusse (1873-1935)

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by

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DEDICATION

For the little boy in Dublin that my father used to be

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAHB	Association des Amis d'Henri Barbusse
AAV	Archives Annette Vidal
ARAC	Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants
BmP	Bibliothèque marxiste de Paris
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
CCPFE	Comité catholique de propagande française à l'étranger
<i>CHB</i>	<i>Cahiers Henri Barbusse</i>
<i>Couteau</i>	<i>Le Couteau entre les dents</i>
<i>Eur.</i> 1974	<i>Europe</i> , special no. (<i>Henri Barbusse</i>), September (1974)
<i>Le Feu</i>	<i>Le Feu (Journal d'une escouade)</i>
FHB	Fonds Henri Barbusse
IAC	Internationale des Anciens Combattants
<i>Jésus contre Dieu</i>	<i>Jésus contre Dieu. Mystère avec cinéma et musique</i>
<i>Judas</i>	<i>Les Judas de Jésus</i>
<i>Lettres</i>	<i>Lettres d'Henri Barbusse à sa femme 1914-1917</i>
<i>Lueur</i>	<i>La Lueur dans l'Abîme. Ce que veut le groupe Clarté</i>
<i>Le Nu</i>	<i>Le Nu au Salon</i>
<i>Mystère</i>	<i>Le Mystère d'Adam</i>
<i>Naf</i>	<i>Nouvelles acquisitions françaises</i>
<i>Paroles</i>	<i>Paroles d'un combattant. Articles et Discours (1917-1920)</i>
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
PCFRA	Parti Communiste Français: Research Archives
<i>PDP</i>	<i>Populaire de Paris</i>
SAAE	Société Amicale des Anciens Élèves de l'École Nationale des Mines de Saint-Etienne
<i>Staline</i>	<i>Staline. Un monde nouveau vu à travers un homme</i>



‘Communiquant avec la chambre, le bureau: une table de chêne devant la fenêtre, un vaste lit de repos au-dessus duquel trônait une splendide statue de bois: Sainte Thérèse d’Avila.’

Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 110

INTRODUCTION

Two years before Henri Barbusse died in Moscow in 1935, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the former People's Commissar for Public Instruction, wrote that the French writer had overcome his ' "déviation", son "roman" noble et chaleureux, mais inopportun avec Jésus de Nazareth.'¹ What Barbusse would or should be remembered for, he added, somewhat mindful, perhaps, both of the strength of Barbusse's faith in Communism and of similar, bygone 'deviations' of his own, was the French writer's commitment to the Revolution. This *has* been the case, to such an extent that for many of those with but a passing interest in Barbusse's life and work, this was a writer who was a Communist long before he actually joined the PCF.² Broadly speaking, Barbusse's religious preoccupations have been forgotten, ignored or subordinated to his interest in politics.

One would do well to bear in mind, however, that it was not until he was within sight of his fiftieth birthday that Barbusse joined the Party, the first, and only political party of which he was a member. By way of contrast, the writer's engagement with religion can be traced back to the very outset of his literary career, disproving the notion that for Barbusse religion was a peripheral concern, a temporary aberration, or a 'growing obsession'³ which emerged in his declining years, as long periods of ill health repeatedly forced him to confront the limits of his own mortality. As Picciola, chief editor of *CHB*, has stated:

Le problème religieux s'est emparé de Barbusse, pratiquement au sortir de l'adolescence [...] il serait facile de repérer, d'œuvre en œuvre, sous des formes variées, la continuité, l'impregnation de la pensée de Barbusse par le drame religieux, considéré comme le drame énorme de l'humanité.⁴

That nobody has explored this particular area of potential research some three-quarters of a century after Barbusse's death can be ascribed to the relative neglect from which this particular writer had suffered until recently. Academic interest — with regard to non-specialists in particular — has centred on Barbusse's involvement in the Great War; the

novel that this brought about, namely *Le Feu* (1916); and the author's subsequent/consequent political development.

The few scholars who have carried out sustained research on Barbusse have likewise tended to focus on his non-literary activities — on the Clarté movement, *Monde*, and Barbusse's political development from 1914 to 1920, in the case of Brett, Normand and Müller, respectively.⁵ Baudorre's biography is a non-literary study, which, like the doctoral theses of Weems and Michel, charts the transformation of Barbusse from bourgeois journalist and literary aesthete to Communist cultural figurehead, 'rassembleur' and propagandist.⁶ The doctoral thesis of Cimon is concerned with much the same process as reflected in six of Barbusse's novels, covering the period from 1903 to 1930.⁷ Relinger's 'doctorat d'Etat', in its examination of the whole of Barbusse's *œuvre*, sets out to prove the theory that the writer's work represents a dialectical process combining literature and the concept of revolution.⁸ As the works of the above-mentioned scholars and my own master's dissertation clearly show,⁹ Barbusse's political evolution was a long process that took the writer, only very gradually, from somewhere vaguely left of centre to the far left of the political spectrum. Tison-Braun's pithy statement is basically sound: 'Barbusse fut socialiste avant d'être communiste, et humaniste avant de s'attacher à la politique.'¹⁰

Broadly speaking, one can state without fear of contradiction that until he marched off to war in 1914, Henri Barbusse was a humanist who was vaguely left-wing in his political orientation. The time he spent in the trenches of the Western Front was the defining experience of his life. From the second half of the war onwards, his written and verbal discourse began to acquire a revolutionary dimension. However, this is not to be taken as evidence of a pro-Bolshevik stance on the part of this particular writer, for in the final days of 1917, some two months after the fall of Tsarism in Russia, Barbusse was describing the Bolshevik revolution as 'une scission meurtrière'.¹¹ Aligned with Jean

Longuet's minority faction in the fractious French Socialist Party, Barbusse fully and fulsomely endorsed the Fourteen Points of the American President Woodrow Wilson and, along with them, the democratic process. This remained the case until the latter half of 1919. Then, and only then, did a disillusioned Barbusse look eastwards for a more radical solution to the problems bedeviling contemporary society. There is still a certain amount of scope for personal interpretation as to the precise timing of, as well as the reasons behind Barbusse's abandonment of traditional forms of democracy in favour of Communist ideology but the writer's basic 'itinéraire politique' has now been well and truly covered by reputable scholars.

This makes the lack of research into Barbusse's treatment of religion all the more compelling a subject for sustained analysis. At the moment, the nearest equivalent to the studies of religion in the work of contemporaries such as Bernanos, Gide, Roger Martin du Gard, Péguy, and of the two literary figures Barbusse most admired, Zola and Hugo,¹² is the long chapter entitled 'Le messianisme social' in Relinger's thesis. For all its merits, Relinger's analysis of Barbusse's use of biblical sources in relation to the portrayal of war in *Les Enchaînements* (1925) is not extended backwards to *Le Feu* or *Clarté* (1919), in which the author's reworking of the Apocalypse and the Great Flood of the Book of Genesis is so conspicuous. Furthermore, Relinger notes the obvious affinities between the central character of Barbusse's first novel, *Les Suppliants* (1903), and the eponymous narrator of *Jésus*, but he chooses not to illustrate them. Indeed, despite his apt remark that 'un être humain garde toujours sa continuité, même dans son évolution',¹³ Relinger spends very little time on the youthful Barbusse, making light work of his poetry and devoting barely a dozen pages to *Les Suppliants*, as opposed to three entire chapters to *Le Feu*. More generally, notwithstanding the consensus that Barbusse saw himself as a secular prophet, a concept which is either mentioned or analysed to

varying degrees by all Barbusse specialists, religion is to Barbusse studies what Barbusse's work as a whole is to French cultural studies — unjustly neglected.

The general aim of this thesis, then, is to provide a thorough examination of religion generally and, in particular, of Christianity in its Roman Catholic form, as depicted in selected works spanning the whole of Barbusse's career. Barbusse's quest for faith cannot be analysed any other way, given the circumstances. In their passage through Aumont in the fateful summer of 1940, the Nazis destroyed the overwhelming majority of Barbusse's literary estate.¹⁴ There is good reason to suppose that a considerable number of the documents now lost forever would have been of relevance to this thesis. Those documents that have survived are limited and fragmentary; as a result, agreement between scholars is limited in scope and, at best, only general. There are various divergences on a number of important points.

According to research by Guille, peasants by the name of Barbusse farmed the land within sight of the Cévennes mountains, practising 'la religion réformée' three centuries and more before Barbusse's birth in 1873. In the 'Camisarde' revolt that followed the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, a number of Barbusse's distant ancestors — at least two, possibly three¹⁵ — were captured by the king's troops and died for their faith as galley-slaves on royal vessels.¹⁶ It was not until the promulgation of the Edict of Tolerance in 1787, Catholic royalists having failed to suppress the Protestant rebellion, that members of the Barbusse family and their co-religionists were readmitted into public life, by which time rebellion and religion had been thoroughly commingled in the minds of Barbusse's ancestors.

Had Barbusse the theatre critic enjoyed, in the early stages of his career, the same degree of journalistic licence that was to be his after the remarkable success of *Le Feu*, he would no doubt have commented directly on the religious persecution his family had suffered when the opportunity first arose in 1898. In his review of Pierre Loti's

Judith Renaudin, however, he referred to the ‘dragonnades’ that marked the revocation of the Edict of Nantes only insofar as they related to the play’s plot: ‘Ne pouvant m’arrêter sur toutes les réflexions que suggère cette pièce émouvante par plus d’un point, je m’arrêterai encore moins sur l’inutile polémique qu’elle a soulevée au sujet des persécutions protestantes’.¹⁷

The precise role that religion played in the lives of Barbusse’s more immediate relatives and the impact this had during his childhood and adolescence are no less uncertain. According to the late Pierre Paraf, friend of Barbusse’s widow, Hélyonne, and long-serving President of the AAHB, Barbusse’s paternal grandfather, Auguste (born 1797), was a ‘pasteur’. Paraf made the point on at least three separate occasions without ever substantiating it.¹⁸ Barbusse’s biographer, Baudorre, and France’s leading Barbusse-scholar, Relinger, both describe Auguste Barbusse, quite simply, as a ‘marchand de vins’.¹⁹ In the absence of conclusive evidence either way, the matter must remain unresolved, as must the motivation of his son, Adrien (born 1841), Henri’s father, with regard to Adrien’s decision to go to Geneva around 1860 to study theology at Geneva University with a view to becoming a minister.

Guille takes the view that Adrien was following the wishes of his ultra-pious father.²⁰ Baudorre categorically rejects this view, pointing out that Auguste Barbusse had died several years earlier. According to Baudorre, Adrien’s mother had been left ‘sans revenus’ upon the death of her husband and was thus completely dependent upon their one surviving son: ‘Pourquoi dans ces conditions partir pour Genève? Par vocation? Cela paraît bien improbable.’²¹ Improbable though a sense of vocation may seem on the part of a man who appears to have turned his back on Geneva an ‘athée convaincu’,²² it is hard to imagine why he would otherwise have left his mother in such straitened circumstances.

Suffice it to say that Adrien's original intentions are open to speculation, likewise the degree of faith with which he began his theological training. He may well have balked at the rigorous, pietistic Calvinism of the University of Geneva of the time, imbued as he will (in all probability) have been with 'la tradition populaire, tolérante et démocratique des Camisards'.²³ On the other hand, if Baudorre is correct, the religious atmosphere in Geneva was not sufficiently oppressive to have prevented Adrien from completing his degree before moving to England to embark on a career in journalism and the arts. It was here that he met Annie Benson, the youngest child of a Lincolnshire brickmaker.²⁴ The couple married, moved to Montmartre and had three children — not baptized, it has been claimed²⁵ — during the delivery of the third of whom Annie died.

While his father eked out a modest living as a playwright, novelist and critic for various Parisian newspapers, including the anticlerical daily *Le Siècle*, Henri Barbusse found himself in the loving care of Émilie Voirin, a friend of his deceased mother who became the family housekeeper. She also became Adrien's companion and years later, Adrien regularized their situation by making her his second wife. It was to his father and to the woman that he always referred to as his mother that the seven-year-old Henri Barbusse addressed a letter, happily preserved, on the occasion of New Year's Day, 1881:

Chers parents,
Je suis heureux de pouvoir, au commencement de cette année, vous souhaiter une bonne santé. Je demande à Dieu de vous conserver longtemps encore à mon amour. Je lui demande aussi qu'il éloigne de vous tout ce qui vous cause de la peine. [...]²⁶

Precocious a child though the young Henri was, and the verse play that he wrote less than two years later suggests remarkable maturity in both artistic and intellectual terms,²⁷ this brief missive cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of a belief in God. The reference to God may well be merely formulaic, or a pointer to an unquestioning, childlike acceptance of an abstract concept.

On the other hand, it would appear that Adrien, the ‘athée convaincu’, had done nothing in Barbusse’s formative years to persuade his young son that God did not exist, preferring, perhaps, to let him make the discovery for himself. Albeit indirectly, he may even have fostered religious beliefs in his children that ran counter to his own. Relinger has stated that Adrien was apt to give his children evening readings from various sources of literature, including the Old Testament.²⁸ The claim, once again, is not substantiated by hard evidence. Indeed, on more than one occasion in the extant archival material, Barbusse alludes to these literary ‘soirées’ and never mentions the Bible.²⁹ Those familiar with Barbusse’s fiction would not dispute that he had a profound knowledge of the Bible (the writings of the Hebrew prophets in particular) and would therefore feel disinclined to challenge Guille’s assertion that only ‘l’ancien élève pasteur de Genève a pu donner à Henri Barbusse le goût de la culture biblique qu’il a acquise par la suite.’³⁰ That said, as with so much else in the life of Barbusse, there can be no certainties.

What does appear to be beyond doubt is that religion played no great part in Barbusse’s schooling. After attending a primary school in the rue Milton near the family home in Montmartre, Henri became an ‘externe’ at the Collège Rollin, now the Lycée Jacques-Decour, in Paris’s ninth ‘arrondissement’. Jansenist at the time of its foundation in 1690, the school developed, over the course of the following two centuries, a liberal tradition in religious matters. By the time that Barbusse was a pupil there (1883-1893), members of the clergy had gradually been replaced by the laity in all areas of teaching and administration. Religious instruction was provided by visiting representatives of various denominations, but only when requested by parents and at the latter’s own expense.³¹ If Barbusse the schoolboy had any lingering religious beliefs, they will have been seriously challenged in this liberal environment.

Seen from the historico-biographical point of view, then, all that can be said with any great sense of assurance about Henri Barbusse and religion is that he was born into a

family whose traditions had been both democratic and Protestant, or rather, democratic *because* Protestant, for centuries. He was, possibly, the grandson of a preacher; definitely, the son of a man who at least began theological training with the apparent aim of becoming a minister of God, a keeper of the faith.³² As the subsequent chapters of this thesis will demonstrate, Henri Barbusse, a writer and intellectual who is often associated with Communism, had a profoundly religious culture which he drew on throughout his career in order to channel what he appears generally to have considered to be an innate religious impulse in human beings in particular, secular directions.

It is perhaps fitting that the analysis contained in the following eight chapters of this thesis should be grounded primarily in Barbusse's work, which, unlike his personal history, remains intact and fully accessible. As Barbusse himself once declared, 'La voix basse de l'écriture ne se tait jamais.'³³ Initially, he aspired to be a poet in the Victor Hugo mould and it was as the author of a volume of verse entitled *Pleureuses* (1895) that Barbusse first made a name for himself. Turning to prose for reasons that are not clear, he produced seven novels over the course of the following thirty-five years, a period that fully incorporates the three broad chronological phases in Barbusse's development as man, writer and political educand. The focus in this thesis, in Parts one to three, is on Barbusse's poetry and *Les Suppliants*, *L'Enfer* (1908), *Le Feu*, *Clarté*, *Les Enchaînements* and *Jésus*, the titles of almost all of which alone are highly suggestive of a spiritual odyssey on the part of the author. The writer's final novel, *Élévation* (1930), whose title can also be understood in religious terms, has been omitted, as it adds nothing new to Barbusse's critique of Christianity. The important Tower of Babel imagery in *Élévation* is anticipated in both *Jésus* and *Les Enchaînements*; the criticism levelled at the Protestant Church, absent from Barbusse's early work, first appears in various publications in the 1920s; and the Great Flood which enables the workers to

enter into the paradise of the USSR at the close of the narrative is, essentially, just a reworking of the ending of *Le Feu*.

Analysis of the poetry and the six novels in question is underpinned throughout Parts one to three by frequent reference to relevant non-fictional documents. Despite the depredations of the Nazis, there remains a fairly substantial corpus of non-fictional writings composed of manuscript and other archival sources, including letters; Barbusse's work as a journalist; and his socio-political studies, which predominated after 1920. This approach makes it possible to lend weight to the point being made in the textual analysis, whilst obviating the potentially problematic question of the extent to which Barbusse the poet and author of works of fiction is to be identified with his various narrators: five out of six of the narratives in question are recounted by a first-person narrator; and of them, only Jesus and, to a lesser degree, Simon Paulin in *Clarté*, are highly developed characters who, generally, can be readily distinguished from their creator.

Because of circumstances, as well as the nature of Barbusse's career, use of the non-fictional material relating to the writer's thoughts on religious matters cannot be evenly applied throughout the thesis. There is a decent amount of good manuscript material for the poetry and Barbusse's first novel, *Les Suppliants*, in particular; there is precious little by comparison for the rest of the novels. Barbusse was a prolific journalist throughout his career but most of his activity prior to the First World War consisted of reviews of books and plays, and of feature articles and short stories, the subject and orientation of which Barbusse generally had no control over. Much of this work is, therefore, not germane to this thesis. His works prior to the publication of *Paroles* in 1920 were all literary in nature; from that point until his death in 1935, Barbusse produced works of non-fiction and fiction at a ratio of roughly two to one. It is mainly for this reason that Part four of this thesis will draw largely on non-fictional material.

While there can be no consistency with regard to the *form* of the non-fictional source material alluded to, it is the *content* that counts. This thesis seeks to make use of Barbusse's unmediated thoughts on religious matters wherever direct access to them exists, in order to lend support to the conclusions arising from the analysis of the poetry and the fiction.

If the general aim of this analysis is to highlight the importance of religion in Barbusse's work, the more particular aim is to explore the concept of continuity and development in Barbusse's critique of Christianity and the quest for faith as it emerges in this critique. Within the context of continuity and development, five main themes will receive sustained critical attention, these being Barbusse's atheism, his anticlericalism, his use of religious language and imagery, his fascination with Jesus, and his lifelong desire to play the part of secular prophet for the age in which he lived. While all of these themes will be covered fairly evenly in the thesis as a whole, they will not be analysed in any particular order. Not only is there a certain amount of overlap between them, their individual importance will also be seen to vary from chapter to chapter. It will be seen that while there is continuity in Barbusse's critique of Christianity, there is also a change of perspective arising from the writer's individual development under the impact of external events.

In Part one of the thesis, close textual analysis of Barbusse's poetry (1890-1901), *Les Suppliants*, *L'Enfer*, and relevant archival material will show that in the first phase of his career, Barbusse, a convinced atheist, undermined Christian doctrine and practices from a metaphysical, humanist, broadly left-wing perspective. It will be seen that he sought, quite consciously, by means of a paradoxical appropriation of Christian figures, language and imagery, to divinize the human as self-styled secular prophet. As he pointed out to his friend Gabriel Randon, with whom he planned to give a series of lectures to popular audiences in the late 1890s: 'J'ai des choses à prêcher.'³⁴ The enormous, and

unexpected success of *Le Feu* gave Barbusse a readership, and, as public speaker, an audience far beyond the bounds of Paris's literary *cognoscenti*.

It will be seen in Part two of the thesis, that although Barbusse's next two novels, *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, are not attacks on religion as such, the author continued in them his critique of Christianity. Where once this had been largely metaphysical and humanist in inspiration, it was now largely politically motivated. The Church is attacked as the bulwark of the 'Union sacrée' and as the main barrier to social reform generally. Analysis of the prophetic mode at work in *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, together with the apocalyptic features of the narratives, the author's portrayal of hell, the implications of Simon Paulin's 'conversion' and the appearance of Jesus (prefigured in the central characters of the earlier works of fiction) will show that Barbusse continued to undermine Christianity in his quest for an alternative form of faith, proposing a pseudo-religious cult of socialist republicanism as embodied by the American President Woodrow Wilson.

Part three of the thesis will show how, in *Les Enchaînements* and *Jésus*, Barbusse broadened his critique of Christianity by setting it in an historical context and comparing it with other world religions. A member of the nascent PCF from 1923 onwards, Barbusse had, by the mid-1920s, come to think of the Church as the Communists' main ideological opponent, to be combated as such, as energetically as possible. Analysis of the texts of *Les Enchaînements*, *Jésus*, and other, non-fictional sources will emphasize this point. The continuity in Barbusse's religious thought will emerge from consideration of the parallels between Barbusse's Jesus and Maximilien Desanzac of *Les Suppliants* but the development in terms of perspective will also be stressed. Jesus's portrayal as a Communist revolutionary could not have been envisaged by any reader of *Les Suppliants* but it will be shown to have been clearly prefigured both by the depiction of the Christian proto-martyr Stephen as a Communist in *Les Enchaînements*, and by the personal development of the author.

The parallelism between primitive Christianity and Communism which Barbusse establishes in *Les Enchaînements* and *Jésus* will be shown, in Part four of the thesis, to have been pursued with vigour in numerous non-fictional works and newspaper articles from 1920 onwards. Barbusse's pseudo-religious cult of what was not just a secular, but a militantly atheist ideology, justified by Barbusse as faith deriving from reason, surprised many contemporaries, Communists and non-Communists alike. There is, however, an internal logic to the development, as the preceding analysis of Barbusse's literature and reader-response thereto will have made clear. In the absence of universally agreed definitions, it is impossible to give a categorical answer to the question asked in Part four (Henri Barbusse: Comrade or Christian?) but the pertinence of the question will become clear. Not without good reason, fellow Communists accused Barbusse of 'mysticizing' revolutionary politics, of clumsily endeavouring to fashion an ersatz religion. In the words of one contemporary: 'Quand il parle des Soviets, il est en état de foi, non en état d'esprit critique.'³⁵ Barbusse's ignorance of Marxist theory and the Marxian canon appeared to lend weight to this accusation, just as his highly impressive familiarity with the Christian canon and exegetical works, his publicly declared love for Jesus, and his apparent religiosity lent weight to the view that Barbusse was a crypto-Christian.

Long before he shot to fame, Barbusse once wrote to his wife, Hélyonne, reflecting somewhat nostalgically on his childhood years: 'Mon enfance s'est embellie, divinisée un peu, oserai-je dire, d'une vague mais indomptable espérance vers quelque splendide avenir. La moindre chose m'émouvait et j'espérais, j'espérais, j'espérais.'³⁶ Whatever it was, this Absolute that body and soul yearned for, this 'grand bien inconnu qui viendrait un jour', it was not God. Despite the subsequent assertions of numerous critics, there can be little doubt that at some indeterminate point after his New Year's letter to Adrien Barbusse and Émilie Voirin, Henri Barbusse, like his father before him, lost whatever belief he had once had in the transcendent God of Judaeo-Christianity. Weems is in no

doubt as to the implication of such statements: 'Barbusse felt the absence of God, of faith in God, as a personal loss. This sense of absence created a void which nothing else could fill.'³⁷ Given the paucity of the documents available, it is highly questionable whether an historico-biographical approach can bear out this assertion. However, what a close analysis of Barbusse's *work* shows, quite incontrovertibly, is a lifelong preoccupation with, and subversion of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular, as well as a quest for faith that ultimately found fulfilment in the basic tenets of international Communism.

Notes

¹ Lounatcharski, *Silhouettes*, p. 310. The reference is to *Jésus* (1927).

² See, for example, Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, II, p. 250.

³ Flower, *Writers and Politics in Modern France*, p. 42.

⁴ Picciola, 'A propos d'Henri Barbusse', p. 47.

⁵ See Brett, *Henri Barbusse*; Normand, 'Henri Barbusse, *Monde* and the Dimensions of Commitment'; Müller, *Barbusse, 1914-1920*.

⁶ See Baudorre, *Barbusse*; Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse'; Michel, 'Henri Barbusse (1873-1935). Littérature et engagement'. See also Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*.

⁷ See Cimon, 'Les Romans d'Henri Barbusse: Une évolution vers la propagande'.

⁸ See Relinger, 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse'. Relinger's book, *Henri Barbusse, écrivain combattant* is an abridged version of his thesis stripped of most of the academic apparatus. For ease of access, subsequent reference will be made to the book where a choice is possible.

⁹ See O'Brien, 'Politics and the Novel'.

¹⁰ Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, II, p. 247.

¹¹ Barbusse, 'Nous voulons savoir la vérité'.

¹² See Cooke, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of Christian Commitment*; Savage, *André Gide. L'Évolution de sa pensée religieuse*; Bertalot, *André Gide et l'attente de Dieu*; Robidoux, *Roger Martin du Gard et la religion*; Duployé, *La Religion de Péguy*; Walker, 'Germinal' and Zola's Philosophical and Religious Thought; Saurat, *La Religion de Victor Hugo*; Levaillant, *La Crise mystique de Victor Hugo*.

¹³ Relinger, 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', p. 12.

¹⁴ The AAV, housed in the BmP, contain no documents prior to 1912, by which time Barbusse was very nearly forty. The other main source of archival material in Paris, the

FHB at the BnF (Richelieu), like the Vidal collection, is also far smaller than it would otherwise have been. In her book on Barbusse, Vidal relates how Barbusse had her produce forty-two typescript versions of a single chapter of *Les Enchaînements* (see Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 104); the relevant dossier at the BnF contains not even one typescript of the entire, two-volume novel.

¹⁵ Guille mentions two. See Guille, 'Origines', p. 11. In 'Les débuts littéraires d'Henri Barbusse', p. 32, Picciola mentions three. The exclusion of Barbusse's Protestant ancestors from public life from the revocation of the Edict of Nantes to the Edict of Tolerance has made research into his more distant family background a largely thankless enterprise.

¹⁶ For a full account of the uprising as a whole, see Ducasse, *La Guerre des Camisards*.

¹⁷ Barbusse, 'Premières représentations et reprises', October-December (1898), p. xi. In his review of Jules Lemaître's *L'Aînée*, Barbusse likewise confined himself to the comment: 'On a voulu voir dans cette étude [...] une critique à l'adresse des mœurs rigides du protestantisme'. See the same rubric, May (1898), p. vi. It should be added that at this stage of his career, Barbusse was thoroughly opposed to didacticism in art and to those critics who sought to make works of art a subject for socio-political polemics.

¹⁸ See Paraf, '*Jésus contre Dieu. Mystère avec cinéma et musique*', p. 68; 'Jésus et Henri Barbusse', p. 5; 'Barbusse l'iconoclaste', p. 8.

¹⁹ Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 12; Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 7.

²⁰ See Guille, 'Origines', pp. 14-15.

²¹ Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 13.

²² Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 25.

²³ Guille, 'Origines', p. 16.

²⁴ There have been some differences of opinion about the profession of Annie Benson's father. A copy of her birth certificate, very kindly provided by the AAHB, puts the matter beyond doubt.

²⁵ See AAV, 32.66. This dossier contains an unidentified seven-page typescript. The claim is made on p. 1.

²⁶ FHB, *Naf* 16467, f. 44.

²⁷ For the manuscript of the play, see FHB, *Naf* 16469.

²⁸ See Relinger, 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', pp. 15-16, where Relinger writes: 'Pierre Paraf nous a confié un témoignage d'Henri Barbusse lui-même'. There is no reference to any written source.

²⁹ Barbusse mentions readings from Hugo, Racine and Corneille, but no Bible. See FHB, *Naf* 16467, ff. 36 and 39.

³⁰ Guille, 'Origines', p. 16.

³¹ See Châtelain, 'Historique de notre établissement', p. 60.

³² In his memoirs, a friend of Barbusse in his youth, Albert Keim, wrote of Adrien: 'J'apprends aussi qu'il a vécu à Genève et a *commencé* des études théologiques'; my italics. *Le demi-siècle*, p. 112.

³³ Barbusse, quoted in Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse', p. 582.

³⁴ *Naf* 24549; quoted in Weems, p. 41 Randon wrote under the pseudonym of Jehan Rictus.

³⁵ Aulard, 'Les clartés et l'ombre'; quoted in Weems, p. 317.

³⁶ FHB, *Naf* 16467, f. 6.

³⁷ Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse', p. 82.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE HENRI BARBUSSE, POET-PROPHET (1890-1901)

In *Situations*, Jean-Paul Sartre reports how he had listened as a child to his Catholic grandmother and his Protestant grandfather poking fun at one another's religion. He might have been swayed one way or the other. In the end, however, he concluded that the two faiths were equally worthless. Thereafter religion ceased to be of importance, although Sartre adds that it was his transposition of religious needs into literary longings that made him a writer.¹ While Henri Barbusse never made such a claim for himself, there is more than a little evidence to suggest that it could justifiably be made on his behalf. In contradistinction to Sartre's experience, however, religion never ceased to be of importance to Barbusse. Indeed, his life and virtually all of his work are informed by it at one level or another, despite an atheist stance which was initially adopted, in all probability, when he too was still a child, a stance which, like that of his more illustrious fellow writer, never wavered throughout the remainder of his life. For Barbusse, the discovery that God is a creation rather than the Creator marked the start of his engagement with religion, rather than the end.

Although numerous commentators were later to identify Barbusse as a believer for reasons which further analysis of the texts and sources will make clear, there can be no doubting the depth and sincerity of Barbusse's atheism. In the early phase of his career, as is the case elsewhere, the examples abound. At the height of his courtship of Catulle Mendès's youngest daughter, Hélyonne, who became his spouse in the spring of 1898, he wrote in his diary, before their betrothal, that he wished that there were a God, naturally implying that he believed God did not exist: 'Je voudrais croire en Dieu pour lui demander que jamais mon amour pour elle ne devienne de l'habitude, ne s'éteigne, ne s'avilisse dans la familiarité, et qu'il soit toujours accompagné, virginisé, pour ainsi dire, d'un immense respect tremblant.'²

In a long letter to Hélyonne written in the summer of 1897, in which Barbusse articulated his literary ambitions, aesthetic preferences and philosophical views, he left his fiancée in no doubt that she would be marrying a non-believer who subscribed to the immanentist theories of Immanuel Kant and Henri Bergson, the latter of whom taught philosophy for a brief period during Barbusse's time at the Collège Rollin. Neither 'spiritualiste' nor 'panthéiste',³ unlike a number of the poets under consideration in the letter (Victor Hugo, Lamartine and Leconte de Lisle, ff. 75-77), Barbusse stated that he refused to believe in 'la matière distincte d'un système universel en dehors de l'être pensant' (f. 81). In contradistinction to the concept of the transcendent God of Judaeo-Christian thinking, Barbusse referred to what he called 'la pensée-centre du monde' (ibid) and he could not overstate its importance, for when one took human consciousness as one's point of departure, he argued, 'l'homme qui n'était qu'un souffle, devient par lui-même le créateur, le voyant, la raison de tout, celui qui a édifié la terre et le ciel lorsqu'il est né, et dont le sommeil couvre tout cela d'ombre' (ibid).⁴

There was nothing comforting about such a thought, for it held out the prospect of nothingness upon death whilst precluding in life the possibility of human fellowship through union with God:

Nous sommes seuls, nous sommes philosophiquement les promoteurs et les maîtres; rien n'existe que par nous — conséquences dans la vie; nous sommes séparés les uns des autres et nous sommes à notre tour, avec toute notre sensibilité, à la merci de nos pensées. (ibid; author's emphasis)⁵

He went on to express his atheism more emphatically still, and in such a way as to suggest a difference between himself and Hélyonne,⁶ in what for Barbusse, quite obviously, was an issue of fundamental importance:

Je ne crois pas en Dieu, je vous l'ai dit, et vous avez compris; je ne crois pas que le cri en avant de nos sentiments soit jamais entendu par un être supérieur, mais qu'ils se traîneront de cri en cri dans les siècles des siècles; je ne crois pas qu'il y aura pour toute cette soif, soif du futur, soif du passé — une fontaine; qu'il y a un ciel où la prière enfin, repos[e]. (f. 83)

Presumably, its literary merits notwithstanding, it was for this reason that Barbusse had advised Cora, one of the two young American visitors to France he had been frequenting in the summer of 1896, not to read the Bible as much as she was; and he had committed himself to bringing her ‘des livres intéressants à lire.’⁷

Not surprisingly, Barbusse’s atheism found ample expression in notes on, or early versions of, some of his poetical works. With regard to Prometheus, a Greek mythological figure whose appeal to Barbusse would have been considerable for obvious reasons, Barbusse scribbled a note which once again reveals his atheism, but also hints at an intention to use his creative writing, as opposed to publications of a philosophical nature, as a medium for combating belief in God and all that this entails: ‘Dieu n’existe pas. Autrefois il me semblait que pour combattre [...] Dieu, il [fallait?] faire des livres de métaphysique. Pas du tout. [...] Dieu! il n’est [nulle?] [part?]. Il ne voit pas, il n’agit pas ou ne le [montre?] pas. Il n’est pas là!’⁸

A lengthy plan of his first book (*Pleureuses*), a plan containing many poems in various stages of progress very few of which appeared in the published version bears a relevant authorial observation at the foot of one of the pages: ‘Grand sujet. Dieu. C’est le vide [...] le Verbe, c’est notre gloire’.⁹ A little further on, the title of the second part of the bipartite structure he was considering, ‘Révolution inutile mais glorieuse’, is followed by the remark ‘Dieu dans l’homme’ (f. 31; author’s underlining), which indicates that the immanentist beliefs outlined in the letter to Hélyonne in the summer of 1897 were already exercising Barbusse’s mind some time before the publication of *Pleureuses* in 1895. In notes on *Le Mystère d’Adam*, a verse play begun in 1895 and never completed, Barbusse ruminated on the existential challenges facing the human race, ‘étant donnée l’absence de Dieu’; and pointed out that ‘le malheur était un indispensable élément du bonheur [...] quand bien même Dieu existerait’, implying, once again, that God, in Barbusse’s opinion, did not exist.¹⁰

Just as happiness cannot be conceived of without the notion of unhappiness, the profane cannot be understood independently of the religious; atheism makes no sense without the notion of the God that it rejects. The tension between the profane and the religious, atheism and belief in God, is a key feature of *Pleureuses*, *Mystère* and *Le Nu au Salon*, a collective book of verse to which Barbusse contributed ten poems.¹¹

As has already been stated, *Pleureuses* was Barbusse's first book publication, aptly described as a work strongly influenced in its form by symbolist writing and a '*fin-de-siècle* vogue for a rather effete aestheticism.'¹² Following the success of *Le Feu*, it was re-edited by Flammarion in 1920, with minor modifications. The original edition, long since a bibliographical rarity, contains fifty-nine poems, many of which were first written when Barbusse was still a teenager.¹³ As Mendès rightly pointed out at the time, *Pleureuses* should be read as one long lament.¹⁴ The work is divided into seven sections and there are obvious differences in form between individual items: variations in rhyme patterns, metre (alexandrines and octosyllables) and verse (triplets and quatrains) make for numerous permutations. Further variety is provided by changes of perspective, and of the identity of the addressee, who may be male or female, singular or plural, an object of contemplation with whom the poet is on either familiar or polite terms.

Nevertheless, as Brett has expertly shown, the vocabulary Barbusse employs is severely restricted; the tone achieved generally sombre, introspective and pessimistic.¹⁵ Thematically also, *Pleureuses* is a work of considerable homogeneity. The evanescent nature of life and the certainty of death, the impossibility of love and the solitude this entails, the consolation to be sought in nature are themes that run through all seven sections of the volume, and in Barbusse's work more generally. Religious themes abound also. Curiously, however, as Relinger has noted, contemporary critics failed to identify these: 'il est frappant de constater avec quel ensemble ils méjugèrent le recueil, passant à côté de son récit spirituel.'¹⁶

As has already been demonstrated, Barbusse himself was incontestably an atheist, and one who felt compelled to combat religion, as represented by Christianity. A pugnacious, antireligious attitude on the part of the author makes itself felt in 'Le Prophète': 'Laissons les maladroits et les irrésolus/ Qui prêchent d'oublier tout doucement, sans cause,/ Et qui croient consolés ceux qui ne souffrent plus'.¹⁷ In the same poem, pity is expressed for 'Ceux qui [...] nomment le ciel ce qui manque à la vie'. In 'Dans le soir', the poet puts it much more starkly: 'l'église a blasphémé'. As Brett has shown, in 'Les Saints' and 'La Procession', both of which were omitted from the 1920 edition of *Pleureuses*, the poet's obsession with solitude and death cause him to seek an antidote in 'le mysticisme religieux'.¹⁸ In 'Les Saints', he contemplates the statues of the saints in a church, only to realize, as in the religious procession described in 'La Procession', that there is no hope; that 'l'avenir dort dans le ciel/ Comme un souvenir de souffrance' ('La Procession').

Religion is shown to offer no real solution to human woes but in the absence of a viable alternative, it is perhaps inevitable that suffering human beings should turn to it. Certainly, there is a considerable sub-structure of belief in *Pleureuses*, embodied, to a degree, by the poet himself. 'Comme le Seigneur est timide', he declares, 'Dans son ciel, sa tranquillité!' ('Repos') God's 'timidité', his non-intervention in human affairs, casts doubt on his very existence, yet the referential nature of the language that the poet uses implies belief in this existence. In 'Le Prophète', the poet directly addresses God twice: 'Comme l'Autre, Seigneur, tu verras dans les rues/ Les Hommes revenir en pleurs pour oublier,/ Et les filles qui rient pour être secourues!' He later cries: 'Seigneur, toi que l'on trompe et qui baisses la tête,/ Tu sentiras, brûlé par le soir de longueur,/ La faim qui crie en toi comme une grande fête.'

The ambivalence brought about by the overarching atheism of the author and of the poet, generally speaking, on the one hand, and the particular instances of the poet's

apparent belief, on the other, are pointed up by 'Les Saints' and 'La Procession', which are juxtaposed in the original edition. In the former, there is a marked division between the saints, believers who find succour in God's existence and presence, and 'nous', the non-believers: 'Heureux vous dont l'âme est ravie,/Vous qui trônez, vous qui voguez,/Mais nous, nous sommes fatigués,/Et nous n'irons plus dans la vie.'

In 'La Procession', by contrast, the poet appears to be fully integrated into the religious rite in question, as indicated by the opening lines of the first and second stanzas — respectively, 'Nos âmes ont des robes blanches' and 'On sort de l'église'. The poet seems to be a part of the community of believers, as opposed to that of the non-believers — a reversal of the perspective of the previous poem. The final stanza underscores this division with regard to faith: 'Et tandis que nous marcherons/Dans les chagrins et les vieillesses,/Nous verrons toutes les tristesses/Pencher vers nous leurs pauvres fronts.' However, the faith of the poet and his fellow believers lacks conviction because it lacks hope: 'Nous marcherons sans espérance'; 'Chantons avec indifférence/L'hymne mystique et solennel./Et l'avenir dort dans le ciel/Comme un souvenir de souffrance.' In 'Silence', there is the same ambiguity: 'Le ciel écoute les apôtres .../Le destin nous voit à genoux.' Here, as elsewhere in *Pleureuses*, the reader feels the tension arising from the clash between atheism and belief.

The same combination of, and interpenetration between, the profane and the religious is in evidence in *Mystère*. As has already been indicated, this unfinished verse play written in alexandrines of varying rhyme patterns has as its *raison d'être* the author's belief in the 'absence de Dieu' and the mutual constitutiveness of 'le malheur' and 'le bonheur'. In the same source, Barbusse succinctly explained the meaning of his work: 'Etant données ces idées, il m'a semblé qu'elles seraient assez nettement illustrées par un poème montrant Adam et Eve rentrant au paradis [...] et constatant que le bonheur divin est égal à la mort' (16 February 1897).¹⁹

At about the same time, Barbusse expanded upon this statement in his diary. Given the importance of the Adam and Eve motif in the early phase of Barbusse's career as a novelist, it is worth reproducing his thoughts *in extenso*, before proceeding to an analysis of the text:

A une époque vague du Moyen-âge, un jeune homme va trouver une Pythonisse qui rêve dans sa caverne, lui expose le malheur humain qui cherche toujours quelque chimère, qui tend sans cesse vers l'espoir inaccessible — sans jamais pouvoir s'arrêter dans le repos et le bonheur; cette vaine agitation qui fait qu'on tombe toujours du sommet qu'on a gravi [...] est le grand mal de l'humanité, sa grande pauvreté [...], et le jeune suppliant vient demander s'il ne viendra pas [...] un moment où [elle?] pourra jouir d'un bonheur définitif sans se sentir précipitée de nouveau vers l'insatiable et vaine espérance. Pour toute réponse, la Pyth[onisse] fait un signe; le fond de la caverne s'ouvre et l'on voit une lumineuse apparition: Adam et Eve qui reviennent au paradis loin duquel ils ont vécu pendant leur vie expiatoire. D'abord heureux à la pensée de la réalisation d'un si long espoir des félicités durables, ils se sentent bientôt inquiets, troublés, au seuil du paradis divin. Puis leur inquiétude se change en angoisse et immensément, harmonieusement, ils regrettent peu à peu la misère de l'existence humaine. Ils comprennent avec des pleurs, puis des cris et des sanglots, que le bonheur est précisément la prière inassouvi[e] qui bouleverse lamentablement la créature, qu'un repos où l'on aurait oublié tout est un vain mot, ou plutôt est la mort, car si l'on rejette son existence ancienne sous prétexte que le passé est triste, que reste-t-il? ... C'est donc une épouvante qui les assaille et où ils se débattent ... l'apparition cesse.²⁰

In Barbusse's long letter to Hélyonne in the summer of 1897, he referred once again to *Mystère* but in such a way as to suggest that by this time, after approximately two years' work, he had abandoned the project for good.²¹ Although it is not possible, therefore, to say how the play would have developed, the above comments constitute a good elucidation of both the broad content and meaning of the work that Barbusse did manage. In Barbusse's allusions to the Pythia and Adam and Eve in particular, he also draws attention to the more obvious religious elements.²² However, the tension between the profane and the religious, between atheism and belief, is far more conspicuous in the text itself.

It is clear, for example, and not only from the title, that the two characters whose presence is conjured up by the priestess of the cave are the Adam and Eve of Judaeo-

Christian mythology. They are referred to directly as such in the stage directions: ‘Le fonds de la caverne s’ouvre: On aperçoit Adam et Eve.’²³ Indirectly, their identity is revealed in a number of ways. Before they appear, they are introduced to the young supplicant and his silent female companion as ‘Vos deux premiers aïeux, un soir, las, exaucés,/Revinrent au jardin dont ils furent chassés’ (5.19-20). Subsequent Eden-esque allusions are made by the characters themselves (16.14, 22.3, 25.1) and in despair Eve cries: ‘Oh! je regrette tout, l’ombre le mal, la honte/Tout, la chute et son cri qui résiste et qui monte!’ (25.8-9) She goes on to refer to the ‘long coup de poignard que Caïn m’a donné’ (26.10), the horror of which Adam echoes shortly thereafter: ‘J’ai vu, j’ai vu jadis un de mes fils vainqueur’ (27.8).

Paradoxically, however, Adam and Eve are cast not as Adam and Eve in the *dramatis personae*, but as ‘L’Homme’ and ‘La Femme’; and every intervention they make in the three scenes that Barbusse completed are headed accordingly. Similarly, they themselves are not — and by definition could not be — atheists: they have known God in Paradise and thus could hardly deny God’s existence. It is due to God’s benevolence that they are allowed to rejoin him: ‘Ils sentirent, levant leurs têtes dérivées,/Un timide pardon de Dieu dans les nuées .../Et la bonté leur dit: “Allez!” et se levant,/Ils regagnent obscurs, le paradis d’avant’ (6.7-10). They acknowledge God’s existence/presence on numerous occasions (7.3, 16.14, 24.21, 27.5, 29.1) and bow to his superiority by use of the rather more deferential term ‘Seigneur’ (9.15, 21.7, 21.8, 26.22).

Yet, on the threshold of Paradise, they come to realize that true paradise is the life ‘ici-bas’ (one of Barbusse’s favourite adverbials throughout his career) that they are about to leave. Intra-temporal existence in human form means pain and suffering (21.15), ageing (24.4, 24.7) and, ultimately, death (24.14); but for as long as they live there is a future — somehow an appealing concept when considered against the prospect of eternity — and thus hope (22.4, 24.13), ‘seule blancheur que l’homme arrache au

monde' (27.17). On earth, there is 'malheur' aplenty but, states Adam, 'nous fûmes heureux dans le soir décevant,/Et je dis qu'il n'est pas d'autre vivant' (27.3-4). Ironically, Adam and Eve reconcile themselves to a second expulsion from Paradise and a journey which now takes them in the opposite direction from the one in which they moved at the dawn of time.

As will be seen, Barbusse often returned to the Adam and Eve myth in his novels; he employed it one final time in verse form in a piece entitled 'Le Paradis perdu' — one of the ten poems by Barbusse published in the collective work, *Le Nu*.²⁴ Every poem in the collection is accompanied by a photograph, print or painting of the same title. 'Le Paradis perdu' is dedicated to the artist (L. Beroud) of the painting that features alongside it. In this case, as with *Mystère*, the title of the poem/painting is helpful, since the poet provides no names in his poem. The poem is addressed to 'l'homme', who is spoken to in the second person in the opening stanza: 'Homme, ne pleure pas l'azur, pâle mystère,/Ni l'aurore sans fin noyant le paradis.'

Beroud's painting shows God in a burst of light in the top third of the canvas, expelling Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. Adam is in the foreground of the painting, head bowed in shadow, both hands in front of his body, as though chained. Eve stands closer to God and is bathed in celestial light, her head thrown back in despair, right hand over her eyes, left hand behind her head. Both figures have their back to God, descending the path that leads to earth. Barbusse's poem generally lacks the coherence of Beroud's painting and it makes no direct reference to God. However, juxtaposed with the painting and read in conjunction with *Mystère*, the meaning of 'Le Paradis perdu' is clear: 'l'âpre fatigue', 'la fange', 'la douleur', 'l'ignorance', all of the painful phenomena that make life what it is have to be embraced, 'Pour que la volupté puisse vous mêler bien/Pour que votre tendresse existe comme un ange'; 'Pour sentir un frisson inouï t'émouvoir'. Paradise is not the celestial place from which Adam and Eve were banished

as in Beroud's painting, but 'le paradis perdu du soir', which, to judge by Barbusse's thoughts as expressed through Adam (27.3-4), is a rather opaque way of saying the one life that is certain — terrestrial existence.

It is not difficult to sympathize with those contemporaries of Barbusse who struggled to make sense of his poetry²⁵ and it is perfectly understandable that various readers have construed the religious elements that permeate his work as a whole as symptoms of a quest for faith in God. This view is not sustainable, however, given Barbusse's atheism, which was the cornerstone of his being. What the evidence suggests, rather, as the foregoing has, to some extent, already demonstrated, is that Barbusse understood the religious impulse; and, unable to make the leap of faith required of him once his mind had outgrown childhood acceptance of the supernatural basis of Christianity and other religions, he sought to channel this religious impulse away from traditional religious beliefs and practices, towards a different kind of response.

Barbusse was aware of the progress made by rationalist religious historians throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As he saw it, their work had exploded the myths on which religion was built, yet the need to believe persisted. In a review of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *L'Aiglon* in October 1900, Barbusse wrote:

A un moment où le libre esprit d'examen dépouille les préjugés, et met partout du vertige, voilà, à la scène, l'incarnation patente et saignante d'une grande inquiétude que chacun retrouve au fond de soi, plus ou moins obscure, plus ou moins vague, plus ou moins religieuse. Et l'émotion de ressentir, même de loin, l'immense frisson sacré de cette question de destinée, touche même les foules païennes et profanes d'aujourd'hui.²⁶

He had made much the same point in a long and important article written on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Chateaubriand. Barbusse felt that there were parallels between Chateaubriand's age and his own and thus careful consideration of Chateaubriand's contribution to life and letters was fully justified: 'Des caractères moraux et communs à son époque et à la nôtre, à sa conception et à la nôtre, nous y

sollicitent plus purement.’²⁷ Whatever the origins of Chateaubriand’s religious faith, remarked Barbusse, the author of *Le Génie du christianisme* and *Les Martyrs*²⁸ ‘bâtit son livre à la glorification du christianisme’ (p. 706). This faith provided him with a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Modern man was in even greater need of such a sense (‘les spasmes d’angoisse qui ont agité René, nous agitent bien plus encore’, p. 708) but he could take no comfort from religion: ‘la foi défaille et ne guérit plus avec ses commandements d’oubli’ (p. 707).

This discrepancy between the challenges set by the human condition and the means to respond to them represented ‘[le] plus grand caractère de dissemblance entre notre époque et celle de Chateaubriand au point de vue spirituel’ (p. 709). Chateaubriand had faith to sustain him and, by definition, a true believer cannot despair. Since Barbusse thought that there was no longer any basis for such a faith, he was of the opinion that progress had been made. Nonetheless, the erosion of religion had left a spiritual void, in contemplation of which ‘l’esprit moderne’ experienced an overwhelming feeling of alienation:

La religion a bien déserté les esprits et les choses. La science a amené avec elle quelque matérialisme et, autour d’elle, un esprit de critique et d’examen fort contraire au symbolisme que veulent imposer les religions. [...] Cet ébranlement subi par les idées religieuses et même par les idées divines, ce solennel changement, entraînent, cela va sans dire, d’innombrables conséquences. La divinité est un monde dont une parcelle faisait vertigineusement dans l’infini, équilibre au nôtre. Si on l’ébranle ou si l’on en néglige la croyance, un bouleversement absolu se produit dans les milieux sublimes de la conception humaine. (pp. 709-10)

According to Barbusse, the foremost consequence, from which all others followed, was that ‘l’homme est rejeté plus au centre des choses’ (p. 710) — an echo of the immanentist beliefs that Barbusse had made manifest the previous year in his letter to Hélyonne. Chateaubriand’s greatest literary creation, René, had taken a step on this particular path, then stopped short: ‘René se bâillonne lui-même, [...] il traîne une consolation cramponnée à jamais à lui. Dans ces conditions, il ne saurait être qu’un

précurseur, non un prophète' (p. 711). The final word here is the operative one, for it was in the role of the prophet of his Godless generation that Henri Barbusse cast himself during his literary apprenticeship.

Writing in the spring of 1896, Barbusse noted in his diary his dissatisfaction with *Pleureuses*, which he considered to be 'bien peu de chose: de ce côté-là je suis encore perdu dans le vague avenir'.²⁹ He felt unworthy of the prestige it had bestowed upon him in the eyes of Mendès and his young daughters. There was a disparity, he could not help but think, between his achievements and his ambitions: 'Je ne suis presque qu'une émotion, qu'un cri, comme un prophète qui ne vivrait que pour convaincre et dominer.' Having successfully courted Hélyonne (and persuaded her difficult father to give her hand to a near indigent poet such as himself), he later expressed private irritation at her cult of 'le Beau', which did not correspond with the image he had of himself:

Je ne veux pas être joli, je veux être et par dessus tout avoir l'air intelligent, profond. [...] Je voudrais ressembler, si on me donnait le choix, non à Apollon, mais à un prophète, maigre, presque décharné, enflammé, opiniâtre, et doux avec les autres, plein dans l'allure et les traits de cette espèce de sublime pauvreté qui est à mon avis la divinité humaine.³⁰

In this statement, which is all the more revealing for its having been written in a personal notebook (at some point between December 1896 and April 1897) and thus never intended for public consumption, Barbusse stated his role in life as he saw it. Furthermore, he provided an insight into the positive message that was his to impart, 'la divinité humaine', its negative corollary being the bankruptcy of traditional forms of religion, numerous expressions of which have already been considered.

In the letter that he sent to Hélyonne in the summer of 1897, he put in writing his desire to be 'non un poète médiocre, mais un très grand poète'.³¹ So strong was this desire, he noted, intriguingly in the light of what was to happen to him following the great success of *Le Feu* twenty years later, 'je ne puis presque pas m'imaginer que l'avenir ne me réserve pas de récompenses rêvées et adorées' (f. 73). To enjoy the

success to which he aspired, he would have to reach the masses, like the two greatest prophets of all: ‘Il faut être compris par le plus grand nombre possible. Les vrais poètes sont des Christs et des Mahomets, ils viennent pour enseigner des amis, des apôtres ou des masses, leur prêcher l’idée qu’ils ont senti[e] miraculeusement’ (ibid).

Barbusse’s critique of the leading poets of the latter half of the nineteenth century led him to the conclusion that originality was the fundamental pre-requisite, originality in terms of language: ‘bien écrire, être éloquent, persuasif, *savoir convertir*, [...] avoir la force et la délicatesse de disloquer assez infinitésimalement la langue pour pouvoir l’adapter précisément, c’est-à-dire magnifiquement à la pensée qu’on développe’ (f. 77; my italics). Originality of language was of itself insufficient, however, for the great poet by definition brought into the world an ‘idée’ (ff. 73, 77, 83) that was his and his alone. Barbusse’s big idea, having declared his atheism in the clearest possible terms, he spelt out thus: ‘adorer le néant comme si c’était un dieu’ (f. 83). He himself experienced what he called ‘la religion de la vérité’; for him, the divine was not to be found in the realms of the transcendent, but in ‘la divinité humaine du frisson’ (ibid), or human aspirations.

Despite his dissatisfaction with *Pleureuses* and the fact that his letter to Hélyonne postdates the publication of the volume of poetry by some two years (and its gestation period by even longer), there can be little doubt that *Pleureuses* represents Barbusse’s first attempt to address the French reading public in the guise of poet-prophet. The prophetic qualities of the published version of *Pleureuses* have been noted by several critics. Of his contemporaries, Mendès, Pottecher and Canivet fully expected the young Barbusse to become one of the leading voices of his generation.³² Amongst modern readers, Décaudin refers to the ‘accent prophétique’ of the collection,³³ Relinger to the ‘vers étonnament prophétiques’ with which it closes.³⁴ In the words of the latter, for Barbusse, ‘l’homme est condamné à la souffrance, la seule consolation est de le crier, et le poète espère être celui qui consolera.’³⁵

If Barbusse had delivered to the publisher the volume of poetry that he initially envisaged, his vocation as a prophet and his self-appointed mission to divinize the human would have been glaringly obvious to every reader, professional or otherwise. The lengthy plan referred to earlier shows that *Pleureuses* was originally to have been entitled ‘Le Livre du Prophète’³⁶ and sub-titled ‘La Divinité humaine’ (f. 26). At this early stage, to judge by the provisional titles, the content of the collection was to have been conspicuously religious in character. According to the table of contents, there would be individual poems entitled ‘L’Ange’ and ‘La Prophétesse’ (f. 14); part one of the bipartite structure would go under the heading of ‘L’Enfer’ (f. 26), the title of Barbusse’s second novel, and as an alternative to ‘Révolution inutile mais glorieuse’, part two would be called ‘Paradis’ (including the poem ‘La Religion’; *ibid*) — an obvious nod in the direction of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

The plan contains many poems in various stages of progress. The most telling as far as this thesis is concerned is the one entitled ‘Le Poème de l’escalier (La divinité humaine). De profundis clamavi’.³⁷ This is the longest poem in the plan, a tripartite structure containing between nineteen and twenty-four stanzas (quatrains) in the three versions of the poem that Barbusse produced. The final stanza of the second part of the second version is evocative of Prometheus, that mythological figure who had the audacity to put himself on a par with the gods of Antiquity: ‘C’est parce que se ferment mes yeux/C’est parce que debout dans l’histoire/Un remords se mêle à ma gloire/Je sais que j’ai volé les cieux!’ (f. 19) So much of the poem is illegible that one has to be circumspect in interpreting the little that is not. Nevertheless, the title of the poem and the indirect reference to Prometheus suggest human aggrandizement, empowerment and divine status. The point is reiterated in a later, untitled poem nine stanzas in length. The sixth adumbrates God’s non-existence and a new religion: ‘Rempli d’une nouvelle Bible/Fraternel, je lève les yeux/Vers les lumières impossibles/Qui sont dans la splendeur

des cieux' (f. 90). The eighth stanza stipulates the poet's divinity, the 'rationale' for which appears to be his all too human qualities: 'C'est le malheur sans cause/Et l'attente qui rêve en vain .../Je suis le seul ami des choses,/Pauvre du soir, tremblant, divin' (ibid).

Quite why Barbusse chose ultimately to omit the embryonic poems and other features considered above, as well as further dilute the religious import of his first book publication by entitling it not 'Le Livre du Prophète' but *Pleureuses*, which gave the work a different connotation altogether, his divinization of the human remains a conspicuous feature. It also acts as a partial counterweight to the poet's negative fixation with the transient nature of life and love. Human beings are regularly versified into the celestial creatures that are angels: 'Oh! quel destin sacré te pousse,/Petit ange qui m'est venu' ('La Consolatrice qui ne savait pas');³⁸ 'J'ai béni l'étrangère, l'autre,/L'ange furtif qui ne sut rien' ('La Ressemblante'); 'Je t'ai trouvé jadis par une nuit très noire,/Pauvre ange de faiblesses avec ton front lassé' ('Hélas! viens avec moi ...').³⁹ Saints and sainthood are also much in evidence: 'La sainte qui le soir, si triste et si jolie/Venait dans la clairière' ('Tableaux'); 'Je te voyais passer, sainte, silencieuse' ('Pendant la prière'); 'Que t'importe à présent l'espoir crépusculaire,/Assise avec le soir, douce sainte d'amour' ('Nous nous sommes revus ...'); 'Mes yeux, lassés du jour qui ment/O ma sainte, seule en novembre' ('Apothéose').⁴⁰

Human divinity is suggested much more directly in a number of poems. It is anticipated in 'La Procession': 'Nous ressemblerons à des dieux.' In 'Laissons l'âpre reflux ...', the poet expects to encounter gods and goddesses on an excursion into the countryside: 'Nous verrons des dieux forts et des déesses nues/Troubler dans les bosquets sombres des grands lauriers.' Laughter, joy and farewells arouse his pity: 'A l'heure où l'on est vrai dieu,/Où l'on ne voit que des martyrs' ('Vous'). Similar thematics are at work in 'L'Absent', in which the poet bemoans the 'départ qui t'a fait vrai dieu'; in 'La Terre', he addresses 'Toi qui veux l'amour sans adieu,/La coupe éternellement

pleine,/Ton cœur est grand comme ta peine,/Tu seras triste comme un dieu.’ In ‘Secret’, the poet explains why human beings are divine: ‘Salut, ô misère, ô silence,/Pauvres aubes de tous les cieux .../Nous sommes des dieux d’ignorance,/C’est pourquoi nous sommes des dieux.’ In ‘La Colère’, it is anger that is next to Godliness: ‘Comme un dieu tu vas n’importe où/Avec ta colère et ta joie.’ Divinity is stated baldly in ‘La Chanson du soir’: ‘Notre divinité tranquille/C’est la longueur de tous les jours.’ A more subtle approach is adopted in ‘Dans le soir’, in which the addressee is called upon to make use of her divine powers: ‘Divinise de joie un passant sur la route,/Et sois persuadée que le pauvre a besoin ...’. In ‘La Chanson du soir’, her hair is not that of a mere mortal (‘tes cheveux divins’). Finally, the poet makes direct comparisons with God in ‘Sainte Madeleine Inutile’: ‘Tu regardes, toujours la même/Tu souris, comme ton ciel bleu,/Et quand on crie ou qu’on blasphème,/Tu laisses dire, comme Dieu.’ In ‘Apothéose’, he does likewise with regard to the mother of the Son of God: ‘A force de tranquillité,/Vous brillez comme auprès d’un cierge,/Dans le soir de réalité/Où vous êtes un peu la Vierge.’

In *Mystère*, Barbusse’s divinization of the two central figures is a more complex, and paradoxical affair. In the guise of Adam and Eve before the Fall, they are at one with God and divine by nature. After the Fall, they are referred to, and refer to one another, as ‘L’Homme’ and ‘La Femme’, the capital letters denoting generic, archetypal qualities; they are portrayed as representatives of the human race, offset by the young boy and girl who come to the Pythia, the priestess of the cave, in an act of supplication.⁴¹ Mere mortals on earth, all of the trials of the human condition are visited upon them — the ageing process, suffering, death in the form of the murder of one of their two sons and so on. As with the poet in the untitled manuscript poem considered above (see pp. 31-32), these two beings are divine not because of their former close association with God and the divine status that this automatically conferred upon them but because of their very

mortality, the most fundamental human characteristic of all. This is the lesson that the Pythia teaches her two young visitors at the close of the first act:

Oh! c'est là la grandeur de l'homme et là sa gloire
D'avoir des yeux sans borne et d'être le cœur fou
Et de porter tout seul l'univers illusoire
Et le néant de tout!

Quand le soleil couchant fait comme un incendie
Lorsque le jour s'incline, ainsi que lui mortel,
Il va, vermeil, divin de tout ce qu'il mendie
Béant de tout le ciel! (30.15-31.2)

As with much of Barbusse's poetry, and prose fiction, *Mystère* is replete with language that has obvious religious connotations. To some extent, this can be ascribed to Barbusse's background and to the strong romantic impulses from which his Muses drew their sustenance. However, just as there can be little doubt that Barbusse quite consciously made use of the Adam and Eve myth and other Biblical figures, symbols and imagery to a very particular end, it would be stretching the imagination beyond the bounds of feasibility to contend that his abundant use of language more commonly associated with the realm of devotional experience was entirely a product of his subconscious mind. Whatever the case may be — and there can be no certainties given the nature of the debate — the effect on the reader is somewhat incantatory. Repeated time and again, words such as 'ciel' (4.11, 5.15, 6.6, 8.4, 9.16),⁴² 'enfer' (5.15), 'prière' (8.6, 12.12, 16.5, 26.12, 30.7), 'l'hymne' (10.2), 'suppliants' (12.1), 'clémence' (12.4), 'grâce' (13.10), 'auréole' (19.3), 'offrande' (20.5), 'expiatoire' (21.8), 'blasphème' (22.6, 24.15), 'martyr' (23.10), 'âme' (10.14, 29.5), 'apothéose' (30.11), 'exaucer' (5.19, 7.2, 8.7, 16.12, 30.11), to name but a few, provide a pseudo-religious 'culture' in which Barbusse's divinization of the human appears to be a natural growth.

One poem that is particularly deserving of attention in this context is 'L'Ouvrière', which can be seen as an indicator of Barbusse's incipient left-wing sympathies. It is also a prime example of the strong religious bent of Barbusse's mind

and, more particularly, of his preoccupation and identification with Jesus — the most significant figure in his novels. The poet sees ‘L’Ouvrière’ at work in her home late at night, labouring ‘A quelque tache un peu divine.’ He sees in her a ‘Pauvre enfant qui n’a pas régné,/Pauvre femme, pauvre princesse .../Voici qu’en ce soir de caresse/Ton cœur trop paisible a saigné.’ This allusion, quite obviously to the sacred heart of Jesus, is reinforced when the poet registers the woman’s surprise at being a ‘Martyre’. In the penultimate stanza of the poem, the poet blesses the object of his contemplation, and others: ‘Béni, celui qui vit ses yeux/Éblouis par un bon mystère,/Bénis, ceux qui trouvent sur terre/Le vague salut d’être heureux! ...’. In doing so, he is echoing Jesus’s declarations of blessedness, as reported in Matthew 5.3-11.⁴³

As a convinced atheist, there was of course nothing remotely religious about Barbusse’s admiration for Jesus. At this stage of his career and intellectual development, it would seem that it was in his vocation as a self-styled prophet that Barbusse felt an affinity with Jesus. Yet in May 1891, at the tender age of eighteen and still a schoolboy, Barbusse dramatically began a poem entitled ‘Lassitude’ with the words ‘O dieu mystérieux superbement mitré,/Entre tes douces mains j’abandonne mon être .../Tu veilleras pendant que je me reposerai’, in obvious imitation of Jesus’s final words in Luke 23.46 (‘Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.’).⁴⁴

As shown earlier in this chapter, Barbusse expressed in his letter to Hélyonne a compulsion to prophesy in the manner of Jesus and Mohammed, the likes of whom come into this world ‘pour enseigner des amis, des apôtres ou des masses, leur prêcher l’idée qu’ils ont senti[e] miraculeusement’.⁴⁵ Of course, Barbusse’s ‘idée’ was diametrically opposed to that of the biblical Jesus with regard to the object of human worship — an important distinction, which those critics who have characterized *Pleureuses* as a prophetic work have neglected to point out. As Lindblom makes clear, prophets are to be found ‘in many provinces of world religion’.⁴⁶ The term, tends, however, to be

associated with the Hebrew prophets of ancient Israel and while Barbusse's use of the Pythia in *Mystère* shows that he did not see prophecy as a purely Hebrew phenomenon, it was to the work of the so-called 'writing prophets' of the Old Testament that he turned most often in his literary career. It is with this group of prophets as a whole, and with Jesus in particular that he most strongly identified.

This identification is somewhat curious. In the preface to the section of the Hebrew prophets in *La Bible de Jérusalem*, the 'prophet', derived from the Hebrew word *nabî*,⁴⁷ meaning 'to call' or 'to announce', is defined as 'Un homme qui a une expérience immédiate de Dieu, qui a reçu la révélation de sa sainteté et de ses volontés'. He is a man who passes judgement on the present and the future 'à la lumière de Dieu et qui est envoyé par Dieu pour rappeler aux hommes ses exigences et les ramener dans la voie de son obéissance et de son amour.'⁴⁸ The experts are in agreement. For Cornill, the prophet is 'the messenger of God to Israel'.⁴⁹ 'The feature common to all prophets in the ancient world', writes Heaton, 'is that they claimed to speak with the authority of their god.'⁵⁰ Chaine describes the prophet as 'celui qui parle au nom d'Iahvé et prêche sa doctrine.'⁵¹ Since the prophet is by definition a messenger and interpreter of the word of a God in whom Barbusse clearly did not believe, the writer can be thought of as a prophet only in the somewhat loose sense that he was 'a man of the public word [...] a speaker and a preacher.'⁵²

Unlike Jesus, then, Barbusse did not seek to preach the word of God but to preach the word of man, at God's expense. If the aim were to proselytize, however, there was no greater example to follow. In his monthly rubric for *La Revue du Palais*, Barbusse gave a review of Rostand's *La Samaritaine*, which he had seen during Holy Week. His comments provide a tantalizing insight into Barbusse's perception of Jesus some thirty years before his Jesus trilogy. Barbusse described Jesus as 'une des voix les

plus religieusement vivantes qui aient jamais parlé à la foule' and praised Rostand's artistic originality in examining Jesus and 'la Femme'.⁵³

Rostand's play, which Barbusse quite obviously appreciated, may well have been the inspiration behind his poem, 'Madeleine', published in *Le Nu*. Unlike his long poem in *Pleureuses*, 'Sainte Madeleine Inutile', 'Madeleine' contains a reference to Jesus and his boundless capacity to forgive.⁵⁴

Quand tout espoir est mort et toute étoile obscure,
Que la femme est mourante au fond du jour mortel,
Un rayon de douceurs règne sur sa figure,
Aussi beau qu'un reflet du ciel.

Pourtant, elle est maudite et seule dans l'abîme,
Et Dieu ne touche pas son front brouillé de nuit,
Et si dans ses yeux passe une lueur sublime,
C'est d'être seule est sans appui,

De souffrir à jamais, de pleurer tout entière
D'être l'espoir sans borne et l'insondable effroi,
Et de crier vers tout une immense prière
Aussi divine que la Foi.

Et qu'ajoute à son cœur au moment qu'elle expie
Le sourire indulgent dont Jésus lui fit don! ...
Elle est, même coupable et sombre, même impie,
Aussi grande que le pardon.

There is an apparent sense of opposition between the first two persons of the Trinity here, in that Jesus forgives Mary Magdalen her sins with a smile, whereas God leaves her 'maudite et seule dans l'abîme [...] seule et sans appui'. The pious would contend, however, that the first two persons of the Trinity are one in the Incarnation: through Jesus it is God himself that forgives this sinner. Far more suggestive of antagonism between Father and Son is the title of a poem that Barbusse appears not to have written, 'Dieu l'antéchrist', which Barbusse included in his plan of *Pleureuses*.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, one can only speculate as to what this poem would have amounted to; and wonder whether the play he wrote over thirty years later, the unpublished *Jésus contre Dieu*, represents its converse.

In Barbusse's major publication of the period prior to *Les Suppliants*, *Pleureuses*, Jesus is referred to only by association, namely with the ultimate Christian symbol, the cross. Recalling his 'douleurs d'autrefois', the poet speaks of those 'Pauvres âmes [...] qui pleurent d'extase au pied des grandes croix' ('Pendant la prière'). 'Une croix se dresse sur eux', he states of his memories, in 'Repos'. Addressing his lost love in 'Les Larmes', the poet senses that she is taking refuge in Jesus's redemptive death: 'Quelque chose dore ta voix/Dans une confuse harmonie .../Ta douleur est presque bénie,/Enfant, tu penses à la croix'. Similarly, in 'L'Attente', solace is being sought in a church by the female addressee but this institution and those who run it would not be, 'Sans l'éblouissement de la croix ...', which is the sub-title of the poem.

A second, and related means of association is provided by the Passion more generally. The saints in the poem of that title 'ont tout oublié, chemins,/Calvaire, amour, gloires brillantes,/Et les bourreaux aux mains sanglantes,/Et les mères aux douces mains.' The last line of this stanza may be an evocation of the *Pietà*, to which there may be an even more oblique reference in 'Le Prophète'. After two references to 'Seigneur', in the section of the poem entitled 'Prière', the poet does not offer up a prayer so much as articulate his thoughts: 'Moi qui ne sais pas de prière,/Toi, si bon au-dessus de nous,/Je voudrais sourire à la mère/Qui t'a tenu sur les genoux.' In reference to 'Dans le passé', Relinger remarks that the poet 'cherche en lui-même la voie de la rédemption.' In a general observation of the work as a whole, he contends that Barbusse, like Jesus, 'qu'il invoque sans le nommer, [...] sait que la première offrande est celle d'être ici, attentif. De là à se vouloir le "prêtre" de ce "monde désespéré", il n'y a qu'un pas.'⁵⁶ Brett makes much the same point in his reading of 'La Procession': 'Déjà, le poète des *Pleureuses* entrevoit, d'une manière mystique, sa vocation de "prêtre" dans ce monde désespéré, prêtre chez qui "toutes les tristesses" pencheront "leurs pauvres fronts".'⁵⁷

Whether a ‘prophet’ inspired by the example of Jesus or a ‘priest’ of a secular, humanist faith, the young Barbusse, in adopting such a role, obviously put himself at loggerheads with the Church and its human representatives, the clergy. The conflict would become fierce and increasingly politicized after Barbusse’s experience of the First World War. At this stage of his career, however, Barbusse was content simply to note his opposition to Catholicism and its priests, as an atheist. In his diary in May 1897, he pondered the state of mind of one Lynda Coates, a former schoolfriend of his fiancée, Hélyonne. Something appeared to be troubling her deeply and she was showing an inclination to turn to religion as a means of dealing with her problems. Barbusse ruminated on the situation as follows:

J’ai souvent trouvé haïssables et criminelles les interrogations minutieuses de la confession et ri de la sophistique des prêtres qui veulent obliger à avouer tout, tout. Et pourtant ce n’est pas insensé de leur part, et si l’on croit à leur mission divine, l’aveu absolument complet est le seul qui soulage et puisse guérir ...⁵⁸

In his letter to Hélyonne, he staked out his area of interest, which he called ‘les vérités du cœur’, leaving to others the ‘domaine de métaphysique, un système de croyances [...] qui ne s’imposent qu’en vertu d’un principe d’autorité qui ne veut même pas être discuté; c’est aux prêtres à s’occuper des révélations supra-naturelles’ (f. 73).⁵⁹

Barbusse’s mild hostility towards the clergy found expression in his earliest poems. One written in April 1891, entitled ‘XXX’, boldly predicts the clergy’s demise:

Ils sont morts! Ils sont morts! les chefs, les Zoroastres,
Prêtres hallucinés d’un gigantesque espoir,
Qui venaient sur les monts où s’épandait le soir
Baigner leur âme au fleur resplendissant des astres.

Et ceux qui poursuivaient l’idéal radieux,
Ils sont morts, il est mort, le mysticisme pâle!
Les pontifes frappés peuplent d’un dernier rôle
Les sanctuaires d’or rougis du sang des dieux.⁶⁰

‘Discussion politique’, written the following month, is altogether more irreverent. Having dismissed ‘Les députés qu’est tou’ des vaches!’ and ‘Les sénateurs qu’a presque

pus d'corps', the poet continues: 'Les curés, des bruts! des plats d'graine/Qui ont [...] /Les bouches comme des trous du cul!'⁶¹

In a sense, *Pleureuses* as a whole (and *Mystère*) can be read as an anticlerical work in its subversion of traditional forms of religious belief and practices and, by extension, of those who minister them. The most obvious expression of anticlericalism in any one poem is to be found in 'L'Attente', sub-titled 'Sans l'éblouissement de la croix ...'. As pointed out above, the poet is mindful that without the cross of Jesus, the Church and the clergy would have no *raison d'être*, which they do not have anyway if Jesus is not the son of God — clearly the poet's view. 'Dans cette église d'ombre où s'incline son cou', the woman to whom he speaks is wasting her time ('C'est l'âme qui pleure et c'est le temps qui passe'). The poet refers to her as 'un grand dieu sans prêtre' and suggests that they, like Adam and Eve in Barbusse's poetry, should place their faith in the material world, despite its many shortcomings: 'Laissons les prêtres fous et les amants fervents/Venir béatement baigner leur tempes vides/Dans ce brumeux chanté par les grands vents!'

In the above analysis of religion in the early, poetical works of Henri Barbusse, it has been shown that the initial belief in the notion of God that the writer may once have had soon gave way to an oft-stated and intractable atheism. Whether this was due to his father's own atheism, his study of philosophy at the Collège Rollin, or the antireligious spirit that animated many at the time, it is not possible to say. In all likelihood, all three phenomena were contributory factors. What *can* be said for certain is that Henri Barbusse the atheist was anything but areligious. Indeed, the young man's realization that God did not exist signalled only the end of the beginning of what was to prove to be a lifelong engagement with religion.

As a young man embarking on his long literary career, Barbusse quietly declared his own war on traditional forms of religious belief and practices in general, and on Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular, in the name of a secular, solipsistic, humanist faith. He saw himself as a prophet, drawing inspiration from the example of Jesus, and using his poetry, as opposed to his writings as a journalist (which eventually provided him with a steady, if unspectacular income), as a means of propagating his message. That this message was inimical to traditional forms of religion is paradoxical: as the brief survey of the concept of the prophet has made clear, a prophet is, by definition, a messenger of God, a medium through whom a divine entity communicates with the human race. Barbusse did not believe that God existed but used a religious concept to make his point. At the same time, because of the concept's very association with the divine, Barbusse's use of it served to transfer divinity from the religious to the secular.

Analysis of his poetry has revealed that Barbusse employed religious language, symbols, imagery and the mythological figures Adam and Eve with the same paradoxical dual aim of subverting established, institutionalized religion, on the one hand, and cultivating a pseudo-religious worship of the human, on the other. By its very nature, this strategy was fraught with risk and could be easily misconstrued.

Barbusse was not seeking God, however; in his quest for faith, he was seeking to *replace* God as a viable object of human worship. 'En assistant à ce drame', he wrote in April 1901 in his review of *Au-delà des forces humaines* by the Scandinavian playwright and soon-to-be Nobel laureate Björnstjerne-Björnson, 'on assiste pour ainsi dire à l'envergure de la créature humaine qui va sans cesse en poursuivant, comme des fantômes, le bonheur et le Dieu qu'elle voudrait'.⁶² But belief in an after-life was universal, 'le plus fondamental et, partant, le plus réaliste des sentiments.'⁶³ Barbusse expressed the view that French playwrights were, by comparison, excessively interested in matters relating to mere manners and social polemics, yet 'L'aventure de la prière', he

averred, 'est à la fois le plus brutal et le plus parfait des drames.'⁶⁴ He himself had addressed spiritual matters in his divinization of the human in his poetry. He was to continue to do so in both of his first two novels.

Notes

¹ See Sartre, *Situations IX*, pp. 32-33.

² FHB, *Naf* 16509, f. 71.

³ FHB, *Naf* 16530, f. 81. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text. This letter has recently been published in its entirety. See 'Une lettre inédite d'Henri Barbusse'.

⁴ Barbusse made much the same point in his long and important essay on Chateaubriand. See 'Chateaubriand et l'esprit moderne', p. 710.

⁵ With regard to existential thought, Barbusse has been seen as something of a precursor to more illustrious names in modern French literature. In his thesis, Relinger compares Barbusse with Camus. See 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', p. 455 ff. For a brief comparative study of Barbusse and Sartre, see Salvan, '*L'Enfer et La Nausée*'.

⁶ Hélyonne may well have been a churchgoer before she married Barbusse. During the period when they were banned from seeing one another by Catulle Mendès, an intermediary wrote to Barbusse: 'Que de moyens avons-nous cherché pour que vous vous rencontriez, en promenades de ou à l'église!' See *Naf* 16509, f. 37. Furthermore, *Naf* 16530 contains watercolours, by Hélyonne (a talented artist), of the imagined decor of their first flat in Paris. A number of these paintings have a religious theme. See ff. 227, 229 and 231. Cossé has claimed that Mendès had all of his daughters convent-educated. 'De la poésie au communisme', p. 26.

⁷ FHB, *Naf* 16507, f. 30.

⁸ FHB, *Naf* 16523, f. 10. Barbusse had notoriously small handwriting and his manuscripts are also, often, extremely untidy. Doubt in deciphering individual words will be indicated in the text by means of a question mark in square brackets.

⁹ FHB, *Naf* 16475, f. 26; author's emphasis. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

¹⁰ FHB, *Naf* 16499, f. 1.

¹¹ For the other co-authors, see the bibliography.

¹² Flower, *Literature and the Left in France*, p. 30.

¹³ Some of them are to be found in the ‘Cahier de vers’ of the literary circle run by Barbusse and his close friend (later brother-in-law) Jean Weber, at the Collège Rollin. See FHB, *Naf* 16471, and *Naf* 16472.

¹⁴ See Mendès, ‘Henri Barbusse’, p. 1.

¹⁵ See Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 14-35.

¹⁶ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 19. Edouard Petit (‘Semaine littéraire’) and Stéphane (‘Les Jeunes — Henri Barbusse’) were exceptions. The latter wrote of Barbusse’s tendency to sanctify his visions. The former likened Barbusse’s poetry to that of another poet: ‘Elle me rappelle, dans tout le cœur du volume, cette exquise pièce, si pleine d’au-delà et de mystère, *Les Limbes*, que naguère sur un ton très doux et très lent, composa Casimir Delavigne.’

¹⁷ Barbusse, *Pleureuses* (Charpentier, 1895). Unless otherwise stated, all of the poems cited are taken from this edition. The title of the poem in question is provided in the text, in parenthesis or otherwise, as the case may be.

¹⁸ Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 29.

¹⁹ See note 10. The destruction of Barbusse’s library by the Nazis in 1940 leaves the student of Barbusse at something of a loss as to what he read. Although there is no documentary evidence to support the claim, it is hard to imagine that he was not familiar with the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman mystery play entitled *Le Mystère d’Adam* (in modern French). See *Le Mystère d’Adam*, ed. by Studer; and ‘The Service for Representing Adam’, ed. by Bevington. For a lively, and accessible discussion of Judaeo-Christian interpretations of the Adam and Eve myth, see Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*.

²⁰ *Naf* 16509, ff. 45-46.

²¹ *Naf* 16530, f. 81.

²² In Greek mythology, the Pythia ('Pythonisse') is the priestess of the Delphic Oracle, the oracular shrine of Apollo on Mount Parnassus. According to Harvey, the Pythia, 'seated on a tripod over a fissure in the rock, uttered in a divine ecstasy incoherent words in reply to the questions of the supplicants. [...] The Delphic Oracle was primarily concerned with questions of religion'. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, p. 138. See also Cornell, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 11.

²³ Barbusse, *Mystère*, p. 6. The document referred to is a thirty-nine-page fair copy, apparently in Barbusse's hand, a photocopy of which the AAHB very kindly provided. For ease of subsequent reference, page and line numbers (of the interventions of the characters only) are given in parenthesis in the text.

²⁴ See note 11. The volume is not paginated.

²⁵ García-Ramon was most impressed with Barbusse's technical abilities but added, ironically, 'the day he deigns to allow himself to be understood, there is no doubt that we will indeed be obliged to admire him.' FHB, *Naf* 16525, f. 9; my translation.

²⁶ Barbusse, 'Premières représentations et reprises', October (1900), p. v. It should be noted that there is an error in the pagination of the supplement to this particular issue of the journal.

²⁷ 'Chateaubriand et l'esprit moderne', p. 701. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

²⁸ *Les Martyrs* features in the list of 'Grands livres' that Barbusse drew up in his 'Carnet de guerre'. The list is to be found in the Flammarion-Livre de Poche edition of *Le Feu*, pp. 460-61. Other books with a conspicuous religious dimension which Barbusse included are *Les Pensées* (Pascal), *La Vie de Jésus* (Renan) and *Le Saint* (Fogazzaro).

²⁹ FHB, *Naf* 16508, f. 8.

³⁰ *Naf* 16509, f. 70.

³¹ *Naf* 16530, f. 73. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

³² See note 14; Pottecher, 'Chronique littéraire'; and Canivet (*Naf* 16525, f. 9 for both cuttings).

³³ Décaudin, 'Le Poète des *Pleureuses*', pp. 24-25.

³⁴ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 28.

³⁶ *Naf* 16475, ff. 13, 26, 29b, 31, 39. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the text.

³⁷ As will be seen, the 'De profundis' motif features prominently in both *L'Enfer* and *Clarté*.

³⁸ Published in the 1920 Flammarion edition. It warrants a place in this analysis, however, since it was included in the pre-1895 plan. See *Naf* 16475, f. 135. The same can be said of 'La Romance' and 'La Ressemblante'. See ff. 136 and 137, respectively.

³⁹ For further examples, see 'La Romance', 'Le Sommeil', 'A une amie', 'La Fatigue' and 'Pendant la prière'.

⁴⁰ For further examples, see 'Vous', 'La Romance' and 'Frisson du réel'. The third of these poems, included in the 1920 edition, was not a part of the volume in 1895. However, it did feature in Barbusse's letter to Hélyonne in the summer of 1897. See *Naf* 16530, f. 79.

⁴¹ A similar configuration is in evidence in *L'Enfer*, in which Aimée and the poet (Adam and Eve) are portrayed as the child-lovers, Jean and Hélène, grown old.

⁴² For further examples, see 10.3, 11.6, 12.14, 12.16, 13.9, 19.5, 21.4, 28.10, 28.14 and 31.2.

⁴³ Maximilien Desanzac, the pseudo-Messiah, utters beatitudes in *Les Suppliants*, as, naturally, does Jesus the non-Messiah, in *Jésus*.

⁴⁴ *Naf* 16471, ff. 14-15. The poem was published in *Le Banquet* under the title of 'Evocation'. It is reproduced in Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 333-34, together with a number of Barbusse's other poems. In Brett's opinion, 'Evocation' is a poem 'plein de [...] mysticisme sentimental et mélancolique' (p. 25).

⁴⁵ *Naf* 16530, f. 73.

⁴⁶ Lindblom, *Prophecy in Israel*, p. 1.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the etymology of the term, see Cornill, *The Prophets of Israel*, pp. 1-15.

⁴⁸ *La Bible de Jérusalem*, p. 1208.

⁴⁹ Cornill, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, p. 34.

⁵¹ Chaine, *Introduction à la lecture des prophètes*, p. 11.

⁵² Lindblom, *Prophecy in Israel*, p. 2.

⁵³ Barbusse, 'Premières représentations et reprises', March-May (1897), pp. xi-xii.

Barbusse also gave an enthusiastic review of Jean Richepin's *La Martyre*, in which a Roman princess, Flammeola, converts to Christianity having fallen in love with an apostle: 'Les deux cœurs peu à peu se rapprochent, se rassemblent, montent enfin dans le ciel, dans le baiser suprême que donne le sang de Jésus crucifié en tombant sur Flammeola mourante, prosternée, convertie.' See the same rubric, April-June (1898), p. i.

⁵⁴ The poem appears alongside a photograph of a female nude by Sezille des Essarts.

⁵⁵ See *Naf* 16475, f. 2.

⁵⁶ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 18.

⁵⁷ See note 18.

⁵⁸ *Naf* 16509, f. 72. The nuanced nature of this criticism is worth noting. As analysis of the novels will show, Barbusse admired those who acted on the courage of their

convictions, and in particular individual priests, whom he generally distinguished from the clergy as a whole and the institution they represented.

⁵⁹ See note 45.

⁶⁰ *Naf* 16471, f. 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, ff. 18-19.

⁶² Barbusse, 'Premières représentations et reprises', January-April (1901), p. 247.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 249.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

CHAPTER TWO
‘LONGUE MÉDITATION SUR L’IDÉE DE DIEU’: *LES SUPPLIANTS* (1903)

Les Suppliants was a long time in the writing — some six years (1896-1902) according to Baudorre, during the greater part of which Barbusse worked as a clerk, first in the Ministry of the Interior, then the Ministry of Agriculture.¹ He had been collaborating with various journals and newspapers throughout this time and in June 1902 he left the Ministry of Agriculture to take up a full-time position as an editor for Pierre Lafitte publications.

Barbusse’s first novel tells the story of his fictional *alter ego* Maximilien Desanzac, from childhood to adolescence, and some indeterminate point beyond. The setting is the Montmartre of Barbusse’s youth; the school described in it is, in all but name, the Collège Rollin at which Barbusse had been a pupil. Like Barbusse, Maximilien loses his mother in early childhood; Desanzac *père*, nanny Léonore, and schoolboy friend Jacques Hellin are fictional transpositions of Adrien Barbusse, Émilie Voirin and Julien Weber, respectively.² The action of the novel, such as it is, consists largely of exchanges between the various secondary characters and the main protagonist, whose views hold sway over those views held around him. They all speak an emotionally charged, highly lyrical French. Barbusse later described *Les Suppliants* as ‘une étude psychologique et un peu romantique de l’état d’âme des jeunes gens de mon époque’.³

Given that Barbusse’s first novel had such a long gestation and was written, for the most part, at the time when he was producing his poetry, it is hardly surprising that the engagement with religion of Barbusse the novelist has many similarities with that of Barbusse the poet, in terms both of the degree and the nature of this engagement. In other words, in *Les Suppliants*, as in the poetry, religion is of central importance with regard to the aims and thematics of the work, and the writer once again mounts his critique from a largely apolitical and metaphysical perspective at the level of the text.

Outside the text, as it were, Barbusse, as author, did see himself playing a vicarious role in the socio-political sphere, on the side of the forces of the Left. Sending his socialist former colleague at the Ministry of Agriculture, André Spire, a copy of the novel, Barbusse wrote in a letter:

Je viens vous demander à son sujet deux services: d'abord le lire et m'en dire votre opinion, ensuite m'aider, par vos indications, vos conseils, votre influence à le répandre le plus possible dans les milieux socialistes. La thèse qu'il défend: absurdité et inutilité du principe religieux dans la vie sentimentale et morale, attaques contre l'existence et la nécessité de la divinité, me paraît de celles qu'il serait bon de mettre hardiment en avant dans les partis antitraditionnels. Sur ce point les militants de l'opinion avancée devraient soutenir et défendre les intellectuels qui leur montrent les voies d'une complète et absolue libération.⁴

It is perfectly clear from this statement that Barbusse hoped to see *Les Suppliants* make an impact in left-wing circles. To his way of thinking, 'militants de l'opinion avancée' and 'intellectuels' could be of mutual assistance in the political fight against religion. It is to be borne in mind that *Les Suppliants* was published at the height of the anticlerical campaign led by the then prime minister Émile Combes. Within two years, the legislation separating Church and State in France came into effect and diplomatic relations with the Holy See were severed, not to be renewed until 1921. *Les Suppliants* has to be read within its immediate socio-political context.⁵

The significance of Barbusse's letter to Spire is that for Barbusse the point of contact between his novel and himself as author, on the one hand, and those moving in socialist circles, on the other, is the novel's thesis, which has nothing to do with capitalism and the class war, and everything to do with religion. The thesis his novel sets out to defend Barbusse sums up as the 'absurdité et inutilité du principe religieux dans la vie sentimentale et morale, attaques contre l'existence et nécessité de la divinité'.⁶ It is the religion that drives the politics rather than the converse. Barbusse's letter to Spire is to be understood as a combination of opportunism and self-advertisement, to which Barbusse was prone in his youth;⁷ he wrote this novel primarily in order to express

metaphysical concerns,⁸ and preach to the masses. Realizing that because of its ultra-radical attitude towards the concept of God and organized religion, it would be a useful weapon for those determined to drive a wedge between Church and State in a country thought of as 'la fille aînée de l'Église', he sent a copy of the novel to Spire.⁹ That this gesture was not motivated by any particular political affiliations is made clear by the recipient of the letter in question, the socialist André Spire: 'lorsque nous étions ensemble au Cabinet de l'Agriculture, Barbusse n'était qu'un rêveur, une sorte de païen mystique et individualiste et n'avait pas encore renoncé à gravir les hautains degrés de la Tour d'Ivoire'.¹⁰

The same point is made by Barbusse himself. In *Judas*, Barbusse points out that his portrayal of Jesus in his recent novel cannot be ascribed simply to a desire on his part to defend and propagate revolutionary ideas deriving from his adoption of Communism:

Certains traits essentiels de cette même image de Jésus étaient déjà indiqués dans mon premier roman *Les Suppliants*, longue méditation sur l'idée de Dieu, écrite il y a quelques vingt ans, à une période de ma vie où je ne songeais guère à prendre une part militante dans les luttes sociales.¹¹

The indication is that Barbusse's first novel, published in 1903, is long on the religious and short on the political, and that the main characteristics of his Jesus of 1927 are to be found in his portrayal of Maximilien Desanzac some twenty-four years earlier.

Barbusse reiterated this point in an interview given on 4 August 1927. In reference, once again, to his first novel, he stated: 'Il constitue une attaque très vigoureuse contre toutes les doctrines et toutes les tendances religieuses, y compris l'idée de Dieu qui en est l'élément central.'¹² Even the most cursory of readings reveals that *Les Suppliants* is a novel of ideas in which the author constructs, first and foremost, a critique of religion from an apolitical perspective. There *are* workers in the novel but their presence is shadowy. Numerous beggars appear but this is a narrative in which all of the characters are cast as metaphorical beggars, the words 'mendiants' and

‘suppliants’ being virtually synonymous within the context of the novel.¹³ Thus there is no attempt to account for the causes of their destitution in socio-economic terms.

The workers and the socially disenfranchised, though present, are relevant only insofar as they are thought to face at an individual level the same metaphysical concerns that Maximilien (and Barbusse) have to face.¹⁴ No material, socio-political remedy is propounded and statements such as ‘Il faut penser aux sources de misère pour les tarir’¹⁵ are not intended to quicken the pulse of the socialist reader, still less that of the revolutionary.¹⁶ The remedy for (and the cause of) destitution in this novel is seen to be the heart, a synecdoche for the human being at an individual level. The primacy of the self over the collectivity, and the preoccupation with revolt in a metaphysical rather than a socio-political sense are best illustrated in the narrative on the day when Maximilien’s father is buried. Seeing a crowd gathered in a demonstration at the gates to the cemetery, Maximilien reflects on ‘la grandeur de l’homme et la petitesse de la foule’ (p. 234).

Such an observation is in keeping with the rest of the narrative. Thus Maximilien tells the shoemaker Thierry and his wife, who are broken by the fatigues of the working day and the recent loss of their baby son (p. 263), that they would do well not to envy the rich, the strong, and the powerful — in Marxist language, the owners of the means of production: ‘Ils ne valent que par des biens, des actions ou des œuvres terrestres, et tout cela est noyé dans la grande demande infinie du cœur’ (p. 272). As with Barbusse’s poetry, so with his first novel: there is virtually nothing in the text to indicate that Barbusse would eventually join the PCF.

Barbusse’s hostility towards Christianity and his political anticlericalism, which might be defined as opposition to the Church at an institutional level, and to its human representatives, the clergy, are manifest in his letter to Spire, as has been made clear. At the level of the text, Maximilien’s irreligion constitutes the major theme of the novel but as he is an apolitical character, his anticlericalism cannot be defined in the same terms as

can that of the author. At most, he is anticlerical implicitly, as a logical extension of his hostility towards the concept of God and all that this entails. He is anticlerical in his opposition to the priest in the novel, Ursleur, but this opposition is at the level of the individual and pits an immanentist philosophy against a transcendentalist philosophy.

Furthermore, not only is there no reference to the Church as an institution, Ursleur too is in a sense an apolitical character, in that he is a lay priest concerned only with the task of ministering to the poor and needy: 'Il n'exerçait pas le sacerdoce. Il passait sa vie à faire la charité. On ne le voyait que lorsqu'il avait besoin d'une aumône pour d'autres'(p. 168). He is thus the somewhat ironical pendant to Maximilien: Ursleur provides material help, animated by belief in an external divinity that has created the self; Maximilien, paradoxically, provides what might be called 'spiritual' help, animated by belief in an internal divinity that *is* the self. Unlike the Roman Catholic priest in *L'Enfer*, Ursleur is not cast as a stereotypical, doctrinaire man of the cloth, which further nuances the anticlericalism evident in the text of *Les Suppliants*. Both phonetically and in terms of his treatment by the author, he calls to mind the abbé Horteur in Zola's *La Joie de vivre*.¹⁷ Suffice it to say for the time being that it is in the two long episodes in which Maximilien and Ursleur endeavour to have their respective world-views prevail, the second of which brings the narrative to a close, that the main interest of the novel resides.

Maximilien's world-view is not arrived at as a result of his interaction with the priest or any other representative of the Church during his formative years. His father, 'très libre-penseur' (p. 54), guards against the religious indoctrination of his son (p. 7), and Léonore's religiosity (p. 5) does not rub off on him (p. 17). Deprived of contact with others as a child, Maximilien develops a sensitivity and introspection which his father finds increasingly worrying. In an effort to draw his son out of himself and to put an end to what is described as a 'crise d'individualisme trop pur qui débauchait son fils à

l'écart' (p. 27), Desanzac *père* delivers a well-meaning lecture, during the course of which it becomes apparent that whereas he believes that the Absolute (the infinite, the eternal etc.) exists outside the self, for Maximilien it is the self that conceives of, creates the Absolute. Although Desanzac himself does not use religious terminology and appears not to be a believer in the way that Léonore is, his downgrading of the human being and his calling upon his son to place his faith in the eternal rather than the ephemeral (p. 28), combined with his 'évoqueries de lois universelles, de choses extra-humaines' (p. 29), do not suggest an obvious non-religious world-view by which his son might live his life. Indeed, there is no discernible difference between these remarks and Ursleur's later observation that 'l'homme est condamné au malheur, s'il prétend rester seul avec lui-même' (p. 151). The step from the rejection of man to the acceptance of God is but a short one.¹⁸

By the tender age of twelve, Maximilien has already reached the conclusion that the only creator is the human consciousness, and all concepts stem from it — infinity, eternity, time, space, and love. Nothing exists without a human consciousness to perceive it: 'il faut un regard pour déployer l'horizon et pour verser l'espace [...] l'espace le plus grand a pour espace la pensée, et [...] le temps a la pensée pour éternité' (p. 75). Like Maximilien's father, Jacques is inclined to think in terms of an Absolute outside the self, with the difference that Jacques explicitly associates the Absolute with the God of Christianity. In the early stages of their friendship, Maximilien tells him, that he, Jacques, is time and space: 'Ne croyons qu'à la pensée qui donne; restons dans l'absolu de nous-mêmes' (p. 75).

Strictly, speaking, then, Maximilien cannot be anything but an atheist in the Christian sense. Maximilien's father sees this early and realizes that there is not likely to be much of an evolution in this respect: 'Et le père se martyrisait les regards à constater que son enfant serait exclusivement, jalousement, surhumainement humain' (pp. 24-

25).¹⁹ After his personal interventions and his having sent his son to school, finally, at the age of twelve have failed to make any impression on Maximilien's introspective solipsism, he arranges for three acquaintances of his, 'un professeur, un écrivain, et une autre personne que Maximilien n'était pas bien sûr de connaître' (pp. 53-54), to pay them a visit.

On the strength of the briefest of visual examinations only, a diagnosis is reached: 'Il a l'âme religieuse' (p. 54) — a diagnosis with which his father agrees, disappointed. The 'professeur' is more specific: 'Il [Maximilien] s'approche de Dieu', who is subsequently associated with 'l'éternité', 'les principes infinis', 'la vérité vraie' (p. 55). Asked the direct question: 'Crois-tu en Dieu, mon petit?', Maximilien answers laconically, 'Non' — the only word he speaks in the entire episode. Whether or not they themselves believe in God is a moot point but there does seem to be a consensus amongst these three wise men²⁰ that the concept of God is reassuring, if nothing else: 'Si Dieu n'est pas, il n'y a que nous qui soyons vivants, il n'y a que nous, et la mort' (p. 56). For the first time, Maximilien is made to feel the full implications of a belief in the human that precludes the possibility of a theistic God and he realizes, not without a considerable degree of *angst*, that it is precisely because of a human desire that there be a God that the concept was created:

Dieu, ne serait-ce pas tout de suite, dans cette chambre, l'aumône même, la guérison de la pauvreté, la maternité toujours miraculeusement riche? [...] il eut l'inexprimable regret, le remords de n'avoir jamais et nulle part vu Dieu. [...] On ne voit de Dieu que la place vide, on n'en voit que le ciel, on entend que le nom [*sic*]; on n'en ressent que le besoin béant. (p. 57)²¹

He questions his fellow pupils about their beliefs regarding the existence or otherwise of God and receives a variety of responses — agnostic, atheist, fideist (pp. 58-59). He alone seems to appreciate the importance of the question, however; he alone seems to suffer and feel the need to find an alternative to the equally unpalatable options of belief in God or belief in the void and contingency: 'Maximilien, délaissait, se mettait à éprouver

cruellement le néant. Son cœur, où tout s'engloutissait, allait pourtant en quête de quelque chose. [...] Il appelait au secours du fond de ses profondeurs' (p. 59). Asked by Jacques whether he believes in God, Maximilien repeats the reply given earlier in the narrative to the same question, this time far more expansively, explaining that:

Dieu n'était qu'un mot quand on le comparait à la puissance et à l'intensité de notre cœur. C'est ce qu'il faudrait et non ce qui est. C'est la formule théorique du bonheur et de la paix ... Dieu, c'est un mot, un cri; Dieu, c'est la place de Dieu; Dieu, c'est une négation ... (p. 66)

It is important to note here that Maximilien's God-denial is offset against the human heart, which has been alluded to so often by this point in the narrative that it has assumed for Maximilien near cultic status. The negative (God) is counterbalanced by a positive (the heart and, by extension, the human), the latter of which provides an alternative source of faith. Maximilien feels the need to believe in something and it is in the human heart and mind that he chooses to believe.

This is evident in his dialogue with Marguerite Ternisier, the friend of Jeanne Roger. Left to themselves when Jacques makes another unsuccessful attempt to court Jeanne at her home in Rueil, they discuss the concept of happiness. Marguerite ventures the thought that human beings are condemned to be unhappy on earth and calls upon Ursleur to echo this thought. The priest's intervention is bound to alienate Maximilien: 'Nous ne sommes pas par nous-mêmes capables d'être heureux. Oui, l'homme est condamné au malheur, s'il prétend rester seul avec lui-même' (p. 151). Making the obvious inference, Marguerite asks Maximilien whether he shares Ursleur's view: 'Non', he replies. 'Je ne crois pas en Dieu' (p. 151). This leads to an allusion to Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, whose systems are held to militate against the concept of God. Asked to state what he does believe in, he says, with 'un accent de fierté': 'Je ne crois qu'au cœur humain' (p. 152).

The same reflex is in evidence in Maximilien's lengthy exchange with Thierry and his wife, who had been good friends of his father (p. 262) and have just lost their baby

son. The importance of this encounter is evident from a manuscript fragment on which Barbusse wrote: ‘Rien n’est plus grave que la scène où le héros du livre apporte une lueur de joie aux humbles parents dont l’enfant est mort, en leur expliquant “qu’il n’y a pas de Dieu.”’²² When Maximilien goes to see the grieving couple and tells them that, in spite of their suffering, there is a consolation (p. 265), Thierry’s wife, sensing that the consolation is of a religious nature, hurriedly confesses to being somewhat lax in this respect and to not having had their son baptized. ‘Croyez-vous que le bon Dieu voudra que nous soyons heureux?’, she asks (p. 266). Maximilien makes his by now customary response to a question about or presupposing the existence of God. To the follow-up question, ‘Il n’y a pas de Dieu ... Alors quoi?’ (p. 267), he replies: ‘Alors ... Il n’y a que nous’, then proceeds to teach them about the workings of the human heart. At the end of it all, the heavens open and ‘les deux êtres reprenaient à Dieu ce qu’ils lui avaient donné, reprenaient Dieu’ (p. 276). They had imagined that Maximilien would attempt to console them with comforting words about God’s benevolence and mysterious ways. Instead, he makes them confront their suffering by uttering what for orthodox believers would be the ultimate heresy: ‘tout ce qui est en dehors de nous est apparence, petitesse; s’en occuper, c’est illusion; y croire, c’est idolâtrie’ (p. 277).

Reflecting shortly afterwards, Maximilien arrives at the following, emphatic conclusion:

Ce n’est pas assez de dire: adorez non la religion, mais Dieu, source de la religion. Il reste à dire: adorez non pas Dieu, mais le cœur humain, source de Dieu. [...] Il n’y a que le cœur humain, et ceux qui voient ce suprême commencement sont, où qu’ils soient et quels qu’ils soient, dans la cité de la lumière, et règnent en même temps que la vérité. (pp. 280-81)

As a solipsist imbued with the philosophy of the three great thinkers mentioned in the narrative, Maximilien comes to believe that if God exists, it is as a figment of the human imagination. The various strands in the thought of the ‘mature’ Maximilien Desanzac — the denial of the existence of the Christian God; the aggrandizement of the human,

creator of God and all things besides; the implicit, apolitical anticlericalism, and hostility towards traditional religious belief and practice — are all on display in Maximilien's two lengthy altercations with Ursleur.

The first occurs as a result of Jacques's despair at his failure to win the heart of Jeanne Roger. In the early stages of their friendship, Jacques is seen to differ from Maximilien in his quasi-religious conception of an external Absolute. As is often the case with a young mind exposed to the deeply held convictions of a friend with a much stronger personality, Jacques finds himself adopting Maximilien's views shortly after they become acquainted at school. He becomes less diligent and takes to lingering at windows, 'à lever les yeux, à éprouver que l'absolu n'était pas au ciel' (p. 76). Reflecting on the nature and origin of perspective, he realizes that his belief in God had always lacked substance. Jacques and Maximilien become the firmest of friends, experiencing the traumas of early adolescence together. The latter returns from a post-*baccalauréat* summer holiday in Auvergne at the home of M. Lise, a former teacher friend of his father. An unconsummated affair with a mysterious married foreign lady has reinforced his basic outlook rather than altered it. On his return, however, he finds Jacques changed, distant and dependent upon Jeanne Roger, who toys with his emotions.

Having had a near mystic experience whilst observing Jeanne crying at an unguarded moment in her salon, Jacques tells his friend and confidant: 'Elle me dirait de croire en Dieu que j'y croirais sincèrement, à cause du miracle d'elle!' (p. 147) He pins his entire hopes for happiness on winning Jeanne's hand and when he loses it to a man of whose existence he had been completely unaware, his reaction is one of utter despair. Maximilien is mindful of Ursleur's words to him about happiness: 'Pour se consoler, il faut croire à *autre chose*. [...] Un jour où vous n'aurez plus besoin que d'entendre redire ces choses pour les croire, vous viendrez me trouver' (p. 155; author's italics). He suggests that he and Jacques pay Ursleur a visit.

Although it is Jacques's desperate unhappiness and his all-consuming need to believe in something other than himself that has prompted the visit (p. 164), once in Ursleur's abode it is Maximilien that does most of the talking, and the scene quickly develops into a clash between diametrically opposed world-views. Informed that they are not happy, Ursleur restates the position articulated earlier at Rueil: 'Pour être heureux, il faut croire à quelque chose de fort et d'éternel, et situé en dehors de nous. Croyez-vous en cela?' (p. 169) Maximilien, speaking more, one suspects, for himself than for Jacques, replies true to type and the lines for battle are drawn.

Careful to leave religion out of his account, Ursleur relates how he has found a cause worth believing in (p. 170) and thereby a sense of purpose and fulfilment in doing good, dispensing charity and justice: 'en servant le bien, quoique nous soyons petits, nous sommes grands' (p. 172). Despite the absence of an appeal from the perspective of religion in Ursleur's long monologue (pp. 171-74), Maximilien realizes that everything the priest says is underpinned by an unhesitating spiritual acceptance of that which he himself cannot allow; that, once again, he is being asked to subscribe to the belief that salvation lies in adopting a transcendentalist philosophy. Maximilien is as unimpressed with Ursleur as he has been with everybody else who has taken this line: 'Cet homme était un halluciné, comme tous ceux qui lui avaient parlé dans la vie: il désignait au delà de lui-même la chose du salut, alors qu'au delà de nous, il n'y a rien' (p. 174). He insists that the truth, what Ursleur terms 'la sainte loi du Bien' (p. 175), is entirely self-referential, at which point a more doctrinaire approach by the priest begins to emerge: 'Mais nous n'avons rien en nous de plus réel que la révélation du Bien et du Mal!'²³ Prompted by the life story told by an adult beggar, one of his regular visitors, Ursleur declares that it is 'le Bien et le Bonheur' that count (p. 189).

Maximilien launches into a counter-monologue (pp. 190-95), culminating in the following statement, which nobody cares to contradict:

La conscience n'est rien à côté de notre cœur. Notre souffle profond l'anéantit ... Et comme le Bien et le Mal n'ont pour preuve que la conscience, je dis qu'il n'y a, dans la vérité, ni Bien, ni Mal. Si la conscience, [*sic*] prouvait le Bien, elle le prouverait à tous [...].(p. 195)

Ursleur protests that his conscience attests to the existence of Good (and Evil); Maximilien promptly points out that he, Ursleur, believes in this concept because he loves the concept. Now very much on the defensive, Ursleur rises to the challenge set by Maximilien's use of the word 'Dieu' by pointing out that he had consciously avoided basing their discussion on it: 'Mais à quoi bon? On croit ou on ne croit pas. On est jeté sur cette croyance terriblement, au hasard comme un naufragé sur une épave, au milieu de toute la mer' (p. 196). Maximilien is quick to show that the moment God is allowed to exist as an external reality the proof of the existence of Good (and Evil), Charity and so on, the whole question of the source of morality, are *per force* automatically arrogated to God: 'Vous voyez que j'avais raison de dire que la conscience n'est pas sincère, puisqu'elle dit qu'elle n'a besoin de rien et qu'en réalité elle a besoin de Dieu. Si Dieu existe, le Bien existe [...] et vous avez raison'. But, states, Maximilien, 'Dieu n'est que le désir et le besoin de Dieu! Et dire: Dieu existe est aussi absurde que de dire: Il faut être heureux' (p. 197).

Nothing more to say, Maximilien and Jacques take their leave of Ursleur at a crossroads, at which three separate paths symbolically diverge. The priest confidently predicts a return visit (using the numerically ambiguous 'Vous' form of address), 'car je crois que tous croiront' (p. 198). However, his atheism reaffirmed by his friend's conclusive words, Jacques receives, immediately thereafter, a letter from Jeanne and their engagement is not long in following. His friendship with Maximilien is at an end and he drops out of the narrative, leaving the stage clear for a final, 'climactic' encounter between Maximilien and Ursleur — an encounter that is brought into sharper relief by the absence of peripheral figures.

It is after his exchange with Thierry and his wife that Maximilien comes across Ursleur for the final time.²⁴ Significantly, Maximilien is making his way out of a church. The reader is made to feel that Maximilien would never have sought out the priest again. ‘Vous me cherchez?’, asks Ursleur. ‘Non’, replies Maximilien, ‘je me cherchais moi-même’ (p. 284). They leave the church together, and take to the streets of Paris. There follows a restatement of their positions, Ursleur locating the Absolute outside the self; Maximilien repeatedly and insistently locating it within (p. 289).

Unlike in their previous encounter, which is a juxtaposition of monologues, a Chekhovian dialogue of the deaf rather than a Camusian meeting of minds, there is now some movement, and it is, of course, Barbusse’s intention that it should be Ursleur that is prepared to concede ground. Ursleur objects to Maximilien’s insistence that the first cause of everything is human in origin by stating that despite everything his interlocutor has said, human beings have a spiritual need to believe; they need ‘[une] croyance à une cause’ (p. 289). His reasoning is refuted once again: ‘C’est une croyance, ce n’est pas une cause. C’est une croyance, c’est nous’ (p. 289), at which point, like everybody else whose path has crossed that of Maximilien hitherto, Ursleur finds himself beginning to see things differently: ‘Le prêtre se tut en un coup d’effarement. Ce que faisait son interlocuteur, ce vaste et vague arrachement des preuves de Dieu, — ô folie! — ne lui semblait plus si fou’ (pp. 289-90).

Dominated verbally and intellectually by Maximilien, Ursleur is reduced this time from the earlier parity to a series of muted, ineffectual responses. Along with all those who share his religion, he is accused of idolatry, of making, then worshipping the image rather than the God (pp. 290, 292): ‘Tout ce que vous voudriez, vous appelez cela Dieu, pour que cela soit. Vous faites une idole, non à l’image de votre argile, mais à l’image de vos prières’ (p. 294). Maximilien adds that he himself would be able to believe in the Christian God only if he were mad. He asks Ursleur to prove the existence of his God.

The priest is unable to say anything beyond his earlier observation about belief (p. 196) and thus does not interject when Maximilien proceeds to equate God with 'le néant', defining the concept as '[un] chaos de réponses impossibles' (p. 295). In short: 'Celui qui a créé Dieu. Celui dont Dieu est le verbe: l'homme [...] il n'y a de Dieu que l'homme; Dieu c'est le mot humain; c'est un adjectif' (p. 296).

Although he has by now lost the battle, Ursleur has still not surrendered. In a reversal of their received roles, Maximilien implores Ursleur to acknowledge, finally, that the humanist rather than the theistic world-view is the one true path to salvation. Speaking to him, 'avec une immense douceur', sensing the bonds of fraternity between them (p. 298), Maximilien urges Ursleur to try and believe, for the latter's own benefit: 'Essayez, essayez de croire' (p. 299). The narrative ends with the priest striving to do so:

L'absolu est-il dans l'universel, l'absolu est-il dans l'individu? Le monde est-il en nous? Les uns ont dit oui, les autres ont dit non. Dans cette mêlée pour la vérité et la simplicité, quels sont les vainqueurs, quels sont les vaincus?...
[...] Et la vérité elle-même, à travers lui, répondait avec tout son silence.
(p. 302)

The novel is brought to an equivocal close with what appears to be a statement of agnosticism by the priest. The dramatic space separating his final position from that of Maximilien has narrowed, due entirely to concessions made on the part of the priest. The reader is left with the feeling that while Maximilien will never endorse Ursleur's initial views, Ursleur is no longer too far away from fully endorsing Maximilien's views, which have remained consistently inimical to Christianity throughout the narrative.

Not only is this and, by extension, all religions implicitly undermined in this novel from first to last, they are also explicitly and very directly attacked at various junctures in the narrative. In her second tête-à-tête with Maximilien, this one after Jacques has won Jeanne's hand by default, Marguerite reveals that in her unhappiness she has recently sought solace in religion, only to be told by a priest to pray and trust in God, secure in the knowledge that she would one day be happy in paradise. She was not convinced: 'je

n'ai pas besoin, moi, d'être heureuse au ciel. Mon chagrin de la terre a besoin d'une consolation de la terre' (p. 203). On his deathbed, Maximilien's father dismisses religion as a 'blasphème' (p. 226); his final words ('Je ne crois pas en Dieu') are delivered with 'un sourire de gloire' (p. 228). His father's death provides Maximilien with two further occasions on which to see for himself that even those who notionally derive religious consolation from the sufferings of this world in practice experience no such thing. Léonore, shaken to the core by the death of her long-standing employer, knows not what to pray for: 'Le paradis? [...] Oh! quel que soit le paradis, Dieu lui-même doit pleurer lorsqu'il voit mourir ceux qu'il aime' (pp. 229-30). Speaking from Maximilien's perspective (as ever), the narrator remarks: 'Jamais une bouche n'avait si parfaitement condamné toutes les consolations des religions' (p. 230).

The same point is heavily underscored on the day of the funeral when Desanzac père's oldest friend, 'homme [...] très religieux, très pratiquant', arrives, 'la figure défaite' (p. 234):

Même les croyants ne croient pas. Car il n'existe pas d'être humain qui [...] se réjouisse de la mort des siens. Dans le grand moment de la mort, on sent bien que le cœur se dévoile, on sent bien que le cœur est plus vrai que Dieu.
(p. 234)

The implication here is that if paradise is a 'reality' and not a grand illusion designed to conquer the hearts and minds of the faithful, far from suffering, those believers left behind should celebrate the death of loved ones who have finally passed from this life to the bliss of the life eternal. That this is manifestly not the case, that the human heart with all its suffering is seen to be 'plus vrai que Dieu', particularly when confronted with the unpleasant, stark reality of death, explains why Maximilien seeks to console (and succeeds in consoling) Thierry and his wife, not by offering them the expected religious response to the death of their son but, on the contrary, by dismissing religion without the slightest reservation: 'Ah! comme la religion et la vérité sont l'une contre l'autre, comme la religion est un blasphème à la vérité!' (p. 275). It is by telling them that there is no

Christian God to help them, that they must look to their own hearts for a way out of their misery that Maximilien brings comfort to this couple.

Given this insistently anti-theistic message and the comprehensive way in which Maximilien destroys the God of Ursleur in their second encounter in particular ('jamais je n'ai entendu nier Dieu si totalement', says Ursleur, p. 297), one would have a strong case for arguing that Maximilien Desanzac is the very (fictional) embodiment of irreligion. There might appear to be something incongruous, contradictory even, about his reaction to Ursleur's description of him as 'l'ange des ténèbres': 'Je ne suis pas un négateur [...]. J'ai le cœur plein de prières ... Je crois que notre désir ne peut rien créer que sa propre immensité, mais comme je suis religieux' (pp. 297-98), a self-description which echoes the words of the author in his preface to the novel (pp. v-vi).

There is, however, plenty of evidence in the text to support such a claim. For example, it is to a church that Maximilien's feet take him, as if of their own accord, after he has opened the eyes of Thierry and his wife, and before his final encounter with Ursleur. Juxtaposed with his imputed thought that religions are 'tombeaux des mondes' is the statement of fact that 'Il admira les religions, il admira le cri humain qui s'évade avec son besoin, son acharnement d'infini et d'absolu, et le passage immense de ce cri dans le néant' (pp. 282-83). The smell of incense, the sound of hymns and the sight of Jesus on his cross evoke in his mind 'une immense vénération pour le cœur humain' (p. 283). Pursuing his thoughts a stage further, he realizes that there is 'un culte plus haut que la vertu et que la religion' (p. 283). It would appear that he considers himself to be intrinsically no different from the men and women 'venus dans cette église pour supplier, appeler au bord d'eux-mêmes'. He is just 'plus loin', presumably in the sense that his is a tangible object of worship worthy of reverence. He himself constitutes living, sentient proof of its existence.²⁵

Only the most inattentive of readers will have failed to notice in the narrative a transposition of the divine from God to man long before Maximilien declares to Ursleur on the verge of its climax ‘Il n’y a de Dieu que l’homme’ (p. 296), going on to add:

Des théologiens ont essayé de prouver Dieu en disant que l’existence, étant un élément nécessaire de la perfection, Dieu existe puisqu’il est parfait par définition. Ce qui est un sophisme abstrait sur une conception abstraite, s’ancre et prend vie si l’on pose la question dans l’autre sens et par rapport à nous, si on la plonge dans la seule réalité: Nous avons toute la vérité, *donc toute la divinité*. (p. 297; my italics)²⁶

Much earlier, observing Jacques and Jeanne together before she becomes betrothed for the first time Maximilien, unimpressed by Jeanne herself but overwhelmed at the impression she has made on his friend, ‘avait presque les mains jointes devant le cœur des hommes, qui contient toute la divinité des idoles!’ (p. 141) The same attitude of worship is in evidence after the death of his father when Maximilien discovers clothes belonging to his mother, who died during his very early childhood: ‘Il tomba à genoux, courbant le front devant ces lambeaux purs, mille fois plus sacrés que toutes les reliques des églises, et qui touchèrent la nudité divine de la femme dont il était sorti’ (p. 238). Maximilien’s encounter with Marguerite in Paris, after she has followed Jeanne’s lead and married a man she does not love, is similarly couched in language that one would normally expect to find in a religious context.

Their relationship is altogether curious. From their various conversations at Rueil, Maximilien is persuaded that Marguerite has fallen in love with him (pp. 154, 201-202). After she reveals that she has tried religion for a reason that she does not specify, she reveals also that she loved Jacques (p. 205) and that her friend’s volte-face has dashed her own hopes of happiness. Maximilien wishes her ‘un céleste bonheur’ on the day of the departure of Jacques and Jeanne, adding that, ‘Peut-être, sur vos pas aurez-vous le paradis ...’ (p. 205). She reminds him of these words after she begs him to come and see her in Paris later in the narrative (‘Vous m’avez promis le ciel, un soir, sur le pas

d'une porte', p. 248). Sexually frustrated in a passionless marriage (p. 247), she seems to have hoped that paradise might be attained by means of the physical (p. 248).

The use of religious language to describe their lovemaking can be explained, to some extent, as a reflection of Marguerite's psyche but given its abundance elsewhere (both in this novel and in Barbusse's poetry), as well as the fact that the narrative is relayed almost entirely from Maximilien's perspective, there can be little doubt that it reflects the author's broad intention to transfer divinity from God to man; and to contrive a pseudo-religious cult of the human. In the episode at Marguerite's residence in Paris, as in the novel as a whole, the human is divinized at the expense of traditional notions of divinity, and human practices are associated with religious practices. It is 'au fond des ténèbres sacrées de ses vêtements' that Maximilien begins to search for 'la révélation d'elle' (p. 249). Marguerite tells him, 'avec une simplicité d'ange', to look at her, 'faisant de tout ce qui la cachait un divin désordre' (p. 250). Their joint cries, after penetration, are described as 'un double cantique d'actions et de grâce'. Afterwards, Marguerite approaches Maximilien 'les mains en croix soutenant ses voiles' (p. 252). It is with 'un bégaiement d'horreur religieuse' that he talks about the immensity of the heart and its need to be poor (p. 255). Once Maximilien has pointed out that the heart is great because it never has that which it desires and ever desires that which it has not, he notices 'un peu de lumière d'or sur les cheveux, de lumière d'argent sur son front', as well as one of her breasts: 'Et il la prit dans ses bras avec des précautions religieuses, heureux qu'elle fût nue' (p. 257). Tison-Braun is perfectly justified in observing that 'c'est dans l'homme seulement qu'il [Barbusse] découvre des traces du divin', just as Weems is justified in her assertion that the novel is characterized by 'the search for pure values and faith'.²⁷

The author's intention to divinize the human and subvert the Christian paradigm by a paradoxical appropriation of the latter's language and imagery is apparent in his

likening Maximilien and Marguerite to the Adam and Eve of Judaeo-Christian mythology:

Il la contemplait, tandis qu'émue et heureuse [...], comme Ève dans le premier éclaircissement de la terre, lorsque la séparation et la faiblesse eurent fait naître l'amour, elle apparaissait vaste de tout le pauvre effort démesuré des êtres, belle de toutes les étoiles qui sont dans ses yeux, sainte de tout le paradis rêvé, plus sainte encore de tout le paradis perdu. (pp. 257-58)

Such an ending to this particular episode is anticipated by the earlier references to 'paradis' (pp. 205, 248), 'chair' (pp. 249, 251, 252), and 'chute' (p. 250). When Maximilien states that 'Il n'y a pas de repos, et il n'y a pas de paradis' (p. 254) what he means is that paradise as it is understood in Christian terms does not exist; rather, as with all other concepts, it exists as a figment of the human imagination.²⁸

The Christian paradigm is further subverted in the following episode, which brings together Maximilien, and Thierry and his wife, whose vague religiosity has already been noted. First he persuades them (without too much difficulty) that the God of Christianity does not exist (pp. 266-67), then he instructs them on the primacy of the human heart and its unfulfillable nature (pp. 268-71). Thierry's wife is made to see that even if her dead son were restored to her, she would still not be entirely satisfied, since entire satisfaction is not attainable. It is at this point that Maximilien judges his interlocutors to be ready for the ultimate revelation: 'C'est pourquoi nous sommes divins'.²⁹ While they have readily acknowledged that there is no God other than the God of human invention, they are taken aback at the notion that they, as human beings, are divine. On the wall hangs 'une image religieuse [...] une chromo d'après un grand peintre, *La Vierge et L'Enfant*' (p. 271). Thierry suggests that, she, the Virgin Mary, is divine. His wife, who has shown herself to be more alert to Maximilien's teaching from the beginning, corrects him by using a hypothesizing conditional: 'C'est elle qui serait divine!' Maximilien duly explains that Mary's real divinity resides, paradoxically, in her very humanness:

Si elle est sainte, cette image de sainte suprême, si elle est grande, si elle est belle et rayonnante, c'est que cette image est aussi, en somme, un portrait de femme. Si vous l'épiez à travers la religiosité abstraite dont elle est fardée, [...] vous la verrez être pauvre et luire! (p. 275)

If they discard the distorting lens of two millennia of Catholic doctrine, they will see Mary's 'lèvres humaines', her 'yeux humains', her 'mains humaines [...]. Et alors, malgré l'azur immaculé et le nimbe, cercle exact et doré, et l'ovale géométriquement parfait de son visage, *elle se divinise, comme vous*' (pp. 275-76; my italics). It is in the light of this inversion of conventional notions of the divine and the secular that Maximilien's cry, 'comme la religion et la vérité sont l'une contre l'autre, comme la religion est un blasphème à la vérité!' (p. 275), is to be considered.

It will have become evident from much of the preceding analysis that Maximilien Desanzac is far more than just a practitioner of a pseudo-religious cult of the human. He can also be seen as its missionary; the action of the novel as a series of conversions. By the end of the narrative, Maximilien's faith has fundamentally altered the perceptions of Jacques (p. 198); his father (p. 225); Marguerite (p. 257); and, in all likelihood, in the ultimate inversion, the priest Ursleur (p. 299). However, Maximilien is much more than a mere missionary. As Barbusse indicates in *Judas*, many of the main characteristics of the image of Jesus that he portrays in *Jésus* are to be found in his first novel, which he had begun work on some thirty years earlier.³⁰ Barbusse's intentions could not be clearer in the manuscript material. In his notes for the novel, he wrote, of the central character: 'Lui - le Christ. [...] C'est un Christ qui n'a pas d'auréole, de cœur doré, des plaies qui se ressemblent à des clous. [...] Le Christ rencontre dès ses premiers pas l'ami qui sera le verbe.'³¹

In the text, the parallel between Maximilien and Jesus is established and deepened in the narrative long before the former consciously identifies himself with the Messiah of Christianity after his preaching to Thierry and his wife. He has a singularity and a

gradually emergent sense of mission that make him stand out from those around him. He rebels against the authority imposed on him at school. He must be his own master, his own saviour: ‘Ses rêves d’espoir l’appelaient réellement comme un sauveur. Que faire?’ (p. 40) The three wise men, like the Magi of Christian tradition, confirm his father’s suspicions, immediately recognizing Maximilien for what he is: ‘Il fut *reconnu* confusément, lui si méconnu. N’avait-il pas l’aspect libéré, détaché de ceux qui viennent modifier les choses acquises’ (p. 54; author’s italics).³² Asked what he is thinking about when they meet for the first time as boys, Maximilien tells Jacques that he is thinking about what he will do in life and, darkly, he informs him that he is not like others (p. 63). In their first exchange, Marguerite tells Maximilien that she has dreamed of ‘un sauveur’ (p. 154) but when Ursleur overhears their conversation and states that consolation is to be had only by believing in ‘*autre chose*’ (p. 155; author’s italics), Maximilien, evidently not quite ready to begin his ‘public ministry’, is at a loss for words:

Il la [Marguerite] détournait de la croyance, et pourtant il ne sut quoi lui dire. Mais il rêvait déjà que la vérité de la simplicité, que la vérité vraie portait dans son sein plus de consolation que l’erreur, et qu’un jour viendrait peut-être où sa bouche, à lui, saurait répondre à la souffrance, à ce grand cri qui s’exhale hors de toutes les bornes, cherchant une réponse. (p. 155)

Although the time when he will start preaching ‘la religion de vérité’ (p. 155)³³ is not yet come, Maximilien *is* the saviour that Marguerite eventually calls upon after conventional religious practice has done nothing to help her. In their second encounter, she predicts that he will console the poor and needy (‘Ah! il me semble que vous consolerez les malheureux’, p. 205). In their third and final encounter it is her that he consoles, in a manner that identifies him with both the first man, Adam (given the immediate context), and the last man, Jesus:

Il l’absolvait, et il s’absolvait d’elle, et il était près d’elle comme l’apôtre près de la femme coupable, mais plus sacrée que l’apôtre, parce que lui aussi avait péché, que lui aussi était prosterné, et qu’il avait mis son propre cœur dans les cheveux épars de la pécheresse. (p. 257)

Having worked his own version of the raising of Lazarus, namely, the ‘raising’ of Henri Thierry; and converted his parents from a half-hearted Christian religiosity to his pseudo-religious cult of the human, Maximilien delivers his own version of the Sermon on the Mount, complete with beatitudes (‘Heureux ceux qui pleurent, car ceux-là voient l’infini humain en esprit et en vérité’, p. 277),³⁴ commands (‘Soyez simple d’esprit pour accomplir cette œuvre de gloire’, p. 277) and the famous inversions relative to the kingdom of God (‘Ceux qui s’élèvent seront abaissés; [...] ceux qui s’abaissent seront élevés’, p. 278).³⁵ Thierry’s wife says that Maximilien has dissipated the obfuscations that cloak the truth: ‘Vous faites qu’on ouvre les yeux. Vous êtes comme le sauveur de tout ce qui est là, et qu’on ne voit pas’ (p. 278). She then mistakes the idol for the man (‘Alors ... *c’est vous?*’, p. 279; author’s italics), however, and Maximilien promptly leaves her to her imaginings, recalling the Marcan gospel of ‘secret epiphanies’.

Outside, he feels himself to be in ‘quelque Jérusalem crépusculaire’; and Jesus, ‘venu pour simplifier les hommes’, enters his consciousness, ‘car il se sentait proche de lui’ (p. 280). He ‘hears’ Jesus state that ‘Dieu [...] n’est pas un étranger. C’est une personne avec laquelle on est en contact dès qu’on se recueille, et qu’on sert dès qu’on fait le bien’ (p. 280). This is felt to be the kernel of Jesus’s message and the thought occurs to Maximilien that he must now consciously — he has already been doing it unconsciously for years — preach Jesus’s doctrine, taking it, however, one crucial stage further, and stripping it of the transcendental God of Judaeo-Christianity: ‘Il n’y a que le cœur humain; tout vient du cœur humain, et ceux qui voient ce suprême commencement sont [...] dans la cité de lumière, et règnent en même temps que la vérité’ (p. 281).

He wanders into a church and notices the Stations of the Cross. At the back of the nave, he beholds a large crucifix:

Le torse criait en silence, distendu par la pesanteur terrestre, déchiré par lui-même, martyrisé d’humanité. Nous sommes martyrisés d’humanité. Chacun de nous ouvre éperdument les bras pour embrasser toute chose, et ne peut pas, et ne peut pas refermer les bras. L’homme est un crucifié plus simple, c’est un crucifié sans clous. La couronne d’épines qui le fouille, c’est sa

pensée pleine de désirs aigus. Il [Maximilien] se leva de nouveau, désireux de la gloire de cette couronne. (p. 282)

Unlike the Jesus of *Jésus*, there is nothing political about this particular Messiah, nor is there any obvious trace of the atheism that is such an essential characteristic of the later literary incarnation. For Maximilien and his creator, this Jesus is, and will until *Les Enchaînements* remain, a symbol of human suffering — not the Jesus of Christian doctrine, the Redeemer, the Lamb of God whose death takes away the sins of the world; but a fellow human being who lived and died and, in between, opened wide his arms in a gesture of supplication. Jesus, and all members of the human race are ‘martyrisés d’humanité’. The attitude in which Jesus died is a symbol of human supplication; his crown of thorns is a symbol of unfulfillable human desires; the road that led to Calvary is a symbol of life itself.³⁶

In a sense, then, Jesus, as Christ, the most unique, the most venerated figure in human history, is Everyman; and every man is seen as being at one with Christ in a way not anticipated by conventional Christianity. Thus, but seconds away from his death (due to heart failure), Maximilien’s father is associated in his mortal agony with the mortal agony depicted on the Cross: ‘Le crucifix d’ivoire de Mme Desanzac était fixé au mur. L’homme étendu, immobile, supplicié et muet était comme un grand Christ à côté d’un petit’ (p. 228). Reflecting on the question of divinity in relation to *La Vierge et L’Enfant*, Thierry’s wife points out that according to Christian orthodoxy, although divine, both Mary and Jesus suffered as mortals. Rejecting the traditional concept of the dual nature, as his philosophy dictates, Maximilien states: ‘On a dérobé un peu d’humanité [...] pour en orner les dieux. [...] Mais on s’est attaché là à une union impossible qui se détruit lui-même. Il n’y a d’humain que l’homme’ (pp. 274-75). In other words, if Jesus suffered, he cannot have been divine in the conventional sense, as Maximilien sees it. Jesus was divine not because he was God made flesh who suffered in the flesh but, quite the contrary,

because he was a mortal man who suffered as a mortal man. It is as such that he should be glorified.

The final sentence of the above block quotation is noteworthy, suggesting as it does that Maximilien is now ready consciously to fulfil a mission reminiscent of the Messiah's: 'c'est plutôt une bonne nouvelle que je vous ai portée', he tells Thierry and his wife (p. 277).³⁷ This mission, the preaching of the gospel of immanentist humanism and human divinity³⁸ is made clear in Maximilien's final encounter with Ursleur, which, long before the end, develops into a sermon. In his usurpation of the priest, his self-identification with the Messiah, and his forthright rejection of its dogma, Maximilien's subversion of Christianity is complete.

Sui generis though it may be in its pseudo-gospel, chapter-verse narrative form, *Jésus* is clearly anticipated in Barbusse's first novel, which was originally going to be entitled 'Le Prophète'.³⁹ Like the original title of *Pleureuses*, this would clearly have signalled Barbusse's intent to act as a secular prophet for his generation. At that time at least, Barbusse considered the publication of the novel to be 'une chose importante, dont l'originalité est d'être biblique, c'est-à-dire non de dépeindre mais de *prêcher* une vérité. Il faudrait rendre cette vérité, découvrir le sens du cri'.⁴⁰ Unfortunately for Barbusse, the message of *Les Suppliants* went the same way as that of his poetry, failing to reach the masses beyond Paris's literary *cognoscenti*.⁴¹

Inevitably interpreting *Les Suppliants* in the light of what Barbusse was to become following the phenomenal success of *Le Feu*, modern scholars have pointed up (somewhat cursorily, it must be said) the prophetic qualities of the earlier work. Relinger states that in the quest for an absolute as conveyed in *Pleureuses*, 'à l'appel de l'objet qui remplira le vide de son âme, le poète a trouvé réponse': 'prêcher la vérité au monde. Et c'est le but du livre.'⁴² In a similar vein, Baudorre writes: 'De "quêteur" il [Maximilien-Barbusse] devient alors "crieur".'⁴³ According to Flower, Barbusse, in preaching the

truth as he saw it, ‘already gave some indication of his future preoccupations’.⁴⁴ Weems describes Maximilien(-Barbusse) as ‘a prophet revealing the truth that it was man that was God’.⁴⁵

Contemporary reviewers of the novel interpreted *Les Suppliants*, its central character, and author in much the same way. One reviewer pointed out that Maximilien becomes ‘avec l’énergie de l’apôtre, le prophète de cette vérité: Le monde est en nous!’⁴⁶ Delaunay noted that the novel was underpinned by ‘une conviction ardente d’apôtre’ (f. 27). Deprived of the benefit of hindsight, however, the reviewers of Barbusse’s day went beyond the theme of the prophetic and pondered, quite rightly, the author’s attitude towards religion: ‘L’auteur [...] ne croit pas à un Dieu’ (f. 12); ‘ce livre est athée, et ce n’est pas un mince mérite que d’avoir osé proclamer l’incroyance comme la source de toute sécurité, de toute indulgence, de tout altruisme’ (f. 7).

The more perspicacious commentators drew their readers’ attention to the ambivalence arising from Barbusse’s rejection of traditional forms of religion, on the one hand, and his quest for a secular form of faith, what Brett has called ‘la religion “du cœur humain”’,⁴⁷ on the other. Rachilde described *Les Suppliants* as an ‘Œuvre de négation, mais de négation probe, émue, simple, sensible et, en quelque sorte religieuse’.⁴⁸ Chevalier echoed this view: ‘œuvre de négation — qui est en même temps l’œuvre d’un croyant. Car, ne vous y trompez pas: seul un esprit essentiellement religieux a pu concevoir un livre comme *Suppliants*’ (f. 4). For Ary-Leblond, the novel was a ‘poétique sermon sur la vie’, the inspiration of ‘une âme religieuse’ (f. 17). The novel’s publisher summed up the tension in the novel between atheism and belief, the profane and the religious, with admirable brevity: ‘Ce poème, tout religieux, à chacune de ses lignes chante: Dieu n’existe pas’ (f. 22).⁴⁹

The above examination of *Les Suppliants* has shown that Henri Barbusse’s overriding aim in his first novel was to undermine the concept of God and thus erode belief in

Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular. Given that much of this highly lyrical novel was written at the time when Barbusse was producing his poetry, it is hardly surprising that his treatment of religion in the novel replicates that of the earlier, poetical works. Barbusse subverts Christianity by plundering its language, imagery, symbols, and figures, foremost amongst whom stands no less a personage than Jesus Christ himself. By adopting this strategy, Barbusse not only undermines the Christian concept of divinity; paradoxically, he also divinizes the human, and, in his quest for faith, contrives a secular, immanentist, pseudo-religious cult of the human, 'la religion de vérité', or 'la religion "du cœur humain"' to borrow from Brett. Whether the concept of religion is elastic enough to allow such a contrivance is debatable but there can be little doubt that it is this secular form of religion that is practised and preached by the pseudo-prophet, missionary, and Messiah, Maximilien Desanzac.

There can be little doubt, also, that Maximilien's attitude towards religion faithfully reflects that of the author, Barbusse. Central character and author are both convinced atheists in the Christian sense. Maximilien's preaching in the narrative is Barbusse's preaching *by means of* the narrative. The anticlericalism detectable in *Les Suppliants*, as in the poetry, is largely implicit, a logical extension of a negative view of the God of Christianity and its doctrines. The Church as an institution is nowhere referred to, let alone directly attacked, and the novelist's portrayal of the clergy as represented by Ursleur, the non-practising priest, is far from categorical in its condemnation. Offsetting this implicit anticlericalism, which is undertaken from an apolitical, metaphysical perspective, there is an extratextual and very explicit anticlericalism as expressed in Barbusse's letter to Spire. This, along with the conspicuous preoccupation with Jesus, constitutes the only significant development from the poetry to Barbusse's first novel. His second novel, *L'Enfer*, was likewise to be a question more of continuity than development in the writer's treatment of religion.

Notes

¹ See Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 77.

² For more on the autobiographical nature of the novel, see Baudorre, *Barbusse*, pp. 78-80; Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 23; and Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 48.

³ Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 47.

⁴ Barbusse, quoted in Spire, *Souvenirs à bâtons rompus*, p. 90.

⁵ For selected items consulted from a considerable corpus, see section 3.2 of the bibliography. Another context within which *Les Suppliants* has to be read is that of the so-called ‘Catholic literary revival’, which acted as a counterweight to the anticlerical work of writers such as Barbusse and Zola. In a manuscript document in which Barbusse writes what appears to be his own review of *Les Suppliants*, he describes the time when the novel was published as an ‘époque où les vrais intellectuels, dans un magnifique accord de plus en plus étroit, se rapprochent de Dieu et de la religion’. FHB, *Naf* 16517, f. 173.

⁶ In the above-mentioned ‘self-review’, Barbusse defends himself against those who have criticized him for propounding ‘une insoutenable thèse, à édifier une sorte d’universel blasphème, à glorifier la négation et l’athéisme.’ *Naf* 16517, f. 173. See also FHB, *Naf* 16478, f. 46, where the last four of thirteen, apparently thematic items to be explored in the novel, read ‘la croyance la négation la théologie la métaphysique de Dieu’.

⁷ See Picciola, ‘Les débuts littéraires d’Henri Barbusse’.

⁸ See *Naf* 16478 (2), f. 46, and, more particularly, f. 127, where Barbusse describes *Les Suppliants* as ‘un livre de solide et pénétrante métaphysique.’

⁹ For a good introduction to the changing status of the Catholic Church from the start of the nineteenth century onwards, see Loisy, *L’Église et la France*.

¹⁰ Spire, *Souvenirs*, p. 89.

¹¹ Barbusse, *Judas*, pp. 119-20; my italics.

¹² Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 47. Relinger is well aware of the importance of religion in this novel (and in Barbusse's work as a whole). See 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', p. 73. Baudorre provides a brief analysis in the section of his biography entitled 'La quête spirituelle'. See *Barbusse*, pp. 77-80.

¹³ Twenty-two years after the publication of *Les Suppliants*, Barbusse wrote, in reply to Morhange's survey on the meaning of the concept of God: 'Dieu répond à un besoin, à un appel du cœur humain, à un idéal; mais rien ne nous autorise à considérer cet idéal indépendamment du raisonneur ou du suppliant qui le crée et à en faire une réalité séparée qui devient de la sorte l'exemple intégral de l'idole.' Barbusse, 'Méditations [sur] Dieu', p. 607.

¹⁴ See note 8.

¹⁵ Barbusse, *Les Suppliants* (Fasquelle, 1903), p. 49. All subsequent references to the text, given in parenthesis, are to this, the only edition of the novel.

¹⁶ As Barbusse himself points out, 'la venue vers l'athéisme de cette créature éminemment révolutionnaire est étroitement mêlée à sa vie simple et paisible, à ses amours, à ses désirs'. Maximilien is a revolutionary not in political, but in metaphysical terms. *Naf* 16517, f. 173.

¹⁷ Barbusse's admiration for Zola is evident in the biography which he published in 1932.

¹⁸ The ambivalence shown by Maximilien's father may well be based on that of Barbusse's own father (see pp. 5-7).

¹⁹ This sense of anguish is a little puzzling in the light of his decision to give his son a secular upbringing. See the previous note.

²⁰ In a list of twenty chapter titles/headings/themes, Barbusse includes: 'AU MILIEU DES SAVANTS (il est l'orphelin de Dieu)/ORPHELINAT (Il pense beaucoup à un Dieu qu'il n'a pas)'. *Naf* 16478 (2), f. 57.

²¹ Clearly Barbusse's own view. In FHB, *Naf* 16520, f. 3, he states, bluntly: 'Faits: Il n'y a pas de Dieu dans le ciel'.

²² Barbusse, *Naf* 16478 (2), f. 127.

²³ The story of Good and Evil as related in the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis was clearly of considerable importance to Barbusse, to judge by the extensive use that he made of it in his poetry and early novels. He comments directly on it in *Judas*, pp. 144-45 and 194-95.

²⁴ The importance of this encounter is highlighted in *Naf* 16520, f. 8, where Barbusse writes 'grande conversation avec le prêtre: exposé de la religion arrachée de nous'.

²⁵ For an introduction to pseudo-religious belief in the French context, see Charlton, *Secular Religions in France 1815-1870*.

²⁶ This is a reference to Saint Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God, which Barbusse refuted in his own voice, as it were, in 'Méditations [sur] Dieu', p. 606.

²⁷ Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse', p. 88; Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, II, p. 248. Tison-Braun's conclusion is all the more admirable for her not having seen the manuscript material. Notes dating back to not long after the inception of the novel indicate that *Les Suppliants* was originally going to be entitled 'Le Conquérant' and subtitled 'La divinité humaine'. FHB, *Naf* 16474, f. 26. See also *Naf* 16517, f. 34, where, amongst the ten chapter titles/headings/themes, one finds 'LA DIVINITÉ HUMAINE'; and *Naf* 16478, f. 60, which records Barbusse's observation: 'Dieu ... l'homme est divin puisqu'il a créé Dieu'.

²⁸ The same point is made in *Naf* 16520, f. 8: 'Il y a un autre ciel [...] Deo ignoto'. The dedication with which Barbusse begins his collection of short stories grouped under the title *Faits divers* is entitled 'Deo Ignoto'. On p. x, he writes: 'Les anciens dédiaient des œuvres ou des actes *Deo Ignoto*, au Dieu Inconnu. Je ne crois pas au dieu, mais je crois, hélas, à l'inconnu.'

²⁹ Something of a *non-sequitur*, coming where it does on p. 271. It is separated from the preceding piece of dialogue — ‘Si mon enfant revenait, je ne serais donc point satisfaite à jamais’ — by a page of narration. The dislocation of the dialogue at this point serves to make Maximilien’s contention even more striking.

³⁰ See note 11.

³¹ Barbusse, *Naf* 16520, f. 7; author’s emphasis. See also f. 10 (‘Le Christ, souffrance.’).

³² The point is made also in the manuscript material: ‘Lui - le Christ. Son allure ... hommages - de temps en temps on le reconnaît’. *Naf* 16520, f. 7.

³³ This is juxtaposed, and contrasted in the text with Ursleur’s religion. In *Naf* 16517, f. 34, Barbusse remarks, somewhat cryptically: ‘rien, rien que la vérité, rien que la notion de la vérité. C’est la seule religion vraie absolue’.

³⁴ Much earlier in the narrative, with regard to time and space, Maximilien tells Jacques: ‘Bénis ceux qui ont l’immense sincérité de ne pas croire au temps et à l’espace’ (p. 75).

³⁵ Such an approach is clearly in keeping with the author’s plans: ‘Il prêche, répète les mots, par une simplicité admirable et comme faisait le Christ qui avait toujours les mêmes mots dans la bouche. [...] Il parle par paraboles.’ *Naf* 16520, f. 7.

³⁶ Camus has his narrator Jean-Baptiste Clamence make much the same points in *La Chute* (1956). In terms of their attitude towards religion in general and Christianity in particular, there are many similarities between Camus and Barbusse.

³⁷ ‘Son histoire. Evangile’, notes Barbusse in the manuscript material. *Naf* 16520, f. 7.

³⁸ Once again, the manuscript material puts the author’s intentions beyond doubt: ‘(Christ: jamais de Dieu autre que celui qui est en nous.) C’est l’idée qui obsède le Christ/L’ÉGLISE/LA DIVINITÉ HUMAINE’. *Naf* 16517, f. 34.

³⁹ See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 45. Baudorre suggests otherwise, giving ‘Sublime Pauvreté’ as the original title (see *Barbusse*, p. 78). Neither Vidal nor Baudorre provides sources. As noted above (see note 27), the title of the novel at the very outset

of the project was to be 'Le Conquérant'. Barbusse loads this word with religious meaning in his review of his own novel when he describes Maximilien's individualism as 'un individualisme féroce et dévastateur qui veut s'emparer de toute chose et s'imaginer conquérir le ciel.' *Naf* 16517, f. 173.

⁴⁰ Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 45; Barbusse's italics.

⁴¹ According to Hertz, the novel was already a bibliographical rarity at the height of Barbusse's fame in 1920. Barbusse never authorized a re-edition of this novel, in contradistinction to both *Pleureuses* and *L'Enfer*. See *Henri Barbusse*, p. 63

⁴² Relinger 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre', p. 68.

⁴³ Baudorre, *Barbusse*, pp. 78-79.

⁴⁴ Flower, 'Henri Barbusse', p. 16.

⁴⁵ Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse', p. 91.

⁴⁶ Quoted in *Naf* 16526, f. 11. Subsequent references are given in the text in parenthesis. Full bibliographical details, where these are provided in the dossier, are to be found in section 2.5 of the bibliography.

⁴⁷ Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 51.

⁴⁸ Rachilde, 'Revue du mois — Les Romans', p. 738.

⁴⁹ For two further examples, see Reboux, f. 9; and Ballot, 'La vie littéraire'.

CHAPTER THREE
'DE PROFUNDIS CLAMAVI AD TE, DOMINE': *L'ENFER* (1908)¹

Henri Barbusse's second novel, *L'Enfer*, first published in 1908, has received scant attention from scholars who have taken a critical interest in the author, which is somewhat surprising, given that, along with *Le Feu*, it is the only one of Barbusse's works still in print. Furthermore, Barbusse later made substantial claims for *L'Enfer* vis-à-vis his socio-political development and the evolution of his understanding of the role of the writer in contemporary society:

Je me suis dans ce livre efforcé de lutter contre l'idée de divinité quelle qu'elle fût et contre l'idée de patrie. Je m'efforçais de pousser ces idées jusqu'à leurs dernières conséquences non seulement par mes idées mais par un besoin de réalisme intégral et un sens aigu du devoir social de l'écrivain. J'étais ainsi poussé vers le socialisme.²

The extent to which this statement squares with a reading of the novel is debatable. Writing shortly after *L'Enfer* was re-edited following the success of *Le Feu*, Hertz declared that, in the earlier work, 'il n'y a pas un seul indice de ce que deviendra Henri Barbusse plus tard'.³ On the other hand, Jules Delahaye, a right-wing politician, speaking in the Chamber of Deputies in July 1917, roundly denounced the scabrous socio-political content of *L'Enfer*, thinking that the passages he was reading were from a work that had succeeded *Le Feu* in more senses than one.⁴

Be this as it may — and his later claims notwithstanding — there is no compelling evidence to suggest that Barbusse ever seriously saw himself as a socio-political polemicist at any time before his transformative experience in the trenches of the Western Front. Aside from the twenty-page dialogue between two doctors touching on the causes of nationalism, war and social injustice, there is little in *L'Enfer* that is overtly socio-political in its orientation.⁵ As Michel has rightly pointed out, at this stage in his career, 'Barbusse reste enfermé dans une conception toute métaphysique du monde.'⁶ 'Ce qui est au centre de *L'Enfer*', she later adds, 'ce n'est pas la question sociale, mais la quête métaphysique du héros.'⁷ It must be remembered that only five years separate

L'Enfer from *Les Suppliants*, Barbusse's 'longue méditation sur l'idée de Dieu, écrite [...] à une période de ma vie où je ne songeais guère à prendre une part militante dans les luttes sociales'.⁸

Furthermore, the archive material, such as it is, supports the view that Barbusse's principal target in *L'Enfer*, as in *Les Suppliants*, was not so much 'l'idée de patrie' as 'l'idée de divinité', or rather, the Christian concept of divinity and all that this implies. The continuity in terms of the thematics of his work at this time can be seen in a poem Barbusse penned on a manuscript folio of *L'Enfer*:

Seigneur, fais nous mourir pas de pitié Pitié [*sic*]
Si souvent ici-bas nous t'avons supplié
Si souvent malgré tout, pleins d'un pardon immense
Nous levâmes nos yeux sacrés vers la clémence. [...]
Hélas le ciel profond n'accueillait pas nos larmes
Nos prières sur nous tombaient comme des armes
Et rien ne soutenait le triste et morne appel
De nos bras enchaînés vers l'essor fou du ciel.⁹

The imagery of the suppliant with outstretched arms calling here upon a non-existent deity to put an end to human despair at the spiritual void is precisely the same imagery that gave Barbusse's earlier novel its title.

In a letter written years later to a woman working on a stage adaptation of *L'Enfer*, Barbusse stipulated that if the play were to be framed by references to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it should be done with the utmost care, because, unlike Dante's masterpiece:

L'Enfer, comme tous mes autres livres, est une entreprise littéraire de démolition de toutes les soi-disant réalités étrangères à l'homme. Et il a pour but de mettre l'homme à sa vraie place, c'est-à-dire au centre du monde et de montrer que tout émane de lui, qu'il n'est tributaire d'aucun apport étranger, cet apport fût-il une pratique, une idole, une superstition, une religion.¹⁰

The evidence from the text of the novel itself, taken in conjunction with the above, lends considerable weight to Baudorre's view that the message of *L'Enfer* is the same radical, metaphysical message as that of *Les Suppliants*: 'il est illusoire de chercher des certitudes en dehors de nous-mêmes, dans des valeurs religieuses, philosophiques ou simplement

morales. Il n'y a pas de transcendance.'¹¹ In short, as the following textual analysis will make clear, Henri Barbusse's second novel constitutes both another critique of religion from a largely metaphysical perspective and a quest for faith very much in keeping with *Les Suppliants* and Barbusse's poetry.

L'Enfer is a first-person, eyewitness account of the goings-on in a Parisian hotel room, as observed by a narrator who has arrived from the provinces to take up a position as a bank clerk. The tone of the novel and its human interest are established in the opening chapter. Like everybody else belonging to the common run of humanity, the narrator expects little from life other than the routine awaiting him in his new capacity (p. 21). In Chapter two, however, he discovers a crack in the wall that separates his room at the Pension Lemercier from the room adjacent. It serves as a spyhole for an indeterminate period which ends when the narrator's money runs out and the bank terminates his employment, without ever having seen him. He witnesses the defining experiences of human existence — childbirth, death, the loss of innocence, sexual activity, love, marriage and so on — and is thus given a privileged insight into the nature of the human condition. He makes it his mission to observe human activity; and report what he witnesses without what he would consider to be embellishment.¹²

At the outset of the novel the narrator informs the reader that he believes 'confusément à beaucoup de choses; par-dessus tout à l'existence de Dieu' (p. 17). If he understands God to be the God of Christianity, which the use of the capitalized word 'Dieu', the sociological context of the narrative, and Barbusse's previous work would all tend to suggest, then it is fair to say that he, unlike Maximilien Desanzac, moves throughout the course of the novel from a confused belief, or residual belief, in the existence of God to a categorical rejection of such an existence.¹³

The language the narrator uses and the antireligious stance he quickly adopts indicate a belief in God in need of urgent redefinition now that it has been stripped of its

doctrinal framework. The narrator hankers after ‘une espèce de paradis perdu’ (p. 20). Although he has nothing and feels he deserves nothing, he would like, ‘malgré tout, une sorte de récompense ...’ (p. 21). The first chapter closes with the realization that since he covets that which he has not, he cannot consider himself a contented man. ‘Mon Dieu, je suis perdu’, he cries. ‘Ayez pitié de moi!’ (p. 22). Once again, as in *Les Suppliants* and Barbusse’s poetry, the reader is confronted with a tension between religious belief and atheism. In *L’Enfer*, this tension is not sustained throughout the narrative. Indeed, it is rather short-lived. What the narrator witnesses soon convinces him that there is no God in the accepted sense.

He describes the frantic lovemaking of the first encounter between two of the main characters, Aimée and the Poet, as ‘un mouvement si emporté, si furieux et si fatal, que je reconnus que Dieu ne pourrait pas, à moins de tuer les êtres, arrêter ce qui s’accomplit. Rien ne le pourrait’, he adds, ‘et cela fait douter de la puissance et même de l’existence d’un Dieu’ (p. 76). In language strongly reminiscent of that of *Les Suppliants*, the narrator comes to realize that ‘pour les croyants comme pour les négateurs, la grande forme de Dieu est de se laisser supplier’ (p. 153); that ‘Dieu n’est qu’une réponse toute faite au mystère et à l’espérance, et il n’y a pas d’autre raison à la réalité de Dieu, que le désir que nous en avons’ (p. 241). In his closing remarks, he supposes that men and women will continue to love life and fear death, looking for, ‘ici-bas une union parfaite entre les cœurs, là-haut une durée parmi les mirages et un Dieu dans les nuages’ (p. 284). What the narrator learns as a result of observing humanity through his spyhole is that God exists only in the desire that there be a God, for the thought of a Godless universe into which human beings are born to suffer and die without the recompense of an eternal paradise in the great hereafter is simply unbearable.

As in his earlier works, however, Barbusse is not content simply to demolish the old certainties. He seeks once again to divinize the human, although in this particular

work, rather than simply state human divinity, he uses more subtle literary techniques to make his point. There can be little doubt that the narrator of *L'Enfer* is quite deliberately portrayed as a God-like figure, despite his insistence on his own humanness and ordinariness.¹⁴ His elevated status is suggested in a number of ways.

Firstly, he draws parallels between himself and the God of western tradition. Having observed sexual intercourse, it dawns on the narrator that lovers are never further apart than when, physically, they are at their most intimate. This prompts an expostulation aimed at those who believe in God: 'Où est donc Dieu, où est donc Dieu? Pourquoi n'intervient-il pas dans la crise affreuse et régulière?' (p. 80). Moved to pity, he asks, rhetorically, who it will be that will tell the world of the grandeur of human solitude, before pointing out that in order to do so, 'il faut être posé comme moi au-dessus de l'humanité, il faut être à la fois parmi les êtres et disjoint d'eux' (p. 80). Immediately after the existence of God has been called into question, the narrator elevates himself to lofty heights. Although a man amongst men, he is both apart from them ('disjoint d'eux') and somehow superior ('au-dessus de l'humanité'). In telling the truth about life as he sees it, he is usurping God, who could prove his existence by making the human condition other than it is.

Shortly after this, the narrator's first self-conscious statement of the privileged, God-like status he has acquired, he leaves the hotel for the first time since his arrival, 'attiré par l'humanité' (p. 82). The reader may well be tempted to see this as indicative of a growing sense of solidarity with *autrui* but it is rather a growing sense of alterity and dislocation that is accentuated. Though pleasing in its appearance, the bright lights of a café disorientate the narrator (p. 82). Rather than socialize, he continues observing those around him. He takes evasive action when he thinks he recognizes a fellow guest of the hotel, then sits in such a way as to obscure his face (p. 83). It is the enlarging experience of the hotel room that has distanced him further from his own kind.¹⁵ His face, similar to

that of others, is felt also to be different: 'La mienne doit être plus impressionnante que celle des autres: elle doit être plus ravagée par l'orgueil d'avoir vu, et par le besoin de voir encore' (p. 83). Eventually, he returns to the hotel, intent on more close scrutiny of the race which he now feels himself to be both of, yet somehow beyond: 'il faut que je continue à contempler. Je perds mon temps dans l'espace de tout le monde. Je reviens vers la chambre' (p. 87).

Faced in Chapter fourteen with the eternity ushered in by death, on the one hand, and the infinite enormity and minuteness of creation, on the other, the narrator ruminates on his identity in relation to his recent experiences and likens himself to God. So numerous are the memories 'captivés' since his arrival at the hotel that:

Je suis devenu pour moi-même un étranger et [...] je n'ai presque plus de nom; je les écoute. Je m'évoque moi-même, tendu sur le spectacle des autres, et m'en emplissant comme Dieu, hélas — et dans une attention suprême, j'essaye de voir et d'entendre ce que je suis. Ce serait si beau de savoir qui je suis! (p. 228)

The narrator has stated repeatedly that he is a man, like many another, yet here he is at an anguished loss. He could establish a sense of identity by drawing on any number of relations; he could describe himself as Josette's lover, bank employee to be, hotel guest, Frenchman and so on. As he has become a stranger to himself, he must once have had some notion of self-identity. Now he feels that God is his only point of comparison. Like the deity of human conception, he is a being that fills himself with the sights, sounds, and sufferings of others, and, God-like, does nothing.

The impression created by the foregoing passages, namely that in his own mind there are parallels to be drawn between himself and God, is further reinforced, both for the reader and, one would assume, for the narrator himself, when characters under observation cry to God from the depths of their despair. The narrator later defines 'Le de profundis' as, 'l'effort pour ne pas mourir, la chute du désir avec son cri qui monte' (p. 246), making no allusion to psalm 130, which in the Latin translation begins 'De

profundis clamavi ad te, Domine'.¹⁶ It is one of the so-called 'Penitential Psalms' and has its place in the Liturgy in the Evensong service conducted on Ash Wednesday.¹⁷ It struck a particularly deep chord with Christian theologians of the stature of Augustine and Martin Luther.¹⁸

Expert interpretation as to the meaning of the psalm varies. For Jacquet, the cry voiced is 'poussé comme d'instinct devant un danger inéluctable et mortel, comme pour "forcer" à "se faire attentif".'¹⁹ Barnes, Rhodes and Oesterley all take the view that the psalm is concerned primarily with sin at the individual/national level.²⁰ This view is categorically rejected by Maillot and Lelièvre, for whom the cry from depths 'où l'homme ne peut plus qu'une seule chose: prier et même crier' is 'plus une confession de foi qu'une confession des péchés.'²¹ Kidner, and Rogerson and McKay provide similar interpretations to this one: 'It is the Lord himself, not simply escape from punishment, that the writer longs for', states the former;²² 'God alone can deliver Israel', suggest the latter two.²³ Presupposed in all of these varying interpretations is what Oesterley calls 'the intense spirituality' of the psalmist²⁴ and an absolute faith in the existence of the God of Israel. Naturally, Barbusse rejects the existence of this God, who was later absorbed into Christian theology, and so his frequent allusions to psalm 130, both in *L'Enfer* and in his work more generally, can only be subversive.

In the first encounter between Aimée and the Poet (Chapter five), Aimée's necrophobia is very much in evidence. She talks of the void that had existed in her life before she had met the Poet and how she had hoped that her love for him would give her life some meaning. They make love and, as has already been seen, the unstoppable of their actions causes the narrator to doubt the existence of God. On the basis of what they have revealed about themselves, both Aimée and the Poet are atheists in the Christian sense. Thus, when the narrator points out that Aimée appears to be speaking directly to him and she cries out, 'De profundis', 'Que Dieu bénisse le peu de plaisir qu'on a!' (p.

77), the implication is that God will have heard Aimée only if God exists, yet Aimée does not believe in such an existence. Likewise the narrator, who *has* heard this voice crying out of the depths — ‘premier signal d’une haute chute, prière blasphématoire, mais divinement, prière!’ (p. 77). It is at the end of this chapter that the narrator describes himself as being ‘au-dessus de l’humanité’ (p. 80), though flesh and blood.

In the following chapter, having stated that he is wasting his time ‘dans l’espace de tout le monde’ (p. 87), the narrator returns to his observations within the walls of the Pension Lemercier and bears witness to an encounter between two lesbian lovers. He is drawn to his spyhole at a time when the hour is late and he has great difficulty in making out anything in the darkness. Eventually, he realizes, ‘les mains jointes’, that it is two women:

J’interroge les noirs amants qui sont tombés là, dans le lit de l’ombre ...
Je sens qu’une frémissante apothéose les a saisis:
— Dieu nous voit! Dieu nous voit! balbutie une des bouches.
Eux aussi ont besoin que Dieu les voie, pour s’en embellir; comme les
désolés, ils l’appellent à leur aide! (p. 91)

This is another cry ‘De profundis’ but it is different from Aimée’s in that these two lovers are not necessarily atheists and may well see the non-intervention of a God in whom they believe as an endorsement of their love, however socially unacceptable it might be considered. It is similar in that, again, the narrator is on hand to bear witness to it. After the lovemaking the dialogue recommences:

Et j’entends comme si on s’adressait à moi. [...]
— Mon Dieu! dit l’autre avec un frisson d’espoir.
J’ai déjà entendu une plainte identique; c’est la même, comme s’il y avait peu
de sujets de plaintes sur terre. (pp. 93-94)

Like the two child lovers, Jean and Hélène (Chapter four), and the two adulterers, Aimée and the Poet, the two who share a love that dares not speak its name lament the secrecy of their affair, their having to hide their love in louche hotel rooms. Then, anew, they call upon God in their despair: ‘Puis ils dirent à nouveau que Dieu les voyait. Ce groupe de

ténèbres, sculpté dans les ténèbres, rêva que Dieu les découvrait comme une illumination' (p. 95).

The chapter ends with another identity crisis, in reference to which the 'De profundis' motif is explicitly articulated: 'Je m'accoude, j'épelle des prières; j'ai bégayé: *De profundis*. De profundis ... Pourquoi ce cri d'espoir terrible, ce cri de misère, de supplice et de terreur monte-t-il cette nuit de mes entrailles à mes lèvres? ...' (pp. 96-97).²⁵ The narrator concludes that he is voicing the confession of human beings, a cry of despair that is identical, whatever the words used or the circumstances in which it is expressed. In essence, this is what he has been listening to since the discovery of the spyhole. Its effects are disconcerting in the extreme: 'Hanté par l'humanité, j'en suis tout sonore. Moi, je ne sais pas ce que je suis, où je vais, ce que je fais, mais, moi aussi, j'ai crié, du fond de mon abîme vers un peu de lumière' (p. 97).²⁶

Once again, the language invites an ontological interpretation, the narrator not knowing not only who, but also *what* he is. He has found himself in the privileged position of God and heard what is at bottom the same supplication. The cries that are sounded many times throughout the novel are heard, to the narrator's and the reader's knowledge, by the narrator only and he himself can but echo them. Unless he, too, is being watched by human eyes and listened to by human ears, he alone will bear witness to his own supplication; he is, in a sense, the only God in residence at the Pension Lemercier.²⁷ As for the author, in his subversive use of the 'De profundis' motif, as in his use of the concept of the prophetic and the Adam and Eve myth, Barbusse once again gives a paradoxical literary expression to his atheism, and seeks to transfer divinity from God to man.

For the reader, the deification of the narrator of *L'Enfer* is reinforced by what might paradoxically be described as his circumscribed omnipresence and omniscience. This is to say that the room adjacent to his can be seen as a microcosm of human society.

Given that the narrative is related in the first person and it is almost entirely an account of the events that take place in the hotel room, there is a sense in which the narrator is to the room what God is in the universe: everywhere present but nowhere visible. The parallel is established as soon as the spyhole is discovered:

Je domine et je possède cette chambre ... Mon regard y entre: J'y suis présent. Tous ceux qui y seront, y seront sans le savoir, avec moi. Je les verrai, je les entendrai, j'assisterai pleinement à eux comme si la porte était ouverte. (p. 25)

Because those the narrator will observe will not be aware that he is observing them, he will be given a privileged insight into human behaviour: free from social constraints, uninhibited, self-indulgent. In short, the narrator will be presented with the sort of spectacle usually reserved for God, with the difference that within the fiction of the novel, he exists in a tangible, physical sense, whereas God exists merely as a metaphysical concept and, as such, only in the mind of the believer.

The impression of circumscribed omniscience is created by the contrast the author contrives between the narrator's typically human inability to penetrate the public mask behind which men and women hide their innermost thoughts and feelings, on the one hand, and, on the other, the heightened, quasi-divine perspicacity he shows when at his spyhole.²⁸ Shortly after its discovery and his observation of the maid, 'comme personne de vivant ne l'a fait' (p. 27), the narrator descends to dine with the other guests. Again, the movement suggested is one from above to below and the dominant feeling related is the narrator's sense of isolation and dislocation (pp. 28-30).

Here also, however, the superficiality of the occasion and the impenetrability of those present receive comment: 'Je ne sais pas ce que pensent ces gens; je ne sais pas ce qu'ils sont; ils se cachent les uns aux autres et se gardent' (p. 29). A young girl blushes, under the impulse of 'une pensée indevinable' (p. 30). One of the guests tells an after-dinner story about the rape and murder of a girl whose screams the murderer drowned out by singing at the top of his voice. Far from shocking the listeners, the story interests

all and even excites a few, the men in particular. The significance of the incident is not lost on the narrator: 'Ainsi, pendant un instant, ils n'ont pas menti. Ils se sont presque avoués, sans le savoir peut-être, et même sans savoir ce qu'ils s'avouaient. Ils ont presque été eux-mêmes' (p. 32). He hastens back to his room, 'poussé par la hâte de voir la sincérité des hommes et des femmes se dévoiler à mes yeux'. It is because people have 'une voix pour mentir et une figure pour se cacher' in public that the narrator is determined to make the most of this unexpected opportunity to see them as they really are; to see them as would their heavenly creator.

Even when they do not reveal themselves by what they say or do, the narrator's penetrative intelligence cuts to the heart of the matter: 'Et brusquement, les voiles se déchirèrent à mes yeux, la réalité se dénuda devant moi', he remarks of the fundamental difference between Aimée and the Poet (p. 66). 'Je ne les distinguais pas l'un de l'autre, mais il semblait que je les voyais de mieux en mieux, car j'apercevais le grand mobile de leur accouplement', he says of their lovemaking (p. 74). 'Même loyal et chaste, sans arrière-pensée, le sacrifice porte un orgueil glorificateur que je vois, moi qui vois tout', is his comment on a gesture made by Anna for the benefit of the dying Philippe (p. 156). The reader is unlikely to dismiss such assertions as idle conceits after the scene in the hotel dining room in which the narrator, after another meal, finds himself in conversation with Aimée. He is not quite sure what to say to a woman he knows far more intimately than she could ever imagine: 'Elle doit supposer qu'elle ne m'intéresse pas, — cette femme dont je vois le cœur, et dont je connais le destin aussi bien que Dieu pourrait le connaître' (p. 105). The implication is that having observed Aimée unmasked, the narrator knows her as well as God would, if God existed. However, God does not exist and the narrator does.

The portrayal of the narrator as a thoroughly human, though God-like figure, a figure who is divine *because* human, constitutes the main thrust of Barbusse's subversion of Christianity in *L'Enfer*. That the narrator is also portrayed as a Christ-figure might at first seem problematic. Aimée provides a pointer to a tenable explanation for this apparent contradiction when she speaks of the cross that human beings have to bear: 'Nous sommes crucifiés; pas comme le bon Dieu qui l'a été charnellement sur une croix; [...] nous sommes crucifiés sur le temps et l'espace' (p. 124). As Aimée is an atheist, her reference to Jesus as 'le bon Dieu' is a mere figure of speech. However, the consubstantiality of Father, Son and Holy Ghost has been a part of official Catholic doctrine since the Council of Nicaea in the early part of the fourth century. The precise nature of the Godhead and the nature of the relationship between its constituent parts has been the subject of fierce, often highly partisan, not to say violent and even murderous debate amongst Christian theologians. It lay at the heart of the Arian controversy and, to a certain extent, it contributed to the schism between East and West that led to the establishment of the Christian Orthodox Church in the eleventh century.²⁹

As far as Barbusse was concerned, abstract theorizing about the number of *hypostases* (entities existent in their own right) in the Godhead, and whether in reference to Father and Son it is appropriate to talk of *homoousios* (identity of essence) or *homoiousios* (likeness of essence) was absurd obfuscation.³⁰ In short, there is no God other than the God of human invention. Furthermore, as analysis of his perception of Jesus as reflected in his poetry and his first novel has shown, Jesus was, for Barbusse, a mortal, and divine as such, rather than divine as the God incarnate of Christian doctrine. Thus, the portrayal of the narrator of *L'Enfer* both as God the Father and Christ the Son is not so much a contradiction as a further means by which Barbusse as author underscores his central thesis. Jesus and the narrator are divine by virtue of their very humanity, likewise, by extension, the whole of humankind.

The parallel between Christ and the narrator is generally achieved by the use of imagery that is suggestive of the final stage of the Passion.³¹ There are numerous examples of this, the most explicit of which is given during the first encounter between Aimée and the Poet. The narrator states: ‘Mon immobilité prolongée me broyait les muscles des reins et des épaules, mais je m’aplatissais contre le mur collant mes yeux au trou; *je me crucifiais* pour jouir du cruel et solennel spectacle’ (p. 76; my italics). The wall is to the narrator what the cross was to Christ. At no point does the narrator elucidate upon his crucifixion in terms of the physical position he has to adopt in order to make his observations. The crack in the wall he discovers in Chapter two is above his bed, which he has to stand on, ‘les mains au mur’ (p. 24). It is difficult to see how he could support himself for hours at a time, his face flush to the wall and his arms outstretched, standing on his bed. The less realistic such a suggestion, the more heavily symbolic it becomes, and the more obvious the author’s intentions appear to be — particularly when the narrator is compared to Maximilien Desanzac, the pseudo-Messiah of *Les Suppliants*. He is ‘posé sur le mur dans le geste de l’embrasser’ (p. 32); ‘étendu sur le mur devant cette femme’ (p. 42); ‘un frisson me cloua où j’étais’ (p. 44); ‘la vérité écartelait mon corps sur le mur’ (p. 59). Like the Redeemer of Christian doctrine, the narrator willingly takes the great burden of this form of suffering upon himself, as the use of reflexive verbs is meant to indicate: ‘je *me* crucifiais pour jouir du cruel et solennel spectacle’ (p. 76); ‘Puis de nouveau, avec un effort, je *m’attache* au mur’ (p. 186); ‘le dernier jour. Je *me* tends pour regarder’ (p. 283; my italics).

Although he is the most obvious victim of metaphorical crucifixion and both physical and spiritual suffering, the narrator is not alone in this. Aimée seems to him to be ‘crucifiée dans les deux sens de sa prière [sur le temps et l’espace] et portant au cœur les stigmates saignants du grand supplice de vivre’ (p. 124). The dead Philippe, placed on the bed, is, like Maximilien’s father in *Les Suppliants*, described as ‘immobile, comme

l'idole crucifiée qui est attachée dans les temples' (p. 224). Michel recalls his period of separation from Anna as 'mes nuits d'insomnie et de désir, étendu, les bras grands ouverts devant ton image, comme ma solitude était crucifiée!' (p. 251) The Poet realizes that without suffering and death, joy and life have no meaning: 'Le bonheur a besoin du malheur; la joie se fait en partie avec de la tristesse; c'est grâce à notre crucifixion sur le temps et l'espace, que notre cœur, au milieu, palpite' (pp. 142-43). Whether nailed to a tree, then, laid to rest, or distanced from an absent loved one, human beings are all metaphorically martyred by life.

They become Messiahs, however, only when they are seen to suffer for a great cause; and disseminate its 'good news'. Another pseudo-Messiah, the narrator acknowledges Jesus's teaching and states his belief that, dressed up as the teaching of Christ, it has been made to do proselytizing work for which it was never intended. Nevertheless — and even had this corruption never occurred — throughout the last two thousand years, 'les hommes sont toujours à rassurer et à consoler [...] je suis toujours à délivrer' (p. 229). In a later passage in which he compares Kant and Christ, he observes that the words of the latter, 'faites pour régenter la société selon de nobles lignes, apparaissent, à côté, superficielles et utilitaires' (p. 245). He describes the book of the former, almost certainly his *Critique of Pure Reason*,³² as 'l'œuvre qui se rapproche le plus de la vraie bible'. The one certainty is that he exists and cannot exist differently. Everything — time, space, reason — are but ways of imagining reality which begin and end with each individual. The Christian Bible is but a collection of 'de piteux livres saints qui ne s'ajustent qu'au devoir moral, et qui ne seraient pas compris si leur dogme ne s'imposait à quelques-uns pour des raisons surnaturelles' (p. 184).

The reader is alerted to a longing for a Messiah-figure, a Saviour to deliver humankind from its woes: 'Ah! viendra-t-il avant que nous ne mourions, celui qui guérira la déchéance', asks the older of the two doctors that tend to Philippe (p. 178). The

Poet's second poem conjures up a new-born babe in whom great hopes are invested: 'il grandira, confus sauveur' (p. 278). The meaning of the poem, according to the Poet, is that 'Nous sommes seuls, divinement, le ciel est tombé sur nos têtes' (p. 280). The narrator himself is waiting for 'le grand poète qui délimitera et éternisera la croyance' (p. 229). The book he has written on the basis of his experiences observing human beings is an 'œuvre sublime [...] qui montrerait les lignes essentielles de la vie et raconterait le drame des drames' (p. 229). It is the answer to the rhetorical question he asks in his summing up. He it is that has seen all and told the whole truth and his report is a 'pagan' bible — 'la bible du désir humain, la bible terrible et simple' (p. 285). Although he never quite articulates the thought in the way that he consciously draws parallels between himself and God, he is like the Jesus of history in his physical suffering; he is like the Christ of Christian doctrine in his Messiahship. Unlike either, he has written his own gospel: 'A travers moi est passé, sans m'arrêter, la parole, le verbe qui ne ment pas et qui, reedit, rassasiera' (p. 286). The allusion to the Johannine gospel is self-evident; its implications add yet another dimension to the provocative challenge to traditional forms of religion in general and to the Roman Catholic form of Christianity in particular that *L'Enfer* represents.

The antireligious tone of the narrative is set early when, in his cursory self-description, the narrator tells us that he believes 'confusément [...] à l'existence de Dieu, sinon aux dogmes de la religion; celle-ci présente cependant des avantages pour les humbles et les femmes qui ont un cerveau moindre que celui des hommes' (p. 17). In line with this quotation, the one main lay character in the novel who seems to accept organized religion is a woman, Anna, who defines Christianity as an institutionalized form of love: 'Son élément fondamental, c'est l'amour. [...] C'est de la vie, c'est presque une œuvre, c'est presque quelqu'un' (p. 189). Philippe replies that this is not a definition of Christianity so much as a definition of Anna herself (p. 190).

Given Barbusse's deepest convictions, it is hardly surprising that an inability to believe, the absence of religious faith in the Christian sense, is the general rule. Aimée rejects religion as the answer to her metaphysical anguish: 'Que faire? Prier? Non; l'éternel dialogue où l'on est toujours seul est écrasant' (p. 119). As has already been shown, the Poet's belief that we are alone, 'divinement' (p. 280), is seen as a fact the acknowledgement of which need not be the cause of despair. On the contrary, it should be viewed positively. Freed from superstitious beliefs and practices, human beings become grander creatures because answerable only unto themselves. Within the framework of such a world-view, there is no place for a revealed religion like Christianity. The suggestion is that those of a certain stamp, men and women for whom reason is the guiding principle in life, need to be convinced intellectually, by the rational and the empirical, before they can believe. However, religious faith as seen by Barbusse is a *terminus a quo*, not a *terminus ad quem*. It is Pascal's famous paradox: 'Tu ne m'aurais pas cherché, si tu ne m'avais déjà trouvé.'

For the two doctors who do the little they can for Philippe, it is the evidence of the material world around them and of which they themselves are a part that precludes belief in God. They appear before the narrator in a futile attempt to save a man stricken with cancer (p. 159). There follows a lengthy joint disquisition on the causes of cancer, leading to an exchange on the inescapability of death (p. 163), be it preceded by disease (as is the case with Philippe, and, possibly, the younger doctor) or the gradual decay of the body (as is the case with the prestigious older doctor). They leave to inform Anna of the imminence of Philippe's death: ' "Condamné par la science", quelle expression stupide!' remarks the older doctor. 'Ceux qui croient en Dieu devraient bien faire remonter la responsabilité plus haut', replies his colleague (p. 179). Insidious diseases like cancer and the considerable suffering they occasion argue against the existence of a

benevolent, personal God of revealed religion.³³ It is surely significant that the older doctor's hypothetical Saviour is defined as 'celui qui guérira la déchéance' (p. 178).

The two barriers to the acceptance of revealed religion, namely a cast of mind that insists on the primacy of reason, and the existence of evil in the form of suffering and death, are combined in the person of Philippe, whose encounter with the Roman Catholic priest is a throwback to Maximilien's exchanges with Ursleur in *Les Suppliants*. Philippe, a lapsed Orthodox Christian, asks for a priest to come to his room to administer extreme unction when he realizes his death is imminent. Somewhat surprisingly, both for the reader and the priest, the latter finds not a repentant sinner, but a broadminded man of reason who puts up obdurate resistance. Having failed to convert Philippe and have him confess his sins by dint of Christian theological reasoning vis-à-vis original sin, the priest turns their argument on its head. He believes what he believes because of his faith, not his intellect, for faith has a logic all of its own:

Persuadé ou non, croyez. Il ne s'agit pas d'évidence, il s'agit de croyance. Il faut croire d'abord, sinon on risque de ne croire jamais. Dieu ne daigne pas convaincre lui-même les incrédules. [...] Dites simplement "Je crois", et je vous tiendrai quitte. "Je crois": tout est là. Le reste m'est indifférent. (pp. 206-207)

Belief precedes understanding. Indeed, one cannot understand if one does not already believe. One does not turn to God unless one already has faith. Philippe cannot make the leap of faith asked of him. Like Barbusse, he cannot reconcile the existence of a benevolent God with the existence of evil: 'Mais le bonheur gagné à force de douleur, c'est l'universelle destinée, la loi commune', observes the priest. 'C'est parce qu'elle est la loi commune qu'elle fait douter de Dieu' (p. 204), replies Philippe, whose love for the beautiful Anna is reason alone for him to want to live on.

This, the latest clash in Barbusse's literature between diametrically opposed world-views, the one religious, the other secular, ends in stalemate; but the reader who has not forgotten Anna's generous adumbration of Christianity a little earlier in the

narrative will see the author's point (without necessarily agreeing with it), for the priest all too readily resorts to violence when the basic tenets of his received wisdom fail to persuade a non-believer. A number of similes used are telling enough not to require any elucidation: 'Il lui jetait le même mot [crois] sans cesse, comme des pierres. [...] Il se penchait de plus en plus, collant presque sa figure à celle du moribond, cherchant à placer son absolution comme un coup' (p. 207). The lasting image of the 'duel' (p. 206) is that of God's representative on earth 'accroupi et sombre comme un démon guettant une âme, comme toute l'Eglise sur toute l'humanité mourante' (p. 208).

The direct reference to the Church here is significant. There is no such reference in the earlier novel, in which Ursleur, a lay priest and misguided, though well-meaning character who is an ironical pendant to the main protagonist, is all but converted by the end of the narrative. Barbusse's attack upon the institution of the Church is expressed directly in his letter to Spire but only indirectly in the text of *Les Suppliants*. This is not the case in *L'Enfer*: the man of the cloth who features in it, 'la bête de la religion' (p. 209), is directly associated with the Church by means of a deliberately polemical and damning simile. Furthermore, unlike Ursleur, he is intended to be seen as all the more representative of the institution in question through his anonymity and his ultra-doctrinaire approach, not to mention his ability to perform religious rites such as extreme unction.

The priest in *L'Enfer* is, in fact, a grotesque caricature. Reviewing the 1917 re-edition of the novel, Aigrain, 'Maître de Chapelle de Sainte Radegonde', in Poitiers, described *L'Enfer* as a 'livre souvent intolérable [...]. Mauvais livre: on peut le dire avec d'autant moins d'hésitation qu'il est violemment anti-chrétien.' And 'quel prêtre', he might well wonder, 's'est jamais rencontré, ailleurs que dans les romans d'Eugène Sue, pour engager avec un mourant une étrange lutte, où la théologie n'a guère plus de part que la charité, lutte que ce "bon prêtre" [...] termine par des injures et des coups?'³⁴ As

Tison-Braun has rightly pointed out, *L'Enfer* marks a gradation in Barbusse's hostility towards organized religion: 'C'est que, derrière le palliatif religieux, Barbusse voit s'abriter tous les abus sociaux'.³⁵

Interestingly enough, despite his obvious distaste, the author/narrator does not leave the reader with the wholly negative impression of the priest that Aigrain's observation would suggest. While the scene the narrator has just witnessed confirms his belief that the dogma of religion is anathema to rational beings, he finds it within himself to comment favourably upon, not to say admire, the priest's conviction and his consistency:

Mauvais prêtre? Non, bon prêtre qui n'avait cessé de parler selon sa conscience et sa croyance, et qui cherchait à appliquer simplement sa religion, telle qu'elle est, sans concessions hypocrites. Ignorant, maladroit, fruste — oui, mais honnête et logique même dans l'affreux attentat. (p. 209)

Although the priest's attitude may be worthy of praise, the attitude of the narrator towards it is not easily accounted for within the fiction of his personality, pointing as it does to a major *inconsistency* on his part. It may well be a case, quite simply, of his recognizing the importance of a *Weltanschauung*, however debased Christianity may be in practice, at a time when his own, reinvented faith is at best merely emergent. The same might be said of the author, who was later to show a priest-like tenacity of faith in Communism. What is beyond doubt is that in *L'Enfer*, the Trinity fares very badly (the Holy Ghost by extension) and the Church and the clergy are cast in a generally negative light. The objects of worship associated with Christianity in particular are held, and shown to be, unworthy of veneration. This does not mean to say that there is anything wrong with worship *per se*; quite the contrary.

Indeed, in its use, or rather appropriation of language and imagery one would normally expect to encounter in religious contexts, *L'Enfer*, like its immediate predecessor, *Les Suppliants*, is anything but an areligious novel. A reader who knew nothing of Barbusse's background might be tempted to contend that the constant

presence of the Christian in the linguistic sense can be attributed to a residual religiosity on the part of the author. An attribution of this kind would not be without some justification. However, as has been shown in this, and in the preceding chapters of this thesis, Barbusse's atheism was beyond dispute.

As for his narrator, the residual religiosity with which he arrives in Paris is completely dissipated by his transformative experience in the Pension Lemer cier. Long before the end of the narrative, he has, unquestionably, become an atheist in the Christian sense of the word, one who has no time for this traditional form of religion. Towards the end of *L'Enfer*, he declares, emphatically: 'j'ai été dans le royaume de vérité, si on peut employer à l'égard de la vérité, sans la souiller, l'expression dont se sert le mensonge et le blasphème religieux' (p. 285). It is quite obvious to him that 'la vérité des vérités' he craves, and in which he hopes to find 'une direction, une foi [...] pour mon salut' is his, and his alone, to fashion (p. 228). Given the divinization of the narrator and the concomitant undermining of organized Christian belief and worship, the use of religious adjectives, nouns, verbs and their derivatives in non-Christian contexts throughout the narrative is intended to create a new, secular, humanist faith. As in Barbusse's poetry and in *Les Suppliants*, there is in Barbusse's second novel a cult of the human, which the abundant use of religious language and imagery seeks to sanctify.

The female characters, in particular, appear to the narrator to have something holy or angelic about them. The maid is on her own, 'chose inouïe, un peu divine [...] les mains ballantes, le tablier céleste. Sa figure et le haut de sa personne sont illuminés: il semble qu'elle soit dans le ciel' (p. 26). The unnamed woman who strips before the narrator is described as being 'angéliquement seule' (p. 44). Floating above her head is 'une faible auréole', which shows that her hair is blond; her hand is resting on the 'carreau céleste, comme un oiseau' (p. 37). The old lady who finds the child lovers, Jean and Hélène, is 'vieille, flétrie; mais elle est angélique, avec sa robe jusqu'au cou' (p. 59).

The narrator is dumbfounded by the lack of interest Aimée's husband shows in her, 'la femme exquise', on whom the light, 'qui se jouait dans ses voiles aériens présentait et nimbait radieusement tout son corps' (p. 103). Anna has 'une figure de madone' (p. 143) and is 'si blanche et si dorée que la lueur du jour semblait mourir plus lentement qu'ailleurs, sur sa pâle figure argentée et l'auréole diffuse de ses cheveux' (pp. 143-44).

Descriptions of the various sexual encounters the narrator witnesses make extensive use of sanctifying adjectives or their adverbial derivatives, such as the largely synonymous 'divin' (pp. 64, 77, 256), 'saint' (p. 76), and, in this context, 'pieux' (p. 118).³⁶ When used in conjunction with nouns associated with acts of Christian worship, such as 'prière' (pp. 77, 92), 'litanie' (pp. 89, 112), 'offrande' (pp. 40, 196), and 'cantique' (pp. 60, 253), to name but a few,³⁷ the overall effect for the reader is incantatory, as though one were privy to mystical, pseudo-religious acts of ritual and worship, a sanctification, through the narrator, of the human experience in all its stark physicality.³⁸

Thus the presence of the woman who strips is accompanied by 'une odeur d'encens et de fleurs [...] Elle s'agenouilla devant la cheminée, la flamme aux doigts' (pp. 37-39). The look she unwittingly exchanges with the narrator is '[une] sorte de regard plus aigu, d'offrande plus chaude' (p. 40). There is a communion between them, despite the physical partition; 'le seul miracle vivant qui soit sur terre' is the woman one does not yet know, the woman who will reveal herself (p. 38). When she does remove her dress, the act is described as 'le grand geste simple que les hommes adorent comme toute une religion' (p. 41). Before they make love following Philippe's death, Anna listens, 'dévotement', to Michel expatiating on his feelings during their enforced separation: 'S'il ne l'avait tenue, elle aurait glissé à genoux devant ce dieu aussi beau qu'elle' (p. 249). She herself is perceived as a 'vague prêtresse fille des dieux païens, ange de la nature' (p. 256). She declares her love for Michel as he, in an echo of the

language used in the description of the encounter between Maximilien and Marguerite in *Les Suppliants*, takes her virginity in a ‘cantique d’actions et de grâces’ (p. 253). She teaches him ‘l’extase divin’ (p. 256). Not without good reason did a reviewer of the original edition of the novel remark that ‘La capacité de spiritualisation de M. Barbusse n’a d’égale que celle de Baudelaire’,³⁹ while another commentator, writing some eight years later, noted ‘the surprise of nine-tenths of its readers to find that Maeterlinck at his most mystical is materialistic as compared with the mysticism attained by M. Barbusse at his most realistic.’⁴⁰

Not content with appropriating religious language and employing it to sanctify the human, Barbusse, through the narrator, once again plunders the Judaeo-Christian fable of Adam and Eve to the same end. The motif is introduced in the first erotic scene (that of the woman who exposes herself) with references to ‘sa chair défendue’ and ‘son corps, — dans cette ombre qui, au fond, est un fruit’ (pp. 41, 42). It is consolidated in the loss of innocence episode involving the child lovers, Jean and Hélène. Alone in the hotel room, they have created ‘la solitude défendue’ (pp. 51-52); ‘ils sortaient du paradis de l’enfance et de l’ignorance. Ils parlèrent d’une maison et d’un jardin où ils avaient vécu tous deux’ (p. 55). Now the moment, ‘l’heure des belles décisions et des fruits défendus’ (p. 56), has arrived. The Adam and Eve analogy is made explicit when initial physical contact becomes more intense:

Leurs bouches et leurs yeux étaient ceux d’Adam et d’Eve. J’évoquai l’infini exemple ancestral d’où l’histoire sainte et l’histoire humaine coulent comme d’une fontaine. [...] Quand, — par suite du triomphe de la curiosité, interdite pourtant par Dieu en personne — ils ont appris le secret, découvert la séparation caressante et entrevu la grande volonté de la chair, le ciel s’est obscurci. (p. 57)

In *Judas*, written some twenty years after *L’Enfer*, Barbusse discusses, and makes abundantly clear his objection to, the Christian dichotomy between the flesh and the spirit, body and soul, with the consequent anathematization of the former. His view is unequivocally pro-body and he sees the myth of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from

Paradise, in which Eve's act of disobedience has been linked to the workings of the flesh, as repugnant, a part of the still greater conspiracy that subordinates imperfect humankind to perfect God.⁴¹

That Aimée and the Poet are meant to be seen as Jean and Hélène grown old would be clear enough without the link provided by the words 'la première fois' (pp. 52, 69, 71) and Edenesque reminders such as 'jardin' and 'chute' (pp. 71, 77). Their encounter is fully consummated, thus furthering the author's subversion of the Judaeo-Christian myth by his continued appropriation of it. In addition, however, Aimée and the Poet are the Adam and Eve of the Adam and Eve poem that the Poet tells Aimée when she comes close to despair in Chapter eight. As in *Mystère*, Aimée/Eve longs to return to Paradise because of all the pain she has suffered on earth. The Poet/Adam makes her realize that she is 'en contradiction avec elle-même en réclamant à la fois le bonheur terrestre et le bonheur céleste' (p. 137); that 'le paradis, c'est la vie' (p. 138).⁴² The Poet demonstrates by means of a poem how human beings need 'de la tristesse et de l'ombre, pour faire de la joie et de la lumière' (p. 127).

Instead of living in the absurd hope of a return to Paradise or despairing at the contingency of a life without a Supreme Being in an ordered universe, 'il faut garder le lien qui nous retient au sang et à la terre [...] nous sommes plus que nous ne le croyons' (p. 142). The narrator fancies he sees a halo above their heads before the magic of the prose poetry wears off. Aimée is consoled, having come to believe that true happiness is not possible without its converse. Aimée and the Poet are 'aussi rapprochés qu'on peut l'être ici-bas' (p. 142). Thus this Adam and Eve, like the same pairing in Barbusse's earlier verse drama, paradoxically explode the myth of Paradise Lost. In the words of Relinger, 'Dieu, Eve, Abel et Caïn ne sont que des images de l'homme'.⁴³ There is no transcendence, no heaven or hell other than those of human conception. This is the discovery that the narrator makes as a result of his observations. At the start of his

narrative he laments: 'il me semble que c'est fini de moi, que je n'ai pas vécu et j'ai envie d'une espèce de paradis perdu' (p. 20). The hotel room is all that he finds, in other words life on earth, in all its agony and ecstasy: 'il n'y a pas d'enfer que la fureur de vivre' (p. 285).

In his assessment of *L'Enfer* as 'the work of a man whose concern for the human condition is very real but whose indignation has yet to be channelled into more forceful and forthright forms of expression',⁴⁴ Flower makes much of the narrator's use, on the final page, of the word 'Rien'. He is not alone in taking such a view of the novel. One contemporary reviewer bemoaned Barbusse's nihilism: 'je reprocherai [...] à l'auteur de n'être qu'un apôtre de désespérance, de tout démolir sans rien reconstruire'.⁴⁵ Another described Barbusse's narrator as a man riddled with doubt, a man who finds 'ni consolation, ni remède à son désenchantement, puisque, tour à tour, il a tout condamné.'⁴⁶

This is not strictly true, however, and striking though the use of the word 'Rien' on the final page may be, one has to take account of the qualifying, and conclusive remark that follows it: 'Je crois que cela ne signifie pas notre néant ni notre malheur, mais au contraire, notre réalisation et notre *divinisation*, puisque tout est en nous' (p. 286; my italics). As Barbusse himself remarked years later: 'si je finis sur le mot "rien", c'est dans un effort suprême pour ôter autour de l'homme tout ce qui l'entrave, tout ce qui le limite au point de vue des idées, des sentiments et des croyances.'⁴⁷ God does not exist, but this is not cause for despair; on the contrary, as conveyed in Barbusse's poetry and his earlier novel, it means 'notre réalisation et notre divinisation'.⁴⁸ If this is not 'la vérité des vérités' from which the narrator wishes to extract 'une direction, une foi [...] pour mon salut' (p. 228), there is good reason for thinking that it is its quintessence. On the final page of his narrative, the narrator, making use, once again, of the 'De profundis' motif, states that there is only one course left to him: 'Me souvenir et croire. Entretenir

de toutes mes forces dans ma mémoire la tragédie de cette chambre, à cause de la vaste et difficile consolation dont a résonné parfois le fond de l'abîme' (p. 286). He realizes far earlier in the narrative that he will never amount to much; that all he can ever hope to be is a believer: 'Je ne peux être sur la terre qu'un croyant' (p. 49).

By the end of the novel, the narrator has an inchoate faith in the power of reason and its originator, the human mind. More than this, he believes in human beings, because they *are* human beings. 'Je ne distingue plus la mère; je ne la sais plus; je crois en elle' (p. 188), he says of a woman who gives birth in the room adjacent to his. He later 'evokes' 'les êtres vivants en qui j'ai foi' (p. 242), and although the novel ends on much the same note of Schopenhauerian solitude with which it begins, it is surely significant that towards the end there is a long address, in the second person, to the narrator's companion of the future — 'ma sœur, mon enfant, ma femme' (p. 258). He may well 'worship' his future soulmate on his knees, his hands joined in prayer, just as Aimée has 'worshipped' the Poet (pp. 75, 125, 278); the Poet, Aimée (p. 122); Anna, Philippe (pp. 154, 197, 223); and Anna, Michel (p. 251). The faith the narrator eventually finds is given an overtly pseudo-religious dimension in his final observation of Aimée and the Poet: 'Je vis face à face le glorieux orgueil de la correspondance et de la charité, en contemplant cet homme qu'une femme prostrée devant lui divinisait' (p. 282).

It is not difficult to appreciate why Rachilde pointed out that she would have entitled this novel not *L'Enfer* but '*Dieu*',⁴⁹ or why the Catholic poet Francis Jammes felt moved to write in a letter to the author, 'Je crois que l'homme qui a écrit ce livre ira chercher un jour la paix dans l'ombre de la plus humble Église.'⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the anonymous writer who produced a critical essay on the novel in October 1917 was much nearer the mark when (s)he began with the observation that 'Barbusse repousse en bloc les croyances et les dogmes de toutes les religions. [...] L'auteur est un athée.'⁵¹

This being the case, if *L'Enfer* can be read as further evidence of a quest for faith on the part of the author, it is clearly not God but an alternative to God, occasioned by the absence, or the collapse of a belief in the Christian scheme of things, that the author is questing after. Certain commentators have pointed up what they have taken to be the novel's overriding nihilism. In addition to those already mentioned, Brett likewise contends that the narrator of the novel 'perd la foi religieuse qu'il ne sait pas pourtant, remplacer par une autre'.⁵² Conclusions of this kind are in the minority, however; far more numerous are those that claim to detect evidence of a secular faith in the pages of *L'Enfer*. Of Barbusse's contemporaries, Latourelle alluded to the narrator's 'pensée de foi et d'amour [qui] transfigure le monde',⁵³ Mendès to an 'espèce de foi, oui, de foi frénétique, en la perpétuité des choses, des esprits et des cœurs',⁵⁴ and Pioch to 'une foi mélancolique et inébranlable [...]: la foi en la beauté de notre absolue solitude'.⁵⁵ A then close friend, Albert Keim, went so far as to suggest that the author had demolished the basis for belief in traditional forms of religion, only to create in *L'Enfer* 'une religion tout de même, de l'être persévérant dans son être'.⁵⁶ More recently, Salvan has stressed the 'profession de foi solipsiste' with which the narrative ends,⁵⁷ and Tison-Braun has drawn attention to what she calls 'un solipsisme mystique'.⁵⁸ For Relinger, *L'Enfer* is not a negative work: 'La suprême consolation est l'immanence de Dieu et de l'absolu dans l'homme. Le livre entier repose sur ce message philosophique.'⁵⁹

Of all the various notions of divinity that Barbusse later claimed to have undermined in *L'Enfer*, the Christian concept of divinity is by far the most salient. Those who wish to see in this novel a forerunner to *Le Feu* would do well to remember that it is, more particularly, the successor to *Les Suppliants*, and to Barbusse's poetical works. Taken collectively, as Part one of this thesis has shown, the writer's literary output in the early part of his career can be seen — indeed, *ought* to be seen — as a critique of religion in general and of Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular, a critique mounted

from a largely metaphysical perspective. It is one in which continuity predominates over development. Barbusse's atheism is a constant feature of his writing but he shows himself to be anything but areligious. Indeed, there is a permanent tension between atheism in Christian terms, and a pseudo-religious cult of the human. There is also a permanent sense of paradox arising out of the fact that the means by which Barbusse undermines Christianity — its monolithic certainties, its God the Father and Christ the Son, its sacred words, works, figures, images and rituals — are also the means by which he divinizes the human in his quest for an alternative belief-system. While he shows a certain degree of sympathy for the individual cleric, even for one as zealously anti-human as the faceless priest of *L'Enfer*, his opposition to the Church is unrelenting; and if there is any notable development in Barbusse's treatment of religion in his work prior to the outbreak of the First World War, it is in the way in which his attitude towards the institution that the clergy represents finds expression within the text. Largely implicit in *Les Suppliants*, it becomes explicit in *L'Enfer*, although in neither case could it be said to originate in any deeply held political convictions.

Analysis in the previous two chapters has shown that Barbusse viewed himself, once again paradoxically, as a secular prophet, from no later than the mid-1890s onwards. The message propagated by this would-be prophet both outside, and by means of the texts, was the same as that of the prophet-like characters in them: traditional religion is dead; long live religion in an alternative, secularized form. *L'Enfer* fits into the pattern established by Barbusse's poetry and his first novel. On the plan of *L'Enfer*, Barbusse wrote, 'en gros lettres: Le Cri, et, en-dessous, comme fil conducteur: Importance terrible du cri de vérité'.⁶⁰ This emphasis was not lost on Mendès, who described the published version of the novel as the work of 'un prophète ivre de blasphème'.⁶¹ Relinger has identified the impulse at work throughout Barbusse's career as the 'noble ambition' to be 'le "crieur" des hommes, le prêcheur de vérité qui veut

lever les illusions et arracher les masques'.⁶² In the early part of his career, Barbusse preached in something of a void. The success of *Le Feu* changed all that, and although his critique of religion continued, the perspective altered, as did the alternative forms of faith Barbusse proposed.

Notes

¹ Some of the material contained in this chapter has already been published in a different form. See O'Brien, '“Par quelle autorité fais-tu cela?”'

² Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 52. Unfortunately, here, as is often the case, Vidal does not indicate when Barbusse made these comments.

³ Hertz, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 28.

⁴ See the *Journal officiel*, pp. 1971-72.

⁵ See Barbusse, *L'Enfer* (Albin Michel, 1991; first published, 1908), pp. 158-79. All subsequent page references, given in parenthesis in the text, are to this, the latest edition of the novel.

⁶ Michel, 'Henri Barbusse (1873-1935). Littérature et engagement', p. 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸ Barbusse, *Judas*, pp. 119-20.

⁹ Barbusse, 'Des vers inédits d'un manuscrit de *L'Enfer*'; my italics.

¹⁰ FHB, *Naf* 16479, f. 123. The woman in question is one Madame Lara and the letter is dated 12 August 1926.

¹¹ Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 88.

¹² What follows is a realistic narrative in that sense, although the language used often rises to the heightened intensity of poetry and there is little or no differentiation between the various voices. Baldick's comment that the characters speak a language the like of which no eavesdropper ever heard is perfectly justified. See the short introduction to his translation of the novel (p. 9). An anonymous reviewer of the book ('Militant Pulpiteer') described the conversations in the novel as 'tiringly biblicized'.

¹³ Salvan, in '*L'Enfer et La Nausée*', has pointed out that Barbusse, like the narrator, was 'façonné par une éducation chrétienne' but hated 'les artifices du dogme' (p. 36).

- ¹⁴ ‘Moi, je suis un homme comme les autres’ (p. 16). The point is reiterated on pp. 17, 38, 84, 86, 106, and 260.
- ¹⁵ From the brief self-description he provides (pp. 16-17), he appears never to have been a gregarious type.
- ¹⁶ The concept was clearly of considerable importance to Barbusse. The key chapter in *Clarté* (1919) is entitled ‘De profundis clamavi’.
- ¹⁷ See Rhodes, *Psalms*, p. 173; and Cooper, *The Cassell Dictionary of Christianity*, p. 209.
- ¹⁸ See Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le cœur de l’homme*, pp. 500, 506.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 502.
- ²⁰ See Barnes, *The Psalms*, II, p. 609; Rhodes, *Psalms*, p. 173; and Oesterley, *The Psalms*, pp. 525-26.
- ²¹ Maillot and Lelièvre, *Les Psaumes 101-150*, p. 174.
- ²² Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, p. 446.
- ²³ Rogerson and McKay, *Psalms 101-150*, p. 133.
- ²⁴ Oesterley, *The Psalms*, p. 527.
- ²⁵ It is somewhat curious, perhaps, that the narrator should himself invoke God in this way but, as has already been indicated, he arrives in Paris with a residual religiosity. At this point in the narrative, he has made remarks that suggest agnosticism rather than outright atheism; and, again, doing as others do at times of crisis, he is showing himself to be ‘un homme comme les autres’.
- ²⁶ In reference to the narrator, Brett talks of an ‘angoisse métaphysique, [...] une angoisse existentielle et même, pourrait-on dire, existentialiste avant la lettre.’ *Henri Barbusse* (pp. 63-64).

²⁷ He alone sees the old doctor shake his fist at the heavens in defiance, following his younger colleague's declaration of atheism ('il vaut mieux pour lui [Dieu] qu'il n'existe pas', p. 179).

²⁸ Not only does he see less perspicaciously when outside the hotel room, he is portrayed also as something of an invisible man at certain points in the narrative. For example, one of the female guests and the narrator look at one another despite the barrier of the wall between them (p. 40), whereas she fails to notice him altogether the following morning on the stairs as she prepares to leave (p. 47).

²⁹ For a more detailed analysis of these highly convoluted issues, see Chadwick, *The Early Church*, pp. 114, 130, 141-47, 195-96 and 235.

³⁰ In *Judas*, Barbusse defines one of the two 'absurdités irréductibles et statutaires' that make Christian doctrine untenable as 'l'impossibilité de concilier l'Unité divine et la Trinité' (p. 194).

³¹ The narrator is also transfigured (p. 84).

³² Barbusse included this and Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* in his list of 'Grands Livres' in his 'Carnet de guerre' (see pp. 460-61 of the 1965 Livre de Poche edition of *Le Feu*).

³³ For Barbusse, this was the second of the insurmountable obstacles to belief in Christian doctrine (see note 30). Camus held the same view, expressed most notably in his fiction in *La Peste*.

³⁴ Aigrain, 'Trois lauréats du Prix Goncourt', pp. 119-20.

³⁵ Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, II, p. 249.

³⁶ They are to be found in plenty of other contexts, however.

³⁷ Others include 'aumône' (pp. 81, 223, 268), 'autel' (p. 155), 'âme' (e.g. pp. 38, 129, 130, 181), 'martyr' (pp. 31, 77, 87, 188, 224, 268), 'madone' (p. 143), and the polysemous word 'ciel'. In some instances, this noun clearly indicates the sky (e.g. pp.

16, 25, 149); in others, heaven (e.g. pp. 57, 280). There are contexts in which it is ambiguous (e.g. p. 22). The most commonly used verb that one would readily associate with a religious context is 'supplier' (e.g. pp. 108, 205, 280, 281).

³⁸ In 'Psychoanalyse des Barbusseschen Stils', Spitzer claims that Barbusse 'divinizes terms relating to the flesh and nudity' (p. 259; my translation).

³⁹ Pioch, 'L'Enfer de Henri Barbusse', p. 112.

⁴⁰ Ciolkowska, 'The French Word in Modern Prose', p. 28. In the letter to Madame Lara referred to in note 10, Barbusse wrote: 'Le grand génie de Dante était imbu d'un mysticisme dont je m'efforce au contraire, depuis que j'essaye de transformer des idées en livres, de débarasser l'esprit humain. Ou plutôt je m'attache à ne pas donner au mysticisme humain d'autre aliment que lui-même.'

⁴¹ See *Judas*, pp. 145-46.

⁴² In the words of the *TLS* reviewer, *L'Enfer* is a work in which Barbusse 'brings Heaven down to Earth (and Hell, one might add, up to it).' See note 12.

⁴³ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Flower, *Literature and the Left in France*, p. 31.

⁴⁵ Cabs, 'Les livres du jour - *L'Enfer*'.

⁴⁶ Goedorp, '*L'Enfer*'.

⁴⁷ See note 10.

⁴⁸ The point has not been lost on either Cimon or Spitzer. In 'Les Romans d'Henri Barbusse: Une évolution vers la propagande', the former points out that 'le seul infini, la seule divinité, c'est le moi' (p. 125). The latter suggests that Barbusse believes man 'creates God, and is therefore God himself. Already in his early works, Barbusse preaches the infinity and divinity of man.' *Studien zu Henri Barbusse* (p.17; my translation).

⁴⁹ FHB, *Naf* 16524, f. 122.

⁵⁰ AAV, 42.103b.

⁵¹ FHB, *Naf* 16526, f. 28.

⁵² Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 62.

⁵³ Latourelle, 'Scolies - *L'Enfer*', p. 18.

⁵⁴ Mendès, 'Premières éditions - *L'Enfer*'.

⁵⁵ Pioch, '*L'Enfer* de Henri Barbusse', p. 110.

⁵⁶ AAV, 42.103b. The quotation is taken from a letter to Barbusse dated 4 March 1908.

⁵⁷ Salvan, '*L'Enfer* et *La Nausée*', p. 38.

⁵⁸ Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, II, p. 248.

⁵⁹ See note 43.

⁶⁰ Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 50.

⁶¹ See note 54.

⁶² Relinger, 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', p. 838.

PART TWO

CHAPTER FOUR

HENRI BARBUSSE, THE PROPHET ARMED: *LE FEU* (1916)

For many, Barbusse, like Remarque, is a one-book author, the author of *Le Feu*. The novel was awarded the Prix Goncourt for 1916 and had a huge impact on French public opinion during the second half of the First World War. *Le Feu* established Barbusse's reputation as a writer. His status as an 'ancien combattant' conferred upon him a considerable moral authority in the eyes of his supporters and, as will be seen, his overnight fame brought him to the attention of the masses, on whose behalf he was only too willing to play the much sought-after part of secular prophet.

Even though the focus of critical interest in *Le Feu* has very much been on the socio-political content of the novel and the various contexts in which it was conceived, written, published and attacked or defended, certain commentators have expressed the erroneous view that *Le Feu* was, already at the time of its publication, the work of a pro-Communist writer.¹ It is not difficult to see why: the paean in the text in praise of Karl Liebknecht, who, together with Rosa Luxemburg, founded the German Communist Party in 1920, constitutes good prima facie evidence.² However, those with more specialist knowledge are fully aware that in 1916 Liebknecht was for Barbusse little more than the name of a German politician who was imprisoned for consistently refusing to vote for the war credits in the Reichstag. Ideologically, the Barbusse of both *Le Feu* and his next novel, *Clarté*, stood far closer to the American President Woodrow Wilson than to either Liebknecht or Lenin. As Relinger has put it, 'La dernière ligne du *Feu* écrite, Barbusse était loin encore d'être un révolutionnaire.'³ What Barbusse called for in *Le Feu* was not the kind of revolution that shook Tsarist Russia a year later, but 'L'entente des démocraties, l'entente des immensités, la levée du peuple du monde, la foi brutalement simple ...' (p. 435), or, to borrow from Cruickshank, 'vague invocations of futurity'.⁴

Whatever the case may be, anybody surveying a good many of the various analyses of Barbusse's work could be forgiven for thinking that Barbusse wrote little of

consequence besides *Le Feu*, and that the preoccupations expressed in the novel do not extend beyond the strictly socio-political. The religious content of, and dimensions to *Le Feu* have been generally overlooked or ignored. However, it will be shown in this and the following chapter that in the second phase of his career, Barbusse continued his critique of religion in general and of Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular. It will be seen, also, that the chief characteristics of this critique remain the same; but that the perspective from which it is mounted changes, from the broadly apolitical, metaphysical and humanist to the broadly socio-political, in keeping with Barbusse's politicization during the war.

The few who have considered *Le Feu* in terms of religion have done so all too briefly and have tended to focus on the text's perceived apocalyptic qualities. The ' "déluge apocalyptique" ' of the final chapter, 'L'aube', appears to Relinger to be the most salient feature of what he describes as 'ce chaos biblique'. He subsequently talks about the novel as 'un agencement de l'apocalypse et de l'intimité'.⁵ In the light of the final chapter, Winter likewise sees *Le Feu* as 'an apocalyptic tale'.⁶ King interprets the novel as 'observed reality [...] conveyed with imagery which is apocalyptic and visionary',⁷ while Brett refers to 'L'image apocalyptique des souffrances des prolétaires des batailles'.⁸ Undefined or unqualified, the use of the epithet 'apocalyptic' in reference to *Le Feu* is not particularly illuminating and it will not do as a generalization, since the term can refer to 'a corpus of books, to a literary genre, to a style of symbolic writing, or to a religio-political movement within Judaism.'⁹

The word 'apocalyptic' is derived from the Greek verb *apokaluptō*, meaning to 'reveal', 'uncover' or 'unveil'. Apocalyptic literature, unlike the work of the 'writing prophets', was intended as literature from the moment of its conception and there is a literary self-consciousness in its creation which in the recording-process of the writings of the prophets does not become a factor until a much later stage.¹⁰ 'Apocalypses' tend

also to take the form of pseudonymously written reports or visions and lean so heavily towards the symbolic that they often lapse into partial or total incoherence for the uninitiated.

As for content, 'apocalypses' relate events on a cosmic scale, describing a Manichean universe in which the forces of Good, which are only marginally stronger, do battle with the forces of Evil.¹¹ The focus is invariably eschatological (from the Greek word *eskhatos*, meaning 'final'), the underlying assumption being that human history is about to be terminated by the sudden appearance of God at the end of the final, cataclysmic struggle. Human suffering will be brought to an end; a period of eternal bliss will begin; and 'a land conquered by pagans will become a world fulfilled with the glory of God.'¹² The timing of the termination of human history has been predetermined by God. There is nothing that can be done by human beings to retard or prevent the process and there will be no time for repentance: those who have led good, righteous lives will be saved; those who have not will be damned, along with the pagans.

The apocalyptic writer's view, one which put him at odds with the teachings of Judaism, is that man is an incorrigibly depraved creature whom an omnipotent superhuman agent must save from himself.¹³ Thus, although apocalyptic literature undoubtedly has its origins in Jewish prophetic literature, as well as in Babylonian/Graeco-Roman mantic wisdom and the dualistic eschatology of Zoroastrianism,¹⁴ it is hardly surprising that the Apocalypticists, 'like the Essenes, remained outside the mainstream of Judaism and had little influence on its development.'¹⁵ It follows also that while apocalyptic literature provided a source of great comfort to Jews suffering under the Seleucid conqueror Antiochus Epiphanes, then the imperial yoke of Rome, culminating in the Jewish war, the destruction of the Temple, and, ultimately, a non-Jewish Palestine, none of it, with the exception of the Book of Daniel, found a place in the proto-canonical works of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶ The classic,

and only sustained example of the genre in the New Testament is the Book of Revelation, known also as ‘The Book of the Apocalypse’, which quite clearly owes much to Daniel.¹⁷

In what ways can *Le Feu* be said to correspond to apocalyptic literature as outlined above? It has been pointed out that an ‘apocalypse’ usually takes the form of a vision, a term which can be applied to *Le Feu*. The title of the first chapter/prologue, ‘La vision’, is particularly telling. The parallelism between it and the final chapter/epilogue, with its equally symbolic title, ‘L’aube’, is established by mirror-image references to the French Revolution (pp. 25/424), the thirty million men involved (pp. 27/427), and the word for word repetition that far from a war, the conflict rending the world asunder is actually suicide committed by one mass army (pp. 25/418). What the convalescents see from on high the combatants themselves experience at ground level during the course of the narrative.¹⁸ No sooner is war declared than the convalescents behold its aftermath. In keeping with Daniel and Revelation, which anticipate persecutions that have already occurred (at the hands of Antiochus and the Roman emperors Vespasian and Domitian, respectively), the vision at the start/end of *Le Feu* foresees an event that has already happened:

Dans leur vision, des formes sortent de la plaine, qui est faite de boue et d'eau, et se cramponnent à la surface du sol, aveuglées et écrasées de fange, comme des naufragées monstrueux. Et il leur semble que ce sont des soldats. (p. 27)¹⁹

The great debate between the soldiers in the final chapter is interrupted by ‘une autre vision où les adversaires éternels sortent de l’ombre orageuse du présent’ (p. 429). This consists of warriors and chargers dividing the clouds and sending forth beams of light far above the ‘regards enfiévrés qui sont à terre’ (p. 429). The vision is loaded with symbolic details — ‘couronnes’, ‘épées’, ‘chevaux de bataille’, ‘balance de justice’ — but its meaning becomes clear when these ‘adversaires éternels’ reveal themselves to be the supporters of the status quo.

Le Feu can be said to be apocalyptic not merely in the formal sense that it can be read as the relating of a vision by the author ‘from above’, or by the first-person narrator ‘from below’, as a character deeply involved in the action he describes. It has similarities with apocalyptic literature also in its portrayal of binary oppositions. As will be seen in the following chapter, the dualistic universe finds its highest expression in Barbusse’s pre-PCF writing in *Clarté* but already in *Le Feu*, the author divides society into two diametrically opposed camps. In the only chapter set at the home front, ‘La virée’, the narrator and a number of his fellow squad members visit Paris, where they gradually realize that they are on the wrong side of the dividing line that separates the blessed from the damned:

Le spectacle de ce monde nous a enfin donné, sans que nous puissions nous en défendre, la révélation de la grande réalité:²⁰ une Différence qui se dessine entre les êtres, une Différence bien plus profonde et avec des fossées plus infranchissables que celle des races: la division nette, tranchée — et vraiment irrémédiable, celle-là — qu’il y a parmi la foule d’un pays, entre ceux qui profitent et ceux qui peinent ... ceux à qui on a demandé de tout sacrifier, tout, qui apportent jusqu’au bout leur nombre, leur force et leur martyre, et sur lesquels marchent, avancent, sourient et réussissent les autres. (p. 380)

Although it is never quite articulated, here or elsewhere, what divides one man from another in this quasi-Manichean view is not the matter of righteousness and its opposite, but class.²¹ The future belongs to the ‘*trente millions d’esclaves*’ (p. 27), which implies an existing dichotomy, there being no slaves without masters, who are to be found at the close of the narrative (‘Les peuples luttent aujourd’hui pour n’avoir plus de maîtres qui les dirigent’, p. 424). In his final address to the oppressed, the ‘pauvres ouvriers innombrables des batailles’, the narrator identifies the oppressors as ‘les brandisseurs de sabres, les profiteurs et les tripoteurs [...], financiers, grands et petits faiseurs d’affaires [...], les éblouis, les faibles d’esprit, les fétichistes, les sauvages [...] les prêtres [...] des avocats — économistes, historiens’ (pp. 430-31). Ranged against them stand those who believe in equality, the mainspring of the French Revolution and the *sine qua non* of social justice.

There is a further, albeit only partial correspondence between *Le Feu* and apocalyptic literature in that the visionaries who make their pronouncements take a fairly dim view of human nature. Contemplating the spectacle of a world in flames, one of the convalescents in the sanatorium remarks, '*Arrêter les guerres! Est-ce possible! Arrêter les guerres! La plaie du monde est inguérissable*' (p. 26). The narrator puts the blame on the human race as a whole. Just before the attack, he observes: 'C'est en pleine conscience et en pleine santé, qu'ils se massent là, pour se jeter une fois de plus dans cette espèce de rôle de fou imposé à tout homme par la folie du genre humain' (p. 309). As for the other soldiers in the narrative, there is the belief that they find themselves in the front-line because they are mad individual members of a mad race: 'C'est vrai que les hommes sont fous! Ça, on l' dira jamais assez!' (p. 421)

As already stated, however, the correspondence between, on the one hand, the apocalyptic tendency to write off man completely, subordinating him to an all-conquering God and, on the other, the portrayal of human nature and man's place in the grand scheme of things in *Le Feu* is only partial, possibly even superficial. In the first instance, in the apocalyptic scheme of things, God is everything, the hammer on the anvil of human history; but in *Le Feu*, there is no God waiting for the appointed hour to end time. In the second, with the growing socio-political awareness of the narrator and of the less perceptive soldiers around him, there dawns the realization that if war is caused by men alone, it can also be eradicated by them. If it is the system that artificially separates men into master and slave and produces war, one has only to transform the system to prevent exploitation and war. The reflection, or rather the *revelation* about the 'Différence' quoted *in extenso* above, is taken to its logical conclusion in the discussion in the final chapter. The narrator states that it is they, the people, the common soldiers of the towns and villages of France, that are the cannon fodder for war. Somebody remarks:

— Oui, c'est vrai: C'est les peuples qui sont la guerre; sans eux, il n'y aurait rien, rien que criaileries, de loin. Mais c'est pas eux qui la décident. C'est les maîtres qui les dirigent.

— Les peuples luttent aujourd’hui pour n’avoir plus de maîtres qui les dirigent. Cette guerre, c’est comme la Révolution française qui continue. (p. 424)

By the end of the narrative, the ‘maîtres’ stand identified as all those who are opposed to ‘liberté’, ‘fraternité’ and, more particularly, ‘égalité’. In other words, *Le Feu* ends as it begins, with a solution to the problems bedeviling ‘*le vieux monde*’ (p. 26) and the prediction that the slaves will throw off their chains and unite (p. 27).²² Fundamentally, then, *Le Feu* is optimistic about the potential for good in human nature where apocalyptic literature is profoundly pessimistic.

The most striking reason why *Le Feu* can be said to be apocalyptic and its author an Apocalypticist, suitably qualified, is the novel’s eschatology. The eschatological note is struck right at the outset, in the sanatorium, when one of the visionaries, adding to observations about the nature of the war that has broken out, states: ‘*C’est peut-être la guerre suprême*’ (p. 25), which carries obvious echoes of Armageddon, the place mentioned in Revelation (16.16) symbolizing God’s final victory over his enemies. Other such surface similarities between descriptions of the war in *Le Feu* and those of the Final Conflicts in Daniel and Revelation are considerable. The inclusion in ‘La vision’ of extremely small and thus highly significant symbolic details suggest that Barbusse knew both books well and used them for a specific purpose.

For example, ‘*les aigles qui font des cercles dans le ciel et qui regardent la terre d’en haut, à travers les cirques de brume*’ (p. 26) reappear at the end, which is really the beginning seen from a different perspective, and are to be found in both Daniel (4.30, 7.4) and Revelation: ‘J’entendis un aigle volant au zénith et criant d’une voix puissante: “Malheur, malheur, malheur aux habitants de la terre [...]” ’ (8.13).²³ In one of his visions, Daniel sees a ram ‘donner de la corne vers l’ouest, vers le nord et vers le sud’ (8.4), a metaphor for making large-scale war. ‘La vision’ contains the remark that ‘*Au Nord, au Sud, à l’Ouest, ce sont des batailles de tous côtés, dans la distance*’ (p. 25).

The setting for 'La vision' is a mountainside with a view of Mont Blanc (pp. 23, 26). In Revelation, the Lamb appears to the visionary on Mount Zion (14.1); and after the Final Conflict, the latter is taken in spirit to the top of a great mountain, where he is shown the New Jerusalem (21.10).

Finally, there is the mysterious reference on the first page of 'La vision' to a book: '*Puis, on n'entend plus que de loin en loin le bruit des pages d'un livre, tournées à intervalles réguliers*' (p. 23). Books figure prominently in Daniel and Revelation. In both cases, the books alluded to are registers containing the names of those who will be saved (Daniel, 12.1) or judged, 'chacun selon ses œuvres' (Revelation, 20.12). Whereas Daniel is instructed to keep the words of his book secret and seal it until the end is come, the author of Revelation is told the opposite: ' "Ne tiens pas secrètes les paroles prophétiques de ce livre car le temps est proche [...]" ' (22.10). Its message, ' "Heureux celui qui garde les paroles de ce livre car le temps est proche [...]" ' (22.7), may well be the essence of Barbusse's exhortation to his reader: the end of the world is nigh; a brave new world is about to begin. To convey the imminence of this epochal event Barbusse, like the authors of Daniel and Revelation, makes repeated use of affective nouns and adjectives that are evocative of disaster on an enormous scale, adjectives such as 'cataclysme' ('J'ai eu l'impression d'être tout seul [...] au milieu d'un monde bouleversé par un cataclysme', p. 285),²⁴ 'désolation' (pp. 351, 390, 409, 419),²⁵ 'abîme' ('On ne sait rien sinon que le ciel et la terre vont se confondre dans un même abîme', p. 383),²⁶ and 'désastre' (p. 412).²⁷

Barbusse and the author of Revelation are liberal in their metaphorical use of natural phenomena as a means for the punishment of human beings. In *Le Feu*, there is an abundance of thunder (pp. 28, 75, 313, 369, 393), hail (p. 280), storms ('orages'; pp. 26, 29, 321), and an earthquake (p. 342).²⁸ Barbusse, however, outdoes the earlier writer, including a glacier (p. 322), a cyclone (p. 313), a volcano (p. 319), a hurricane (p.

282), storms ('tempêtes'; pp. 287, 313, 346, 435), avalanches (pp. 313, 401) and whirlwinds (pp. 313, 321).

Of the four elements, fire is by far the most commonly mentioned in the Bible. In the age of the projectile, the word 'le feu' became a military term, denoting the launch of a bullet, shell or missile, as well as one of the four elements. While many of the numerous references in the text to 'le feu' will have been intended as a small part of the required realism in a novel relating the First World War experience, the polysemy of the word makes it possible to read its use on more than one level, not least when it appears in close proximity to the equally polysemous word 'ciel', which is often given as the source of 'le feu', viz: 'Brusquement, devant nous, sur toute la largeur de la descente, de sombres flammes s'élancent en frappant l'air de détonations épouvantables. En ligne, de gauche à droite, des fusants sortent du ciel' (p. 312). Furthermore, Barbusse appears to have chosen the titles of his books with care and his choice of *Le Feu* for this novel provides food for thought, given the obvious religious connotations of the titles of his two previous novels, *Les Suppliants* and *L'Enfer*.²⁹

The effect when all of the above-mentioned elements are brought together in the sustained description of the assault in the eponymous chapter of the novel is quite startling. The narrator sees craters opening up all around him, 'avec de stridents fracas et des cyclones de terre pulvérisée' (p. 313). The feeling is one of annihilation, 'par le seul bruit de ces averses de tonnerre.' The narrator drops his rifle, picks it up, and stumbles headlong, 'la tête baissée dans la tempête à lueurs fauves, dans la pluie écrasante des laves'. The senses are assaulted; the stomach is turned, 'par l'odeur souffrée'.³⁰ His sight is impaired, 'par une avalanche fulgurante, qui tient toute la place'. The end seems near: 'C'est le barrage. Il faut passer dans ce tourbillon de flammes et ces horribles nuées verticales. On passe. On est passé, au hasard; j'ai vu, ça et là, des formes tournoyer, s'enlever et se coucher, éclairées d'un brusque reflet d'au-delà' (p. 313).

Shortly before going over the top, the narrator, observing an attack from the relative safety of a half-dug trench, had reflected that the turn of his squad would soon come. The pseudo-apocalyptic dimension to his thoughts speaks for itself: ‘A nous demain, peut-être, de sentir les cieux éclater sur nos têtes [...] et d’être balayés par des souffles d’ouragan cent mille fois plus forts que l’ouragan’ (p. 282). It is a dimension that is pushed to its limits in the narrative in the account of the dawning of the new age when, against the background of ‘le vide infini de l’espace, au milieu du désert polaire aux horizons fumeux’, the survivors ‘bougent et crient, les yeux, les bras et les poings tendus vers le ciel d’où tombent le jour et la tempête’ (p. 435).

An eschatological interpretation of the First World War is by no means confined to Barbusse’s account. According to Stromberg, many European intellectuals and artists were inclined to see the war in such a light, since the integral eschatology of western religion had been reinforced by ‘the whole nineteenth-century historical movement, with its typical expectation of some dramatic *dénouement* to the course of human development in time.’ The apocalyptic motif is a reflection of a moralism in Judaeo-Christian religious thinking that is ‘always ready to pass judgement on earthly kingdoms and consign them to a fiery death.’³¹ Where Barbusse parts company with the biblical Apocalypticists, however, is in his ultimately consigning the oligarchical earthly kingdom of capitalist society to a death not by fire, as the title of the novel might suggest, but by *water*. To do this, he puts the apocalyptic literature of the Bible largely to one side and makes use of another biblical image (which may itself tend towards the apocalyptic), namely the Great Flood of the Book of Genesis.

As Tison-Braun has correctly observed, Barbusse’s war is like ‘le Déluge. Les mots qui reviennent le plus souvent sous sa plume sont ceux de “noyés” et de “naufragés”.’³² There are, of course, intervals of pleasant weather in the narrative, such as those related in ‘L’asile’ (pp. 117, 121-22), ‘Argoval’ (p. 174), and ‘Le portique’ (p.

210). The impression that the reader is left with, however, is that on the Western Front, it is either raining or going to rain: ‘Ça bruine, ça brouillasse, ça fume, ça pleut. Et quand il y a du soleil, le soleil s’éteint vite au milieu de ce grand ciel humide. [...] Quelques gouttes. Puis c’est l’averse’ (p. 217). The almost incessant rain transforms the landscape into a ‘waterscape’. It transforms a ‘route’ into a ‘route coulante’ (p. 181) and the soldiers themselves into ‘hommes [...] ruisselants’ (p. 402). Walking gives way to paddling (pp. 264, 265, 394) and, eventually, even swimming: ‘On marchait en levant très haut les pieds avec un bruit de nageurs’ (p. 402).

As in the case of ‘le feu’, it could be argued that no portrayal of the First World War purporting to be realistic would economize on references to water in one form or another. Once again, however, it must be remembered that since ‘la pluie’ likewise falls from the polysemous word ‘ciel’, it too can be considered on more than one level. An early description of Paradis walking away ‘clapotant, cahin-caha, comme un pingouin, dans le *décor diluvien*’ (p. 30; my italics) suggests that the author is working within a biblical framework. Subsequent use of the words ‘déluge’ (pp. 53, 144, 401) and ‘inondation’ (pp. 152, 177, 179, 202, 370, 398) merely heighten the reader’s sense of anticipation. On the morning of the final dawn of the narrative:

La pluie a cessé de couler. Il n’y en a plus au ciel. [...] L’eau a tout pris; elle s’est répandue partout, et la prédiction des hommes de la nuit s’est réalisée; il n’y a plus de tranchées; ces canaux, ce sont les tranchées ensevelies. L’inondation est universelle. (p. 405)

The final sentence harks back to an earlier reference to ‘l’universel ruissement céleste et terrestre’ (p. 178). The flood wipes out the trenches and, with them, the superficial differences separating German from Frenchman (p. 409). Although a recommencement of hostilities is anticipated on the final page of the narrative, the war will no longer be waged to put an end to German militarism, but in the name of Cruickshank’s vague futurities. It is the Genesis-like Flood rather than the Apocalypse-like fire that writes *finis* upon the old world order and *incipit* upon the new.³³ The novel finishes on a note

of hope strongly reminiscent of God's post-Flood alliance with mankind, the sign of which is to be the rainbow.³⁴ 'Entre deux masses de nuées ténébreuses, un éclair tranquille en sort, et cette ligne de lumière, si resserrée, si endeillée, si pauvre, qu'elle a l'air pensante, apporte tout de même la preuve que le soleil existe' (p. 435).

If *Le Feu* can legitimately be described as 'apocalyptic', it is because of the many ways in which it corresponds to the only two sustained examples of the genre in the Bible, namely the form the narrative takes; the depiction of a dualistic universe; the partially negative portrayal of human nature; and the novel's thoroughgoing eschatology. In his use of the Great Flood of the Book of Genesis, as in the use he makes of Daniel and Revelation, Barbusse, in omitting God from his schema, subverts the Judaeo-Christian paradigm, drawing what are ultimately grand, atheistic analogies.³⁵ In this case, the point being made is socio-political, where in the Adam and Eve and the 'De profundis' motifs in the earlier work it is largely metaphysical and a means by which Barbusse divinizes the human. The same shift in perspective can be detected in another religious theme that is taken up anew, namely Barbusse's depiction of hell.

What Barbusse provides his reader with in the microcosm of society depicted in his previous novel is an ephemeral existence bereft of all absolutes, and God in particular. Paradise, if it is to be had, is to be had this side of the grave, and 'Il n'y a pas d'enfer que la fureur de vivre.' The hell of *L'Enfer*, then, is, at most, a furious struggle for the unattainable, a metaphor for existential angst. The hell of *Le Feu*, by contrast, is a living reality in which men are smashed to pieces by shells and bleed to death in pain that defies the imagination. Barbusse's narrator often makes specific use of the word 'enfer' (far more often than is the case in the novel of that title), either adjectivally (pp. 271, 315, 354), demonstratively (p. 354), or quite explicitly as a noun: 'Si les hommes sont heureux, malgré tout, au sortir de l'enfer, c'est que justement, ils en sortent' (p. 81). As in *L'Enfer*, however, he actually defines the term only once and the definition is given in

the final chapter, from a battlefield submerged under the waters of the diluvial downpour:

A une époque je croyais que le pire enfer de la guerre ce sont les flammes des obus, puis j'ai pensé longtemps que c'étaient l'étouffement des souterrains qui se rétrécissent éternellement sur nous. Mais non, l'enfer, c'est l'eau. (p. 409)

Here the narrator goes from a metaphorical use of the noun to an explicit and emphatic definition of it, and one which, as in *L'Enfer*, does not correspond to traditional images of hell in western art as represented by the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch or the writings of Dante. For all the hellishness of bombardments (pp. 269, 315, 347) and the cadaver-strewn wastelands, the soldier is exposed far more of the time to the horrors produced by the elements, by 'la pluie qui vient d'en haut, contre la boue qui vient d'en bas, contre le froid, cette espèce d'infini qui est partout' (p. 12). Hell is not portrayed as a place that exists in another dimension in diametrical opposition to heaven; it is an environment in which men drown in mud and freeze to death. Observing the corpses of four former members of the squad recently killed in action, the narrator remarks: 'Il y a quatre nuits de cette nuit-là et je vois les corps se dessiner, se montrer dans l'aube qui vient encore laver l'enfer terrestre' (p. 291). Hell is very much of this world, an objectification of the human mind, a 'place' created by a defective, malignant socio-economic system and the political shortcomings of human beings, which collectively produce war and its attendant miseries.

This is not to say that Barbusse does not borrow from traditional imagery in his evocation of hell; in 'Le poste de secours', with its mutilated, dying and dead, its subterranean blackness and exploding bombs, he manifestly does. The narrator accompanies the wounded Joseph Mesnil to the first-aid post after the attack. Once there, they wait in the clearing station for two hours for Joseph to receive treatment, 'dans une odeur de sang et de viande de boucherie. [...] Un jeune, les yeux allumés, lève les bras et hurle d'un air de damné: "J' brûle" ' (p. 352). Joseph's wound turns out to be

minor and the narrator is told to rest below in the subterranean post before returning to his squad. The entrance, 'ce gouffre' (p. 353), can only be penetrated backwards, the narrator searching for the steps with his feet. The experience is described as a continuation of the 'cauchemar d'étouffement qu'on a subi'; the atmosphere is 'empestée et lourde comme la terre'.

At the bottom of the steps, a long time in the reaching, 'on est assailli par la rumeur ensorcelée qui monte du trou, chaude comme d'une espèce de cuisine' (p. 353). After traversing a very long, narrow cave-tunnel that is only one and a half metres in height, the narrator finally arrives at the gateway to hell, watched over by a military nurse, who instructs each new arrival to remove the mud from his boots: 'C'est ainsi qu'un tas de boue s'accumule [...] au seuil de cet enfer' (p. 354). He is immediately confronted by wailing and the gnashing of teeth, 'le brouhaha des lamentations et des grondements' (p. 354); later by 'incohérentes lamentations' (p. 363), and 'geignements sourds' (p. 364). In the midst of 'une collection disparate de souffrances et de misères' (p. 355), lies a soldier with 'une figure de diable' (p. 363) whose feet have been blown off; a sergeant priest, 'occupé à quelque besogne diabolique' (p. 365), removes with his rifle and attached bayonet human entrails hanging from the beams of woodwork overhead. All hell is let loose when the post suffers a direct hit but this is a hell that is intensely physical, as opposed to *metaphysical*. Once outside it again, the narrator, at a distance, sees the multitude still streaming towards it (p. 371). It is not an abstract notion such as sin that sends them in that direction, but grenades, bombs and bullets.

Because of the very subtlety of the paradoxical technique by means of which Barbusse further undermined religion in *Le Feu*, in addition to the relative obscurity of his earlier work and the fact that the first readers of the novel interpreted it within the immediate context of the unfolding war situation, Barbusse's pseudo-apocalypticism and his depiction of hell did not attract censure from clerics and their supporters. Their

hostility towards *Le Feu* and its author, indicated by Barbusse in a letter to his wife in August 1917,³⁶ can be attributed to the explosive admixture of atheism, profanity, and both implicit and explicit anticlericalism that *Le Feu* contains.

Reading the novel as Barbusse no doubt intended it to be read, an anonymous reviewer pointed out in an analysis dated 11 November 1917: ‘Les théistes de toutes confessions combattront ce livre. Ils ont raison. C’est au nom de leur conscience, de leur morale, un devoir absolu.[...] Ecrit par un athée, il est contraire aux dogmes religieux, contraire à la révélation: c’est un blasphème contre la loi.’³⁷ The atheism in *Le Feu* has a much harder edge than does that of *L’Enfer* and it is not offset by any religious beliefs amongst the laity.³⁸ The soldiers of *Le Feu* have only to look around themselves and draw on their experiences in the trenches for ‘proof’ that the benevolent God of Christianity does not exist:

— Moi, dit alors une voix de douleur, je ne crois pas en Dieu. Je sais qu’il n’existe pas — à cause de la souffrance. On pourra nous raconter les boniments qu’on voudra, et ajuster là-dessus tous les mots qu’on trouvera, et qu’on inventera: toute cette souffrance innocente qui sortirait d’un Dieu parfait, c’est un sacré bourrage de crâne.

— Moi, reprend un autre des hommes du banc, je ne crois pas en Dieu, à cause du froid. J’ai vu des hommes dev’nir des cadavres p’tit à p’tit, simplement par le froid. S’il y avait un Dieu de bonté, il y aurait pas le froid. Y a pas à sortir de là.

— Pour croire en Dieu, il faudrait qu’il n’y ait rien de c’ qu’y a. Alors, pas, on est loin de compte! (p. 360)

The narrator underscores the overt atheism expressed in these statements, observing that ‘il y a dans la tragédie des événements, des minutes où les hommes sont non seulement sincères, mais véridiques, et où on voit la vérité sur eux face à face’ (p. 361).

The extent to which the above consensus can be taken as representative of the outlook of the typical front-line ‘poilu’ is, of course, highly debatable. The anonymous reviewer already cited stated that while every conscientious priest should condemn *Le Feu* outright and proscribe the reading of it by the members of his flock, France’s ‘braves prêtres soldats’, who were more directly attuned to the feelings of lay fellow combatants,

knew only too well that Barbusse's novel was an 'ouvrage à condamner, mais non pas à juger fausement.'³⁹ Numerous studies have shown that although there was something of a religious revival amongst France's fighting men at the outset of the war, it fizzled out before long and was replaced by a cynical fatalism.⁴⁰ Yet a recently published collection of war letters and diaries spanning the full duration of the conflict and drawing on the writings of men from a wide cross-section of society contains plenty of evidence of faith.⁴¹ It thus suggests that the impression given by the soldiers' dialogue above is no more than a generalization, and one which tells the reader more about Barbusse's perceptions than it does about the reality of the situation at the Front. A sergeant in a Moroccan infantry regiment objected to the dialogue in question for this very reason:

Si je lis bien sa pensée à travers celle qu'exprime un poilu dont la voix est ivre de douleur [...] M. Barbusse est un athée. C'est son droit de nier Dieu dans le for intérieur de sa conscience. [...] Qu'il y ait des poilus qui pensent comme M. Barbusse, je l'accorde même, encore qu'ils soient en petit nombre. Mais je voudrais que M. Barbusse comptât, à son tour, avec les poilus qui ont la foi chevillée dans l'âme.⁴²

This would have meant a compromise, which Barbusse was not prepared to make.

In the matter of the profane, Barbusse was likewise determined to make his point, and as forcefully as possible. Of course, there is not just a place, but a *need* for the inclusion of profane language in any realistic account of the 'ordinary' soldier's experience in the trenches of the First World War. Undoubtedly, soldiers of the kind depicted in the narrative of *Le Feu* swore a great deal; much of it will also have been blasphemous. This was certainly Barbusse's view. In 'Les gros mots', the narrator tells Barque that in his book about the war, he will have the 'poilu' speak as 'poilus' spoke: 'Je mettrai les gros mots à leur place, mon petit père, parce que c'est la vérité' (p. 222). Asked whether he will not be vilified by fellow intellectuals for doing so, he replies: 'C'est probable, mais je le ferai tout de même sans m'occuper de ces types.'

Although one has to concede, therefore, that the profanities in *Le Feu* are an indispensable feature of the novel's realism, there is clearly more to the matter than this.

Mindful of the ‘jésuitisme’ (*Lettres*, pp. 213, 225) of *L’Œuvre*, the Parisian daily newspaper that first serialized the sketches eventually published as *Le Feu*, and the tendency of the owner and chief editor, Gustave Téry, to cut anything that might cause offence to his more sensitive readers, Barbusse instructed his wife to type the proofs with expletives introduced by the first letter and concluded by the last, with full stops in between: ‘Mais pour l’amour du ciel, pas: fiche à la place de fout, ni nom d’un chien, à la place de Nom de Dieu’ (*Lettres*, p. 213). Shortly thereafter, he expressed his irritation at what he deemed to be Téry’s inconsistency: ‘Je suis surpris qu’on m’ait laissé traiter Millerand de salaud et je ne me fais pas au remplacement de “nom de Dieu” par “nom de nom!” ’ (*Lettres*, p. 216)

Barbusse saw to it that when *Le Feu* was published ‘en librairie’, the book version contained all of the profanities that Téry had airbrushed out of the serialization. The text as it now exists is punctuated with instances of the taking of God’s name in vain and many another irreverence. ‘Nom de Dieu’ and ‘Bon Dieu’ are the standard irreligious crudities.⁴³ They are complemented by ‘Tonnerre de Dieu’ (pp. 183, 403), and expansions and corruptions such as ‘Bon Dieu d’acrobate’ (p. 388), ‘Bou Diou’ (p. 189), ‘Bou Diou d’ bandit’ (p. 89), ‘bou Diou d’ bou Diou’ (p. 189), and ‘coquine de Diou’ (pp. 99, 179).⁴⁴ The peasant woman who lets her stable to the narrator’s squad produces an alarmed ‘Jésus Maria!’ when she learns that it will be occupied by a dozen or so (p. 104). Eudore’s wife, Mariette, exclaims ‘Jésus!’ when she learns from the infantrymen who have turned up on her doorstep with her returning husband that they intend to journey as far as Vauvelle in a thunderstorm (p. 145). Tirette is relieved that in his tirade against the ‘embusqués’, Volpatte does not mention factory workers kept at home on the pretext of National Defence. ‘I’ nous jamberait avec ça jusqu’à la Saint-Saucisson!’ is the aside he makes (p. 168). There are much cruder ejaculations, such as the ‘Pute de moine!’ that Fouillade exclaims when he discovers that he has just been robbed (p. 179);

and the angry ‘Sacré bordel!’ unleashed by a sergeant who is singularly unimpressed by men smoking on a march to a forward position on a night fatigue (p. 388). Given the frequency and the range of these profanities, not to mention Barbusse’s uncompromising atheism, one is irresistibly drawn to the conclusion that their use in *Le Feu* is strategic as well as realistic.

The same cannot be said of the appearance in ‘Le poste de secours’ of the wounded airman, an episode which is purely strategic. Feverishly, the airman relates his flight over a battlefield one Sunday morning when Mass was being celebrated on opposite sides of the front-line. The scene on either side was so similar that ‘ça avait l’air idiot. Une des cérémonies — au choix — était le reflet de l’autre’ (p. 358). Descending to a still lower altitude, the airman had been able to distinguish one and the same prayer produced by ‘deux cris terrestres [...]: “*Gott mit uns!*” et “Dieu est avec nous!” ’ (p. 358). Bewildered, he wonders what God would think about being worshipped identically by two warring peoples, each side striving to endorse its cause by appropriating him to it. If there is only one God and both sides believe in him, why their irreconcilable differences and the resultant bloody conflict? What is God’s purpose in allowing *all* (the word is repeated in the narrative) to convince themselves that he is with them? A groan from a stretcher hangs in the silence as though the answer to the airman’s question and the dialogue about the impossibility of the personal God of Christianity begins. The conclusion that the author would like the reader to draw is that if God exists, it is contradictory and therefore ridiculous to believe that he recognizes the primacy of one national flag over another, or, more likely given Barbusse’s atheism, that God does not exist at all.⁴⁵

The idea of a partisan God is introduced at an earlier stage in the narrative, in ‘Le barda’. One of the jealously guarded items in Volpatte’s pack is a German soldier’s belt-plate bearing the motto ‘*Gott mit uns*’ (p. 224). In all probability, Barbusse conceived of

this as a feature to be incorporated into his fictional account of the war whilst clearing trenches of corpses in a sensitive area of the Front in May 1915,⁴⁶ following an assault similar to the one described in the novel's eponymous chapter. Amongst the detritus of war and the masses of German corpses, he discovered 'une profusion de brochures pieuses, livres de "prières de guerre" ' and a number of letters which, translated from the German, he sent home to his wife for safe-keeping (*Lettres*, pp. 122-23).⁴⁷

Those letters that Hélyonne Barbusse included in the posthumous publication, *Lettres*, do not provide any evidence of a divine partisanship of the kind adumbrated by the airman in *Le Feu*, although Barbusse does remark that in all the letters he had read, 'les femmes allemandes parlent abondamment du Bon Dieu, comme d'un ami sûr de l'Allemagne' (*Lettres*, p. 123). Furthermore, those letters that did make it into print evince an intensely pious Catholicism that would have made the writers susceptible to ecclesiastical propaganda portraying the war as a just crusade.⁴⁸ As a participant in the war, Barbusse clearly felt the same way as the non-participant who wrote *Au-dessus de la mêlée*. As well as being yet another expression of Barbusse's atheism, the airman episode is a literary attempt to convey the same message that Rolland was able to voice without artifice in his book about the war: 'Dans l'élite de chaque pays, pas un qui ne proclame et ne soit convaincu que la cause de son peuple est la cause de Dieu, la cause de la liberté et du progrès humain.'⁴⁹

The strategic importance of the airman episode is further accentuated when it is considered within the context of the 'Union sacrée', which was mirrored by the 'Kriegsbündnis' in Germany. On both sides of no man's land, representatives of the same Christian Church are shown to be lending not just spiritual succour to the combatants, but also political support for the war effort. On the French side, this is hinted at much earlier in the narrative of *Le Feu*, towards the end of the rest period related in 'L'asile'. Whilst on a walk together, the narrator and Lamuse happen upon 'le commandant, et

l'aumônier noir qui marche à côté, comme une promeneuse' (p. 121). Shortly beforehand, the narrator reports seeing a funeral cortège emerging from a church to the sound of pealing bells. It is a military funeral. Draped over the coffin, there is a flag; behind the coffin, 'un adjutant, un aumônier et un civil' (p. 116), each one representing one third of the triumvirate of Army, Church and State that is the 'Union sacrée'.

Towards the end of the narrative, the narrator's ruminations transcend the immediate war context, and in calling openly for reform, he identifies as the enemies of the more progressive elements of society the sabre-rattlers, the capitalists and the priests, amongst others (p. 431). In a passage which in its visionary, pseudo-apocalyptic style replicates the prologue, the narrator sees a disturbing 'sight':

De nouvelles formes hostiles d'hommes s'évoquent au sommet de la chaîne de montagnes des nuages, autour des silhouettes barbares des croix et des aigles, des églises, des palais souverains et des temples de l'armée, et s'y multiplient, cachant les étoiles qui sont moins nombreuses que l'humanité [...]. (p. 434)

There is nothing particularly abstruse about the symbolism of this vision. Quite clearly, for Barbusse and his narrator, the enemies of the people are the elites in the warring countries — the ecclesiastical authorities, the crowned heads of State, and the militarists. The association between the Church and the Army, implicit in the symbiosis of the phrase 'des temples de l'armée', is particularly resonant, and it should be noted that the former is signified also by the words 'croix' and 'aigles',⁵⁰ as well as 'églises'.

Not surprisingly in the light of the above, the human face of the Church, the clergy, fares none too well in *Le Feu*. As has been shown in Part one of this thesis, Barbusse's anticlericalism is a phenomenon that can be traced back as far as the poetry of his youth. In his first novel, *Les Suppliants*, as in his poetry, it is largely implicit, a logical extension of the anti-Christian atheism of Maximilien Desanzac. Barbusse's anticlericalism takes on more obvious contours in his depiction of the aggressive and ultra-doctrinaire Roman Catholic priest in *L'Enfer* but even here the perspective is

generally metaphysical. With *Le Feu*, the balance changes: the author's anticlericalism is implicit and explicit, intertextual and extratextual, socio-political in nature and designedly polemical.

It is at its most palpable in 'La grande colère', during which Volpatte, who has just returned from a period of convalescence, fulminates against the legions of 'embusqués' who populate the rear lines. This leads to a general discussion about the inequalities operating in the war (a microcosm of the inequalities operating in capitalist society in peacetime). With regard to medical personnel, somebody remarks that they are almost all priests, especially at the rear: 'parce que, tu sais, les curés qui portent le sac, j'en ai pas vu lourd, et toi?' His interlocutor replies: 'Moi, non plus. Dans les journaux, mais pas ici' (p. 169). Even a sympathetic commentator such as the former combatant Meyer sees in these remarks the hand of the author and suggests that they can be ascribed to authorial anticlericalism: 'On y respire un relent d'antycléricisme, qui n'était pas vraiment de mise au front [...] ces affirmations un peu sommaires sont peut-être liées à ce qu'il pense de Dieu et qui se résume ainsi à travers ses camarades.'⁵¹

With regard to this particular point, less sympathetic commentators were altogether more trenchant in their criticism of what they considered to be Barbusse's politically motivated tendentiousness. In the columns of the right-wing *L'Echo de Paris*, a senator linked the observations made by the unnamed soldiers in *Le Feu* with 'Une certaine presse [qui] accuse actuellement nos prêtres soldats de lâcheté et d'embuscage.' He went on to discredit the current version of 'la rumeur infâme' (which held that while many of France's clerics had been drafted into the army, only very few found themselves anywhere near the Front),⁵² by heaping praise upon the recently published work of the academic J. Guilloud, *Clergé et congrégations au service de la France*. Guilloud's study gave a full account of the activities of France's 'clergé combattant', as well as the

dangers faced by the ‘prêtres brancardiers’ and the ‘ecclésiastiques infirmiers du Front, dont beaucoup sont morts à la tâche’.⁵³

Aigrain, writing in the *Revue du clergé français* in April 1917, gave short shrift to Barbusse’s views about the ‘sac au dos’ question.⁵⁴ The abbé Eugène Sirech, ‘Aumônier en chef des lycées de Lyon’, in a letter to Barbusse dated 25 April 1917, reproached the author in no uncertain terms for his ‘insultes à la religion et à ses ministres’, adding that his novel was grist to the mill of those who were busy propagating ‘la rumeur infâme’.⁵⁵ At a conference organized in the spring of 1918 by the French Military Mission to the United States of America, Major Léon Eckenfelder, a member of the Mission, simply accused Barbusse of lying: ‘Je dois dire que, dans tous les bataillons d’infanterie que j’ai connus [and he had known plenty after three years’ active service at the Front, including a spell at Verdun], j’ai vu bien des prêtres sac au dos.’ He went on to mention a young priest who was much loved by his comrades in a company of machine-gunners, and a ‘prêtre brancardier’ who was killed whilst picking up bodies on the battlefield.⁵⁶

The text of Eckenfelder’s speech was translated back into French and published in the French press in the summer of 1918. In his reply, Barbusse refuted Eckenfelder’s accusations and stated his position in the clearest possible terms:

Le conférencier de Chicago m’accuse d’avoir dit que peu de prêtres portent le sac. Je maintiens formellement cette affirmation. S’il y a beaucoup de prêtres mobilisés en France, ils le sont, soit comme aumôniers, soit comme infirmiers à l’avant, et ceux-là — très peu nombreux du reste — ne portent pas le sac du fantassin. Demandez aux soldats combattants si les aumôniers et les infirmiers qu’ils entrent voient subissent les mêmes dangers et les mêmes fatigues qu’eux! Mais l’on trouve un grand nombre de prêtres dès qu’on s’éloigne de la première ligne; parmi les brancardiers divisionnaires (qui vont des deuxièmes aux troisièmes lignes), le personnel des ambulances, et surtout celui des hôpitaux de l’intérieur. Dans tous les séjours que j’ai faits à l’hôpital, j’en ai été entouré; les infirmiers, les vagues-mestres, et même les cyclistes et les concierges étaient des prêtres. Je dis et je maintiens donc qu’il est impossible à un homme de bonne foi de prétendre que, pendant cette guerre, le clergé mobilisé a partagé la vie et les souffrances des simples soldats.⁵⁷

Of course, once again, it is impossible to say with certainty whether Barbusse was being entirely honest here. In his defence, it must be pointed out that a sergeant major stretcher-bearer attached to the 13th Regiment sent him a letter of support dated 29 June 1918, in which he stated that he had read Barbusse's counter-claims in *Le Pays* of 26 June: 'Que vous reproche-t-on en particulier? Osé dire que les prêtres sont rares dans la tranchée. [...] Dans mon secteur, par exemple, nous comptons 4 prêtres: 1 aumônier (dit volontaire), 1 infirmier, 1 brancardier, 1 téléphoniste. Et c'est tout.' If Barbusse wanted figures for other regiments, added his correspondent, these would be supplied in due course.⁵⁸

Even though it would seem, then, that Barbusse was not necessarily lying about his personal experience of the clergy whilst a soldier, as Eckenfelder contended, it is curious that he should have neglected to mention the abbé Boulet, a former comrade-in-arms, whom he referred to three times in his letters from the Front to his wife (*Lettres*, pp. 177, 180, 227), and with whom Barbusse corresponded both during periods of convalescence and after his demobilization in 1917 on grounds of ill health.⁵⁹ It is more curious still that Barbusse should have got involved in the 'sac au dos' debate without first checking the facts. Lys was quick to point these out: 'la connaissance des lois de son pays eût appris à M. Barbusse que depuis 1905, le Recrutement militaire ignore totalement le caractère ecclésiastique, et que les "curés" des classes s'échelonnant de 1905 à 1918 portent le sac'.⁶⁰ In accordance with the military laws of 15 July 1889 and 21 March 1905, French priests of this earlier generation had no option in the army but to serve in the 'Service de santé': 'Ainsi les prêtres infirmiers et brancardiers, à l'arrière et sur le front, furent-ils environ 13.000, soit plus de la moitié des prêtres mobilisés en 1914.'⁶¹ The other twelve thousand, 'prêtres des classes 1905 et suivantes, et ceux qui n'avaient jamais appartenu aux cadres concordataires, se trouvaient sous le régime du droit commun; ils étaient des combattants comme les autres.'⁶² Thus, even before the

Sixte-Quenin amendment (the so-called 'loi sac au dos') came into force in February 1917, a development which saw the 'prêtres concordataires' attached to army corps other than the 'Service de santé', French priests carried 'le sac', and fought and died at the Front.

Lys was right to insist that some two and a half thousand priests would not have died by that point in the conflict, had they not been 'où l'on souffre, où l'on est brave, et où l'on meure.'⁶³ The precise figure for the number of French priests who had died by the end of the war has been given as 4,618 in a recent study,⁶⁴ a figure for the number of priests mobilized at the outset, and during the course of the war has also been established.⁶⁵ Clerical participation in the war and death, *en masse*, is now accepted as an historical fact. Lys and others saw it as such, then, while the war was still raging. That Barbusse argued otherwise both in his novel and in the French press can, in all probability, be ascribed to his personal experience, to some extent. But to read the newspapers of that age is to be aware of a striking polarization between those on the Left, who claimed that French priests were only too happy to leave the fighting to others, and those on the Right, who sought to defend the Church from this and other versions of the 'rumeur infâme'. Given his general outlook on religious matters and both the politicization and radicalization of his views as a result of his war experience, Barbusse was bound to side in the 'sac au dos' debate with *Le Bonnet rouge*, *La Lanterne* and *La Dépêche de Toulouse*, in opposition to the likes of *L'Echo de Paris*, *La Revue Hebdomadaire* and *La Croix*.

Thus, while Barbusse may well have written in *Le Feu* and elsewhere as he thought he had seen for himself, he did not have the objectivity required to place his personal experience in a broader context; and so there is a strong sense in which the 'sac au dos' remarks made by the soldiers of *Le Feu* are an example of a polemical writer's having seen what he wanted to see. Ultimately, since the setting for almost all of the

action of the novel is the Front, and the author believed — or wanted his readers to believe — that priests were conspicuous by their absence from it, it is hardly surprising that they do not feature very greatly.⁶⁶

Indeed, only one is developed at all, namely the ‘sergent infirmier’ the narrator encounters in ‘Le poste de secours’. Given the references to Catholicism and the matching physical descriptions, this member of the clergy would appear to be the ‘frère mariste’ with a ‘silhouette d’hippopotame barbu’, whom Marthereau criticizes in ‘Le barda’ for his shiftiness around the members of the narrator’s squad (p. 239). The narrator comments directly on this figure himself in ‘Le poste de secours’, in which, it will be remembered, the cleric is seen removing pendent entrails from overhead beams (see p. 127). Here, it is the association between the Church and the Nation State-in-arms that strikes the narrator most about the representative of the former when he is hit in the throat by a stray bullet: ‘Je me rappelle la fois où il m’a tant exaspéré avec son explication sur la Sainte Vierge et la France. Il me paraissait impossible qu’il emît sincèrement ces idées-là’ (p. 369).

At this point in the narrative, one might have expected a diatribe aimed at the unholy alliance that the ‘Union sacrée’ is deemed to be. What the reader finds, however, is that the dying priest is treated with an even greater degree of warmth and respect than is either Ursleur in *Les Suppliants* or the Roman Catholic priest in *L’Enfer*. As the blood seeps out of the stricken ‘sergent infirmier’, the narrator remarks: ‘je songe que cet homme était bon. Il avait un cœur pur et sensible’ (p. 369). He reproaches himself for having occasionally abused the man for ‘l’étroitesse de ses idées’ and ‘une certaine discrétion ecclésiastique qu’il apportait en tout!’ He recalls, with joy, having once refrained from giving him another piece of his mind. ‘Cet homme dont tout me séparait, avec quelle force je l’ai regretté!’ is his final word on the matter. The priest’s ideas may

have seemed insincere but he has just died sincerely enough, and his ideas ‘ne sont que des détails à côté de son cœur qui est là par terre, en ruine, dans ce coin de géhenne.’

It is doubtful that Lys and Aigrain were right in their assertion that Barbusse included this episode to redress the balance after the remarks about the lack of priests at the Front.⁶⁷ The emphatic claims Barbusse made in June 1918 militate against such an interpretation (see pp. 135-36). Besides, in his ‘Carnet de guerre’, he reminded himself of the need to proceed carefully in his treatment of his fictional cleric: ‘Attention. Le bon curé. Très important. Il faut qu’il soit sympathique, mais pas hypocrite. Il est toujours de bonne foi’ (p. 470). On the evidence of this reminder, as well as the lack of hypocrisy in the priests of all the novels that Barbusse had written by this point, one would have to conclude that the author both admired people who had the courage of their convictions, however much he might disagree with them; and that, in a paradoxical acceptance of one of the tenets of Christian morality, Barbusse hated the sin but not the sinner.

He was also not the kind of man to avoid a fight. To judge by the war-time letters he sent to his wife, Barbusse was well aware that he was asking for trouble by including for publication in the initial, serialized version of *Le Feu* the passages on the wounded airman (*Lettres*, p. 227), the ‘sergent infirmier’ (*Lettres*, p. 229), and the soldiers’ dialogue on the impossibility of God (*Lettres*, pp. 231, 232, 242). The lattermost, together with the ‘sac au dos’ remarks and the profanities, were kept out of the columns of *L’Œuvre* by Gustave Téry.⁶⁸ In his negotiations with Téry over the rights to publish *Le Feu* in book form, Barbusse insisted upon the inclusion of all the suppressed passages and profanities as an indispensable condition (*Lettres*, p. 239). When the novel eventually appeared under the impress of Flammarion (largely because its directors, the Fischer brothers, had guaranteed that the book would be out in time to be considered for the Prix Goncourt of 1916), it did so containing all of the material that Barbusse knew was going to prove offensive to religious readers.

The religious backlash was not long in coming. ‘Donc M. Barbusse en veut à Dieu’, wrote Lys, ‘Dieu se défendra: Soyons bien tranquilles.’⁶⁹ Eckenfelder sought, and was granted leave by his superiors at the French Military Mission to the United States of America to mount a propaganda campaign against Barbusse and *Le Feu* both in America and in France.⁷⁰ However, the war within a war that followed the publication of *Le Feu* by Flammarion is best encapsulated by Barbusse’s ill-tempered clash with the abbé Sirech, who, as has already been noted, wrote to Barbusse in the spring of 1917 to express his contempt for the author’s contribution to the ‘rumeur infâme’. Sirech stressed that the Church would not take Barbusse’s insults lying down: ‘l’Église et ses prêtres [...] se consoleront entre eux de vos outrages.’⁷¹ Sirech did not object to *Le Feu* and its author on merely religious grounds, however; his opposition was also ideological.

Indeed, he appears to have written to Barbusse primarily because of his concerns over the negative impact that he thought *Le Feu* likely to have on French morale, which aim he accused Barbusse of having: ‘vous avez beaucoup de peine à persuader ceux de vos lecteurs qui réfléchissent que vous n’avez pas voulu profiter de la guerre pour répandre dans les milieux populaires et militaires le poison de vos doctrines, et la morphine de vos théories par trop osées. [...] Votre livre lu avec foi, multipliera les défections militaires’. Sirech would like to have seen Barbusse fittingly punished for his perfidy: ‘si les conseils de guerre collent au mur un pauvre soldat qui refuse à sa patrie qui en a besoin le sacrifice de son sang, quel châtement méritez-vous [?]’ For his own part, Sirech undertook to denounce Barbusse at every opportunity, ‘par la plume et surtout par la parole’. If the cleric was throwing down the gauntlet, Barbusse was only too willing to pick it up.

In his long reply, Barbusse claimed the moral high ground as a combatant in the war, rejected the authority that Sirech’s religious status conferred upon him, and stressed his faith in secular ideals:

Au-dessus de vos outrages, au-dessus de vos paroles, au-dessus de vos principes et de vos idées et de votre religion, il y a une loi morale. Cette voix éternelle commande la justice pour tous les êtres vivants. C'est elle que j'écoute et que je pratique.[...]

Comment [...] osez-vous prétendre que cette foi active dans la plus haute et la plus pure des idées n'est pas conforme à la grandeur et à la sauvegarde présente et future de la France? C'est parce que j'y croyais [...] que j'ai fait, complètement et sans réserve, le sacrifice de ma vie [...].

C'est pourquoi, Monsieur, je ne suis pas ému et par votre violente et offensante prise à partie et par les menaces dont vous l'accompagnez [...] et si je souris des représailles que vous me dites vouloir organiser contre moi, c'est que je sais que rien n'arrêtera la marche du progrès dont je suis, avant toute chose, un humble mais passionné serviteur.⁷²

The matter did not end there.

In a second letter, dated 10 May 1917, Sirech expressed his admiration for Barbusse the soldier, whilst insisting that the credit he was due as such served only to make the work of Barbusse the writer all the more reprehensible. He reiterated his position in no uncertain terms: 'les doctrines de votre livre et surtout les commentaires qui les expliquent, restent à mes yeux un révoltant scandale'.⁷³ True to his word in his first letter, Sirech availed himself of an early opportunity to denounce *Le Feu* and its author publicly, the occasion being a memorial service held on 20 May 1917 at Notre Dame church, in Saint Etienne, at the request of the SAAE. In memory of former pupils who had perished in the war, Sirech called upon the congregation to weep 'sur ceux qui nous insultent':

Oui, il est à cette heure des écrivains scandaleux sur lesquels inopérante est la censure, profiteurs sans pudeur de la guerre, dont la plume enfiellée autant que mercenaire répand dans le pays, et aussi, hélas! dans les tranchées d'abominables livres qui salissent tout ce qui est respectable: l'héroïsme, l'esprit de sacrifice, le patriotisme, la frontière, le sacerdoce, l'Église, la religion. Pleurez sur celui [...] qui a jeté le discrédit sur les sentiments qui nous ont fait accepter le sacrifice de nos vies, mêlé aux flots de notre sang, la bave de ses malsaines critiques.

The speech was published in the May issue of the Society's monthly circular, with a footnote to indicate that the 'écrivains scandaleux' and the 'livres qui salissent tout ce qui est respectable' were Henri Barbusse and *Le Feu*, respectively.⁷⁴

Barbusse was livid when the text was eventually brought to his attention later that summer. In a letter to his wife, he railed against Sirech, ‘ce ratichon sonore’, ‘ce jésuite’, ‘cet enjuponné’ (*Lettres*, pp. 255-56), and stated that he would seek redress. He was eventually given satisfaction when the Society in question published his refutation in the November issue of its circular. The most significant passage for the purposes of this thesis is the one in which Barbusse dealt with religious matters as contained in *Le Feu*:

Certes, il est exact que j’attaque l’Église et la réaction, je ne m’en cache pas. Vous m’avez déjà écrit à ce sujet et je vous ai longuement répondu, en vous donnant mes raisons, basées sur le véritable idéal moral, dont, à mon avis, le parti religieux s’écarte par son attitude dans la question sociale.’⁷⁵

Unfortunately, Barbusse did not elucidate upon this remark but previous analysis in this chapter has already shown that by the time Barbusse wrote *Le Feu* he had come to think of the ‘parti religieux’ as a political opponent, a bulwark not just of the ‘Union sacrée’ but of the political status quo more generally. The ‘adversaires éternels’ (p. 429); ‘les puissants héréditaires, debout ça et là par-dessus la prostration du genre humain’ (p. 429); those who say ‘“Baissez la tête et croyez en Dieu!”’ (p. 431) are all considered to be natural allies of the priests. In his final address to his fellow soldiers, the narrator takes to task the conservatives, the traditionalists, and ‘tous les prêtres qui cherchent à vous exciter et à vous endormir, pour que rien ne change, avec la morphine de leur paradis’ (p. 431). When Barbusse, through one of the unnamed soldiers at the end of the narrative, goes on to declare that those who resist the kind of appeals for self-sacrifice for ‘Dieu’ and ‘Patrie’ that Sirech and others were calling for would be ‘maudit’ and ‘mis sur le bûcher’ because the latter ‘ont créé autour du panache une religion aussi méchante, aussi bête, et aussi malfaisante que l’autre!’ (p. 434), he is delivering more than a merely atheistic, anticlerical message; he is identifying the Church as an integral part of the conservative barrier to socio-political reform.

He reiterated the point in the baldest possible terms in a notorious pamphlet entitled ‘Pourquoi te bats-tu’, which was published in *Les Nations* at the height of the

dispute with Sirech, in June 1917.⁷⁶ Barbusse's somewhat enigmatic statement to Sirech about his opposition to the Church because of its failings with regard to 'la question sociale' becomes clearer when read against certain passages from this pamphlet. Addressing the soldiery of France in the second person singular, he told his readers to reject the notion that the masses needed a religion, because religions 'sont dangereuses à faire intervenir dans la conduite des hommes, parce que absurdes et discutables; et ce qu'on base sur elles est compromis et menacé par leur fragilité.' He added:

Elles présentent aussi un autre péril: c'est que très pures dans leurs débuts historiques, alors qu'elles sortaient du cœur et de l'esprit de leurs sublimes fondateurs, elles se sont ensuite modifiées aux mains de leurs dirigeants; elles ont quitté le domaine personnel et sentimental; elles sont devenues les instruments d'une propagande sociale très déterminée, elles se sont changées en des partis politiques d'une orientation caractérisée: Regarde autour de toi, partout. Lis deux journaux opposés, écoute deux orateurs. Tu verras que le parti religieux est toujours, sans exception aucune, dans le bloc de la réaction et du retour au passé, pour la simple raison que la religion vit d'autorité et non de lumière, qu'elle a besoin, pour se maintenir, de l'asservissement qu'elle appelle "l'ordre", de l'acquiescement obscur; et aussi parce que ses représentants ont un intérêt personnel à conserver des privilèges et des avantages temporels contraires à la libération des multitudes.

There can be little doubt that for the Barbusse of 1917 the social was the political, and that the Church had come to be seen as belonging to the conservative camp in Barbusse's dualistic universe.⁷⁷

At this point, it must be stressed that *Le Feu* is not a protest novel about the evils of religion *per se*, nor are the Church and its representatives the main targets of Barbusse's ire. To suggest otherwise would be to distort the text and Barbusse's thinking. Religion is only one strand in the novel and in the politico-literary controversy it caused. Nevertheless, it is an important strand, and one that might have been pointed up more sharply by contemporaries and subsequent readers had *Les Suppliants* and *L'Enfer* achieved anything like the same commercial success as *Le Feu*. A particularly important element in the religious content of, and dimensions to Barbusse's third novel is the

concept of the prophetic, which has received relatively extensive attention from commentators and scholars.

As far as Barbusse's intentions are concerned, Barbusse's war-time letters to his wife are a precious source of information. In one letter, he informed Hélyonne that the initial success of the first instalments of the serialized version of *Le Feu* had won him a captive audience amongst his fellow combatants: 'je fais, je l'avoue, de la propagande. J'ai la grande joie de constater combien tout ce que je dis sur l'Internationale [...] trouve écho dans ces êtres'. The reaction, when he talked to his comrades 'des choses auxquelles j'ai pensé toute ma vie' was most encouraging: 'les soldats écoutent, croient et disent: "C'est vrai tout de même!"' (*Lettres*, pp. 234-35). In another letter, he struck a typical, quasi-religious note: 'c'est vraiment comme une espèce d'apostolat que j'accomplis sur tous ceux qui m'entourent, ceux qui sont des vrais soldats combattants.'⁷⁸ In a close analysis of the genesis of *Le Feu* in conjunction with Barbusse's war-time letters, Michel has shown how Barbusse was emboldened by the approving reactions and encouragement of his comrades to make ever more daring predictions as *Le Feu* developed.⁷⁹

This is not to say that the prophetic qualities of *Le Feu* become palpable only towards the climax of the novel; on the contrary, they pervade it from start to finish. Given Barbusse's nature, his stated ambition to play the part of the great secular prophet of his age, and the prophetic strain of his poetry and his first two novels, this comes as no surprise. As with the term 'apocalyptic', the word 'prophetic' has often been applied to *Le Feu* and its author, with neither elucidation nor qualification.⁸⁰ As pointed out in the brief overview of the prophetic in connection with Barbusse's poetry (see pp. 35-36), such assessments are problematic, in that the prophetic is a religious term in origin, dating back to the Hebrew prophets and beyond. As a prophet is, strictly speaking, an interpreter and communicator of the word of God (or a god), the Barbusse of *Le Feu* can

be considered to be a prophet only in the sense that he passes judgement on the present and sees the future, not in the light of a higher authority, but in the light of a secular, humanist, rationalist view of the world that has acquired a socio-political edge in the trenches of the First World War.

Thus, as Cruickshank has rightly pointed out, Barbusse makes use of (and subverts) prophecy as a literary mode,⁸¹ his message is not the word of a divine, superhuman agent, but rather a 'cri' from one man to other men, the aim of which is to make others aware of the folly of the present, as well as the path that must be followed if a better, more equitable future is to be had by the masses:

Mais les trente millions d'esclaves jetés les uns sur les autres par le crime et l'erreur, dans la guerre de boue, lèvent leurs faces humaines où germe enfin une volonté. L'avenir est dans les mains des esclaves, et on voit bien que le vieux monde sera changé par l'alliance que bâtiront un jour entre eux ceux dont le nombre et la misère sont infinis. (p. 27)

It is not at all clear to whom this prophecy, made right at the end of the opening chapter, 'La vision', is to be attributed. The unnamed first-person narrator does not begin his own account until the second chapter, 'La terre'. The whole of the first chapter, seemingly written from a third-person perspective, is italicized, and the passage from which the quotation is taken is a continuation of a narrative punctuated by four items of direct speech, the first of which is enigmatic in its use of the associative form 'on' ('*On voit, en bas, des choses qui rampent!*', p. 27). The observations and predictions of the first chapter, which is more of a prologue than a genuine contribution to the narrative, are made in a sanatorium by '*hommes intelligents et instruits, approfondis par la souffrance et la réflexion, détachés des choses et presque de la vie, éloignés du reste du genre humain que s'ils étaient déjà la postérité*' (p. 24). With the exception of the final part, this would pass for a good description of the author himself, who wrote much of what evolved into *Le Feu* in a series of military hospitals recovering from the various ailments

he contracted in the trenches.⁸² There is, then, a strong sense in which the initial, and also ultimate prophecy can be attributed to Barbusse himself.

The character in the novel most clearly associated with the concept of prophecy is corporal Bertrand. Shortly after the assault in 'Le feu', there is an exchange between the narrator and Bertrand, the latter of whom is in pensive mood. His words, which both pass judgement on the present and look forward to a just future, are nothing if not prophetic. Lest the reader should miss the point, the comparison is drawn immediately:

— L'avenir! s'écria-t-il tout d'un coup comme un prophète. De quels yeux ceux qui vivront après nous et dont le progrès — qui vient comme la fatalité — aura enfin équilibré les consciences, regarderont-ils ces tueries et ces exploits [...].

L'œuvre de l'avenir sera d'effacer ce présent-ci, et de l'effacer plus encore qu'on ne pense, de l'effacer comme quelque chose d'abominable et de honteux. (pp. 327-28).

He goes on to make an oblique remark about the truth of this last statement, or rather the future truth of it, when it will be found written amongst the truths contained in 'toute une vraie bible', a comment which implies that the Judaeo-Christian Bible contains a number of falsehoods, or is in its entirety a falsehood. At the present time, he opines, the truth, 'cette parole sainte n'est qu'un blasphème!' (p. 328). Paradoxically, he concludes his prophecy by informing the narrator that he had once told the members of his squad that he himself believed in prophecies, 'pour les faire marcher.' Whose prophecies they were and the precise nature of them is not divulged. What *is* known is that this particular prophecy invokes Karl Liebknecht.

In a brief outline of what one would take to be the above dialogue between Bertrand and the narrator, Barbusse, in his 'Carnet de guerre', noted that he, the author, should 'Décharger, élaguer la conversation, qui doit être bibliquement simple et essentielle' (p. 449). A few pages further on, in a section entitled 'Prophéties', he referred to a discussion about the likelihood of a French victory before the onset of winter (1915-1916) and the possibility of predicting the future: 'On me demande mon

avis. On a confiance en moi. Je dis carrément: mais parfaitement. Des prédictions de ce genre se sont réalisées. C'est promis' (p. 456). One wonders whether this was a case of Barbusse's telling his fellow infantrymen that he believed in prophecies, 'pour les faire marcher'; and whether the novel as a whole cannot be interpreted in this way.

Suffice it to say that *Le Feu*, like Barbusse's earlier novels, is replete with the cries of the secular prophet (pp. 95, 297, 365, 420). They are particularly resonant in the diluvian setting of the final chapter (the narrator having assumed Bertrand's mantle): 'le cri de l'homme qui avait l'air de vouloir s'envoler éveilla d'autres cris: — Il ne faut plus qu'il y ait de guerre après celle-là!' (p. 417); 'ils bougent et crient, les yeux, les bras et les poings tendus vers le ciel d'où tombent le jour et la tempête' (p. 435). The difference to the earlier novels and to the poetry with regard to the prophetic is that Barbusse as author, and the various prophetic figures in the novel, deliver a message which has shifted from the largely metaphysical plane to that of the largely socio-political. While the earlier works are essentially an indictment of traditional forms of religion, *Le Feu* is an indictment both of a socio-economic system that is held to produce war, and of an archaic, stratified society in which the levers of power are seen to be in the hands of a privileged few that include the Church and its representatives. Prior to the war, Barbusse the secular prophet had striven in his novels and poetry to provide an alternative form of faith in his pseudo-religious cult of the human. During the war, he attempted to do likewise with the republican ideals to which he had long subscribed, the cataclysmic war situation having pointed up the importance of politics in human affairs.

It is surely no coincidence that the religious language that is such a distinctive feature of Barbusse's earlier work and largely absent from the text of *Le Feu* reappears in the all-important final chapter. Speaking of equality, which can be taken as the foundation on which the philosophy of the mature Barbusse was built, the narrator states: 'Le principe de l'égalité des droits de chaque créature et de la volonté *sainte* est

impeccable, et il doit être invincible — et il amènera tous les progrès, tous, avec une force vraiment *divine*' (p. 426; my italics).⁸³ The full weight of this prediction was measured by Roure. Instead of 'une Providence sage, l'espérance en un Dieu juste', Barbusse was proposing republican ideals: 'Voilà la religion de l'avenir! Voilà l'Évangile socialiste, édition 1916-1917.'⁸⁴ The influential critic of *Le Temps* also expressed misgivings: 'Cette terminologie religieuse est-elle bien à sa place? [...] cette volonté collective n'est pas sainte *a priori*, et quoi qu'elle décide: le droit divin des rois ne doit pas être remplacé par le droit divin des foules.'⁸⁵

Be all of this as it may, *Le Feu* struck a deep chord with the general public and made Barbusse, known only to 'le tout Paris' prior to the war, an extremely high-profile figure and a rallying point for combatants (soon to be former combatants) in particular. Reader-response to *Le Feu* in the form of letters was immediate, massive, and generally very positive. Barbusse alluded to it often (*Lettres*, pp. 236-37, 250, 251) and drew from it a moral authority with which to confound his right-wing critics.⁸⁶ In May 1917, he told Hélyonne that he had 'un devoir à accomplir et il faut parler', and without delay, because 'les grands événements actuels rendent toutes les réformes possibles, et ensuite parce que la vogue du *Feu* me donne à présent la certitude d'être entendu.' His aim was to take advantage of this opportunity, 'pour améliorer la vie sociale et préserver l'avenir' (*Lettres*, p. 253). All his adult life, Barbusse had longed to address the masses, and the success of *Le Feu* made it possible, and imperative for him to do so: 'De tous les points de la palpitante et mouvante frontière actuelle, ils sont venus à moi.'⁸⁷ The soldiers who wrote to him could not possibly have realized how gratifying the contents of some of their letters would have been for this writer in whom the desire to play the part of prophet had long been burning. One described him as a 'chef de file' and added: 'Votre *Feu* a été la révélation, le messie attendu [...] la doctrine que vous prêchez, c'est la

véritable loi humaine'.⁸⁸ Another wrote: 'vous êtes notre guide car vous vous êtes révélé comme étant le grand maître que l'on doit écouter.'⁸⁹

The specialists are in agreement about the prophetic in relation to Henri Barbusse and the work with which his reputation is now chiefly associated. According to Weems, Barbusse 'welcomed the return to his role as prophet and artist of which he had dreamed as a young poet.'⁹⁰ Relinger notes that 'Barbusse a trouvé sa voie. Il est enfin le prêcheur de vérité, le prophète qu'il a toujours voulu devenir.'⁹¹ As far back as he could remember, writes Barbusse's biographer, Baudorre, 'il a toujours gardé, au plus profond de lui-même, une image qui résumait tous les rêves: celle du crieur, du prophète [...]. Avec *Le Feu*, il a enfin trouvé, presque malgré lui, la parole de vérité qu'il a toujours cherchée.'⁹² Indeed, in unimaginable circumstances, Barbusse the would-be prophet had become the prophet armed, and as such, he had finally found a mass audience to whom he could preach. If this is the most salient of all the religious aspects of and dimensions to *Le Feu*, its importance should not obscure the fact, as this chapter has shown, that the prophetic is just one element in a continuing critique of religion and quest for faith, the perspective of which altered as a result of Barbusse's politicization during the war. The full extent of this change in perspective is evident in Barbusse's next novel, *Clarté*.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, II, pp. 249-50.

² See Barbusse, *Le Feu* (Flammarion-Livre de Poche, 1965; first published Flammarion, 1916), p. 327. All subsequent page references, given in parenthesis in the text, are to this edition.

³ Relinger, 'Le Rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', p. 201. See also Relinger's short study, 'Henri Barbusse et la Révolution d'Octobre'; and Baudorre, 'Barbusse en 1919: De Wilson à Lénine'.

⁴ Cruickshank, *Variations on Catastrophe*, p. 85.

⁵ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 83, 85.

⁶ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p. 186.

⁷ King, 'Henri Barbusse: *Le Feu* and the Crisis of Social Realism', p. 48.

⁸ Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 119.

⁹ Baird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, p. ix.

¹⁰ See *La Bible de Jérusalem*, pp. 2061-63; Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel*, p. 174.

¹¹ For the characteristic features of apocalyptic literature with regard to content, see Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel*, pp. 174-75; Epstein, *Judaism*, p. 104; Browning, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 20; Gabel, Wheeler, and York, *The Bible as Literature*, pp. 159-60, 165.

¹² Browning, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Bible*, pp. 19-20.

¹³ See Epstein, *Judaism*, p. 104.

¹⁴ See Rogerson, *An Introduction to the Bible*, p. 64.

¹⁵ See note 13.

¹⁶ According to Epstein, *Judaism* (p.109, note 7), Daniel was included only because, ultimately, he follows the prophets in his general approach to the problem of justice, stating that sinners, too, will be saved.

¹⁷ See Davidson and Leaney, *Biblical Criticism*, p. 327.

¹⁸ See O'Brien, 'Politics and the Novel: A Study of Three Novels by Henri Barbusse', pp. 30-32, 66 note 14.

¹⁹ Author's italics; likewise for all subsequent quotations from chapter one of the novel.

²⁰ The use of the word 'révélation' is in itself interesting, given that an 'apocalypse' is, by definition, a 'revelation', an 'unveiling', or an 'uncovering'.

²¹ In 'Les écrivains et l'utopie', Barbusse wrote: 'il n'y a au monde que deux partis politiques: celui qui veut modeler la vie selon ces principes [logique, justice, raison, morale], et celui qui en fait intervenir d'autres: l'autorité, la tradition, le droit divin, l'asservissement au passé.' Reproduced in *Paroles* (p. 30).

²² With regard to Barbusse's familiarity with Marxist thought and theory after he turned his back on traditional forms of democracy, see chapter eight of this thesis.

²³ See also 4.7, 12.14. The eagle represents the spirit, spiritual endeavour, ascension and aspiration in Christian symbolism. In apocalypses, it is there to pass judgement on the damned by ejecting them from the nest. See Cooper, *The Cassell Dictionary of Christianity* (p. 78). Together with the lion, the bull and the man, it is one of the four beasts of the Apocalypse (Revelation 4.7). Direct quotations from Daniel and Revelation are given in the French (as in *La Bible de Jérusalem*) in order to illustrate the similarities between the biblical sources and *Le Feu*.

²⁴ See also pp. 199, 323, 345. For a comparative analysis, see Daniel 9.26 and Revelation 11.13.

²⁵ Compare with Daniel 9.18, 12.11.

²⁶ See also p. 317. Compare with Revelation 9.1, 11.5, 17.18, 20.1.

²⁷ Compare with Daniel 9.26.

²⁸ For thunder, compare with Revelation 4.5, 8.5, 11.19, 16.18, 19.6; hail, 8.6, 11.19, 16.18; storms ('orage'), 14.2; and earthquakes, 11.13, 11.19, 16.18.

²⁹ In a letter to his wife shortly before the publication of the novel in book form, Barbusse wrote: '[...] ce titre se met à me plaire. Il indique la gravité du fléau qui opprime à présent le monde.' Barbusse, *Lettres* (p. 235). Subsequent page references to this source are given in parenthesis in the text.

³⁰ Revelation often refers to sulphur as a metaphor for divine punishment. See 9.16, 9.18, 14.10, 20.10, 21.8.

³¹ Stromberg, 'The Intellectuals and the Coming of War in 1914', p. 119.

³² Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, II, p. 62. References in the text to the former can be found on pp. 144, 152, 279, 328, 340, 365, 409; to the latter, on pp. 26, 28, 144, 285, 365, 409.

³³ 'Pourquoi *Le Feu* ne s'appelle-t-il pas *L'Eau*?' wondered Grix, with good reason. 'Trois livres de la troisième année de la guerre' (p. 676). Interestingly enough, it is in Revelation that the advent of a post-apocalypse paradise is preceded by the disappearance of the sea: 'car le premier ciel et première terre ont disparu, et de mer, il n'y en a plus' (21.1).

³⁴ See the Book of Genesis, 9.11-16.

³⁵ I am grateful to Dr Brian Levy for pointing out that the use Barbusse makes of apocalypticism is even more subversively antireligious than in the terms stated, since God is shown to be worse than dead, in other words, a breaker of his own covenant — the very basis of Judaeo-Christian faith in the Lord: no more annihilation, no more floods; and yet the Great Flood has returned in the shape of the deluge of the Great War.

³⁶ 'Les cléricaux sont archimontés contre moi. Je crois que s'ils avaient ma peau ils seraient bien contents' (*Lettres*, p. 259). Typically, Barbusse did not qualify the remark.

Earlier that year, he informed Hélyonne that the book had met with a favourable response amongst certain members of the clergy: 'Il [Edmond Rostand] a vu des cléricaux notoires emballés pour le livre, et cela le frappe beaucoup' (*Lettres*, p. 250). Evidently, the clerical reaction to *Le Feu* was more nuanced than Barbusse indicated. For a detailed analysis, see my article, 'Henri Barbusse et les cléricaux à la lumière du *Feu*'.

³⁷ FHB, *Naf* 16536, f. 344.

³⁸ The only indication of an anterior religiosity is an allusion to Farfadet's communion (p. 84) and this may well be ironic.

³⁹ See note 37.

⁴⁰ See Audoin-Rouzeau, *14-18: Les Combattants des tranchées*, p. 95; Huss, 'Virilité et religion dans la France de 1914-1918', p. 115; Mayeur, 'La vie religieuse en France', pp. 184-85.

⁴¹ See Guéno and Laplume (eds), *Paroles de Poilus*, pp. 21, 24, 59, 64, 81, 104, 107, 138.

⁴² Lys, *A propos d'un livre*, p. 8. Roure, in '*Le Feu*', accused Barbusse of inserting this passage in order to dash the last hope of France's soldiery. He also described the author as an 'instituteur primaire selon la formule combiste' (p. 358).

⁴³ For examples of the former, see pp. 48, 56, 85, 115, 137, 138, 188, 220, 318, 319, 332, 341, 365, 368, 391, 394; the latter, pp. 100, 104, 151, 153, 154, 195, 261, 363. In the words of the anonymous reviewer: '*Le Feu* contient, hors des idées religieuses, des mots grossiers semés un peu partout à travers ses pages, qui sont des péchés graves envers Dieu, mais [...] *Le Feu* est grossier parce que vrai'. See note 37.

⁴⁴ In *Lettres*, Barbusse lets fly with the expansive 'Bougri de Bougra de Nom de Dia!' (p. 236).

⁴⁵ Years later, in *Judas*, Barbusse wrote of Christianity: ‘C’est une religion menaçante [...] avec sa prédestination, sa grâce despotique [...] et son Dieu unique qui n’est même pas international’ (p. 213).

⁴⁶ Given as ‘X ...’, on 12 May 1915 (*Lettres*, p. 114).

⁴⁷ In the text of *Le Feu*, the narrator reports seeing a ‘débâcle d’ordures et de chair [...], des profusions d’images religieuses, de cartes postales, de brochures pieuses, de feuillets où des prières sont écrits en gothique’, but no letters (pp. 342-43).

⁴⁸ For an analysis of the war as a crusade, see Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 14-18, *retrouver la Guerre*, particularly chapter two, ‘La croisade’, pp. 108-95. For the propaganda war between the Catholic Church in France and Germany, see the publications of the CCPFE and the initial German reply, *La Guerre allemande et le catholicisme* (section 3.3 of the bibliography).

⁴⁹ Rolland, *Au-dessus de la mêlée*, pp. 80-81.

⁵⁰ See note 23.

⁵¹ Meyer, ‘*Le Feu* d’Henri Barbusse’, p. 45.

⁵² For more on the various versions of ‘la rumeur infâme’, see Mayeur, ‘La vie religieuse en France’, p. 182; Mayeur, ‘Le catholicisme français et la Première Guerre mondiale’, p. 380; Bordeaux, *La Preuve du sang*, p. lx; Becker, ‘Les Églises et la Guerre’, pp. 171, 179-80; Fontana, *Les Catholiques français*, pp. 150-52.

⁵³ Lamarzelle, ‘La rumeur infâme’.

⁵⁴ Aigrain, ‘Trois lauréats du Prix Goncourt’, p. 130.

⁵⁵ FHB, *Naf* 16485, f. 698.

⁵⁶ AAV, 44.105. This dossier contains a six-page typescript of Eckenfelder’s conference speech, entitled ‘Le livre d’Henri Barbusse exécuté à Chicago’.

⁵⁷ The article was published in various French newspapers, including *Le Populaire de Paris*, and was reproduced in *Paroles*, under the title of ‘Réponse à mes calomniateurs’ (pp. 68-69).

⁵⁸ FHB, *Naf* 16484, ff. 85-86.

⁵⁹ Various items of their correspondence are to be found in AAV, 43.105b. One letter from Boulet to Barbusse, dated 26 June 1917, is signed, ‘Joseph Boulet, Mitrailleur-cm 246^e régiment d’infanterie’. Here was one cleric, at least, who fought at Barbusse’s side, exposed to precisely the same extremes.

⁶⁰ Lys, *A propos d’un livre*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Mayeur, ‘La vie religieuse en France’, p. 182

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See note 60.

⁶⁴ Fontana, *Les Catholiques français*, p. 308.

⁶⁵ According to Fontana, in *Les Catholiques français*, 32,699 French priests were mobilized during the war, in addition to 12,554 nuns, making a total of 45,253 (p. 280). Mayeur gives the same figure, pointing out that some 25,000 priests were mobilized at the start of the campaign. Mayeur also mentions, on the Protestant side, 500 pastors, seminarists and evangelists. See Mayeur, ‘La vie religieuse en France’, pp. 181-83.

⁶⁶ Fontana is incorrect in his assertion that Barbusse describes the war, ‘sans jamais parler des aumôniers militaires et des prêtres soldats’ (*Les Catholiques français*, p. 295). Quite manifestly, he does, albeit sketchily, and casting them in a generally poor light. On p. 86 of the text, Volpatte and Fouillade relate how they had rescued a cowering clergyman, known to the troops as ‘l’ sergent Sacerdote’, from a shell hole.

⁶⁷ See Lys, *A propos d’un livre*, p. 6; Aigrain, ‘Trois lauréats du Prix Goncourt’, p. 131.

⁶⁸ *Le Feu* was serialized in ninety-three instalments in *L’Œuvre* from 3 August to 9 November 1916. The ‘sac au dos’ remark was omitted from instalment no. 37 (8

September 1916); the dialogue regarding God, from no. 77 (20 October 1916). It is worth noting that the novel was also serialized in *Le Progrès de Lyon*, in sixty-two instalments, from 3 December 1916 to 3 February 1917. Of the two items above, the former was omitted from instalment no. 22 (25 December 1916), while the latter was retained in instalment no. 51 (22 January 1917).

⁶⁹ Lys, *A propos d'un livre*, p. 9.

⁷⁰ I am grateful to the Archives du service historique de l'armée de terre for providing me with photocopies of dossiers on Eckenfelder, details of which can be found in section 2.1c of the bibliography .

⁷¹ See note 55 for this, and subsequent quotations.

⁷² Ibid, f. 699.

⁷³ Ibid, f. 701.

⁷⁴ Circular of the SAAE, May 1917, pp. 13-14.

⁷⁵ Same source, November 1917, p. 27.

⁷⁶ Reproduced in *Paroles*. See pp. 14-15 for subsequent quotations. Maurras was particularly indignant about this article and led a systematic campaign against it, throughout the summer of 1917, in the columns of *L'Action Française*.

⁷⁷ In 'Aux survivants', Barbusse again divided society, 'cette grande machine publique', into two opposing and mutually hostile camps, namely 'les socialistes, qui sont des républicains', and 'la coalition monarchique, cléricale, nationaliste qui représente un dogme exactement opposé'. Reproduced in *Paroles* (p. 75).

⁷⁸ FHB, *Naf* 16532, f. 158.

⁷⁹ See Michel, 'Henri Barbusse (1873-1935). Littérature et engagement', p. 91.

⁸⁰ See, for but a few examples, Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, pp, 83, 84; Hertz, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 48; Duclos and Fréville, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 38; Cimon, 'Les Romans d'Henri Barbusse: Une évolution vers la propagande', pp. 71, 74.

⁸¹ See note 4.

⁸² See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 60.

⁸³ It is surely no coincidence, either, that the one named character in the squad who survives the mud and mayhem to see the dawning of the new age goes by the name of Paradis. For use of the adjectives ‘saints’ and ‘sacrés’ as applied to republican ideals in the wake of *Le Feu*, see *Paroles*, pp. 18, 19, 24, and 49. In ‘Les lettres et le progrès’, Barbusse talked about what he called the ‘saintes aspirations du moment présent’.

⁸⁴ Roure, ‘*Le Feu*’, p. 358. Lys was most aggrieved by Barbusse’s attempt to replace ‘la morphine de notre Paradis’ with ‘“L’entente des immensités, la levée du peuple du monde”’. *A propos d’un livre* (p. 9).

⁸⁵ Souday, ‘Les livres. Henri Barbusse: *Le Feu*’.

⁸⁶ See, for example, ‘Reponse à mes calomniateurs’/ *Paroles*, p. 67; *Naf* 16485, f. 699; and Barbusse, ‘La polémique du *Feu*’, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁷ Barbusse, ‘Résurrection’/ *Paroles*, p. 52.

⁸⁸ *Naf* 16484, f. 139.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, f. 144.

⁹⁰ Weems, ‘The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse’, p. 136.

⁹¹ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 93.

⁹² Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 147.

CHAPTER FIVE
'NE RECONSTRUISEZ PAS LES ÉGLISES': *CLARTÉ* (1919)

Barbusse began work on *Clarté* exactly a year after he had embarked on *Le Feu*;¹ the novel was on sale to the general public from February 1919 onwards, very shortly after its completion. This would put the novel's gestation period at approximately two years, for the most part of which the Great War continued to rage. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that *Clarté* has many similarities to *Le Feu* in terms of its political orientation. It will be seen that Barbusse continued to seek faith in the general principles of socialist republicanism; and that he pinned his hopes for renewal on the lofty ideals of the American President Woodrow Wilson. As for religion, much of what was said in the previous chapter can be applied to *Clarté*. Like *Le Feu*, it is not a study of religion as such; but it does contain an important critique of Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular, from a socio-political rather than a metaphysical perspective. However, for all their similarities, it will be demonstrated that there is a difference between *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, the author working some of the religious material much harder in the latter novel, unable to refrain at times from making what read like direct authorial comments on his aims.

It will be seen, also, that there are substantive differences arising from the tripartite narrative structure of *Clarté* and the switch from the microcosm of a squad of front-line soldiers to the macrocosm of the society that put them there, as seen through the eyes of a first-person narrator who is a more conventional character in fictional terms than is the narrator of *Le Feu*. The intention is to show how these formal changes enabled Barbusse to widen the scope of his critique of religion, placing the Church, the clergy, and religious beliefs and practices in a much broader sociological context than he had hitherto. There will be a detailed analysis of the narrator's association with the Church, Jesus and Saint Paul; his attitude towards religion; his pseudo-religious

conversion; the volte-face this produces; and the launch of what has been described as his 'apostolic mission',² one which, paradoxically, sets out to dissuade others from embracing the illusory comforts of religion.

Clarté tells the story of the narrator, Simon Paulin, petit-bourgeois inhabitant of the imaginary provincial town of Viviers. He is the accountant for a local printer, and a man who, like the narrator of *L'Enfer*, has no great ambition in life. He marries his cousin, Marie, shortly after the death of the aunt who had raised him. Paulin and Marie eventually become estranged from one another as the former seeks satisfaction in a number of extramarital affairs. He accepts the political status quo and the existence of God as a matter of fact, until he is mobilized upon the outbreak of the First World War and nearly dies when a shell explodes in his immediate vicinity during an attack at the Front. Paulin is transformed into an enemy of the established order, fulfilling his aunt's prediction: 'Tu iras peut-être un jour dire partout aux hommes la vérité des choses. [...] Pourquoi n'en serais-tu pas, toi, mon petit, un de ces grands crieurs! ...'³ Cimon has stated that Barbusse's general aim in *Clarté* was to show how 'un petit bourgeois indifférent et content de son sort se convertit sous l'effet de la guerre et des idées socialistes en un véritable apôtre de la révolution.'⁴ Cimon might just as easily have labelled Paulin a 'prophète', the latest in a long line in Barbusse's novels.

Indeed, if the function of the prophet is to pass judgement on the present age and predict the future, there can be said to be, in *Clarté* as in *Le Feu*, not one but *two* major prophetic figures at work in the former novel. The first, whose mantle Paulin assumes, in much the same way that the narrator of *Le Feu* replaces the dead corporal Bertrand, is Brisbille, the perpetually drunken blacksmith conspicuous in the pre-war section of the narrative for his 'idées avancées' (p. 25), which necessarily include a thoroughly sceptical attitude towards religion (pp. 23, 24, 58, 261).

Somewhat improbably perhaps, the ‘respectable’ citizens of Viviers are wont to assemble in Brisbille’s workshop on Sundays before attending Mass, which provides this particular non-believer with the opportunity to observe the various representatives of contemporary society at close quarters. His verdict, emphatically delivered (‘Brisbille sait crier, non parler’, p. 24) is scathing. He dismisses the highly successful, wealthy, and thus highly regarded ‘cafetier-négociant’, Fontan, out of hand. When Fontan passes before Brisbille’s door, the blacksmith makes disparaging remarks about his physical appearance, adding, ‘avec un éclair de joie populaire: — Heureusement qu’on espère que tout ça va éclater bientôt’ (p. 25). In the significantly entitled chapter ‘Le crieur’, which relates, *inter alia*, military exercises carried out in the environs of Viviers on the eve of the Great War, Brisbille broadens his attack, undeterred by a lack of support (p. 83). At an open-air Mass on All Saints Day, which is attended by the local nobility, the industrialists, and ‘tous les notables du quartier’ (p. 90), Brisbille makes an appearance, ‘pour protester par sa présence malsonnante et débraillée’ (p. 90). At the end of the service, he makes his presence felt; his prophecy is all the more telling given the unfolding historical developments. This man, ‘cette espèce de fou qui se dresse au milieu du chemin’, is quite unequivocal in his judgement:

Veux-tu que j’té dise où ça va, tout ça? hurle-t-il et on n’entend plus que lui. — Ça va aux abîmes! C’est la vieille société pourrie, avec la profiterie de tous ceux qui peuvent, et la bêtise des autres! Aux abîmes, j’té l’dis. Demain, gare à vous! Demain! [...] Demain! Demain! Vous croyez qu’ça va s’passer comme ça toujours? Vous êtes bons à tuer! Aux abîmes! (pp. 93-94)

It is significant that the person he singles out for condemnation is the young parish vicar; and that he challenges this man of the cloth to predict the future himself (p. 94). It is no less significant that Paulin intervenes on behalf of the established order, motivated by a personal dislike of the blacksmith.

Transformed by his experience at the Front, Paulin comes to pass judgement on contemporary society and predict the future as Brisbille had done before the war. Paulin is acutely aware of his role as a prophet, a role with which he is not entirely at ease.⁵ At the 'fête du Souvenir', related in 'Le culte', he feels himself to be painfully conspicuous because of his opposition to the cult of the past: 'Je fais tache comme un mauvais prophète. Je porte cette constatation comme un fardeau infernal' (p. 277). He makes no declaration at this point in the narrative but his message on this and subsequent occasions is clear enough to the reader, and the ultimate prediction is thoroughly unambiguous, for all its metaphorical language:

J'annonce l'avènement fatal de la république universelle. Ce ne sont pas les réactions passagères, les ténèbres et les terreurs, ni la tragique difficulté de soulever le monde partout à la fois, qui empêcheront de s'accomplir la vérité internationale. [...] Sur les vagues disputes qui ensanglantent les grèves, sur les pillards de naufrages, sur les épaves et les récifs, et les palais et les mouvements fondés dans le sable, je prévois la venue de la marée haute. (p. 299)

It is in this optimistic view of the future that Paulin is differentiated from his forerunner, Brisbille. He has a confidence in the masses that Brisbille appears not to share. Injured by the explosion of a shell at the beginning of the defining moment of his war experience, Paulin hears a delirious revolutionary soldier make a political statement which makes a deep impression upon him ('J'ai confiance dans le gouffre du peuple', p. 180). It is remembered later, at the 'fête du Souvenir' when he notices a young man staring with admiration at an officer's magnificent uniform: 'Ah! la prophétie affreuse me martèle le crâne: — J'ai confiance dans le gouffre du peuple!' (p. 260) It informs all of his subsequent reflections on the nature of society and the sermons he delivers towards the end of his narrative.

The eponymous chapter, 'Clarté', serves as a particularly good example of the pseudo-prophetic sermonizing of the narrator; and of the way in which Barbusse's perception of the nature and function of literature changed as a result of his

politicization during the war. Although Barbusse, the would-be secular prophet, had always striven to speak to the masses through his work, he had sought to do so, prior to the war, through a literary medium. What is true of his poetry, *Les Suppliants* and *L'Enfer*, is generally true of *Le Feu*: direct, authorial intrusion is for the most part avoided. In the above-mentioned chapter of *Clarté*, however, the narrator, Simon Paulin, is usurped by Barbusse and simply ceases to exist as a character.

In the interregnum in the fiction of the novel (pp. 286-96), the author invokes the revolutionary spirit of 1789, calling for the foundation of 'la communauté des travailleurs' (p. 289), and the emancipation of women (pp. 289-90). Equal rights for all will lead to equality amongst nations and, eventually, to one supranational entity to which all citizens owe their allegiance: 'La république universelle est la conséquence inéluctable de l'égalité des droits de tous à la vie. En partant de la notion de l'égalité, on arrive à l'internationale populaire' (p. 291). It has been pointed out that many of the statements made in this section of the novel 'have an aphoristic ring to them more suited to the manifesto or political essay than to the novel.'⁶ Indeed, in terms of form, content and style, there is little difference between this direct address, in the second-person singular, to 'le peuple universel' in *Clarté*, and the political pamphlet entitled 'Pourquoi te bats-tu?' (see pp. 142-43).⁷

It would be easy to criticize Barbusse on aesthetic grounds for the sudden, jarring intrusion of his own thoughts into the flow of the narrative of *Clarté*; but one must remember the writer's personal situation. In 1919, after a quarter-century of relative obscurity, Barbusse 'entre dans la vie publique non seulement comme un romancier de célébrité mondiale ou comme une personnalité culturelle, mais comme un personnage politique autour duquel se réunissent des milliers, même des dizaines de milliers de personnes.'⁸ As president of the ARAC, which was 'an important element of the organized Left', Barbusse spoke to, and on behalf of a mass movement.⁹ Given the

great groundswell of support he received from fellow former combatants in particular, Barbusse felt it morally incumbent upon him to use his high profile to help bring about social reforms. This meant addressing mass audiences, which he did with increasing regularity after 1917; and there can be little doubt that he came to regard his literature as another vehicle for his political ideas. In an open letter to Gabriele d'Annunzio, Barbusse criticized the Italian poet, not for using *his* literature in this way, but for doing so in support of the wrong side:

L'écrivain, le penseur, le guide doit voir plus loin que les prétendus avantages immédiats, mon cher maître, et plus loin que les temps présents [...] il doit se saisir de la plus noble et de la plus vaste des causes, celle des pauvres et des souffrants, celle des millions de soldats et des milliards d'hommes qui [...] savent désormais qu'il y a entre eux tous une effrayante ressemblance.¹⁰

The authorial interpolations in *Clarté* have to be seen in the light of these altered perceptions. It is not a question of a lack of artistry or creative imagination on the part of the author; but of a conscious choice, a case of Barbusse the secular prophet acting out his role. As Vandérem most admirably put it: 'L'avenir seul nous apprendra si l'apôtre a tué chez M. Barbusse l'artiste ou si l'artiste a trouvé dans l'apôtre un stimulant et un appui.'¹¹

Barbusse's intentions were not lost on contemporary readers. Some responded negatively: 'M. Barbusse refait son petit sermon sur la Montagne.'¹² For the most part, however, they responded positively. Another critic, Génold, *nom de plume* of Paul Desanges, could not have been more enthusiastic: 'Il faut plaindre les malheureux qui ne verront dans ces pages ardentes que la prédication d'un homme de parti. [...] M. Henri Barbusse n'est pas seulement le plus puissant des romanciers contemporains: c'est un prophète!'¹³ A similar note was struck by a fellow former combatant in a letter to the author: 'Vous avez eu plus que la gloire puisque vous avez eu toute la vérité, l'Homme de demain tout entier, que seul, à travers les ténèbres menaçantes et terribles

d'un siècle de nuit, vous aurez précédé d'une clarté divine, splendide et prophétique.'¹⁴

Another correspondent wrote to ask Barbusse what was to be done, a question put 'à vous qui hurlez la vérité de toutes vos forces d'homme, à vous le premier citoyen de la Grande et Internationale République du Monde. Que faut-il faire? Il ne suffit pas de prêcher maintenant. Semez l'idée [...].'¹⁵

As with *Le Feu*, then, *Clarté* can be said to be a pseudo-prophetic text. It is even more pseudo-apocalyptic than its immediate predecessor. Although the novel is not introduced by a prologue that frames the narrative as an extended vision, the text is replete with visions of the future, one of which is had before Paulin's transformation. In his brief, pre-war flirtation with the working class as represented by Pétrolus, a manual labourer at the same printer's, Paulin investigates working-class conditions. Given cause to reflect on what he has seen, he informs the reader of his capacity as a visionary and of a vision of revolution that he has had. The remark in parenthesis strikes the reader as a self-conscious piece of authorial artifice intended to reduce the improbability of the narrator's subsequent transformation: 'j'ai eu tout d'un coup, le temps d'un éclair, une vision tragique du peuple. (J'entrevois parfois des choses dans la vie, en certaines minutes.)' (pp. 67-68). What he sees, amongst the 'flammes foncées', 'nuées vomies en montagnes spacieuses' and 'un ciel d'orage', is humanity unleashed: 'L'étendue immense d'hommes s'ébranle, crie, et roule dans le même sens le long du faubourg. Un inépuisable écho de clameurs nous entoure; c'est comme un enfer en activité encerclé dans un horizon de bronze' (p. 68). He is afraid at the prospect of the masses seizing power. He will later be enthralled at the same prospect.

The visions the narrator has both at the Front as an infantryman and thereafter are of further death and destruction in war, but on even more massive a scale in the future, when the mass production of weapons — aeroplanes in particular¹⁶ — and the

application of science and technology will usher in an age of total war. He is taken on high in an imaginary aeroplane:

J'ai vu les incendies, et les explosions de mines, avec les crinières de fumée qui s'échevellent et se délayent en un long zigzag noir, aussi grandes que si c'était la chevelure du dieu de la guerre! J'ai vu les cercles concentriques où se renouvelle encore la multitude pointillée. [...] J'ai vu, une nuit effroyable, l'ennemi inonder tout cela d'un torrent inépuisable de liquides enflammés. J'ai eu la vision de cette vallée rocheuse et noire remplie jusqu'aux bords par la coulée de lave qui éblouit et apporte une horrible aurore terrestre éclairant toute la nuit, et faisant partir les étoiles des coups. [...] Cela sera vu par des gens qui vivent aujourd'hui et, pourtant, cette vision de l'avenir si proche n'est qu'un pauvre grossissement de la tête. (pp. 209-11; my italics)¹⁷

By the time of the 'fête du Souvenir', the realization has dawned on Paulin that the cause of the war is socio-economic and that unless capitalist society is reformed, war is inevitable and those who suffer the most in the unequal distributions of the peacetime economy will suffer the most in times of war. He observes a number of war widows, specks of black in the multitude. Having envisaged the same sort of gathering at the same sort of 'celebration' the world over, he comments: 'Ma vision était vraie de fond en comble. [...] Voilà ce qui est; alors voici ce qui sera: l'exploitation jusqu'au dernier souffle, jusqu'à l'usure totale et la mort parfaite' (p. 258). If he is able to announce 'l'avènement de la république universelle' and predict the revolution that must precede it, it is because, as the French indicates, he has 'seen' the future.

Although the focus in the above block quotation is intended to be on the visionary within the apocalyptic context, it is impossible to ignore the eschatological elements, given the abundant use of natural phenomena and the somewhat overblown evocation of the end of time. Indeed, the eschatological elements in *Clarté* are conspicuous to the point of becoming ponderous. King, impressed with the effectiveness of eschatological imagery in *Le Feu*, is disappointed with its successor: 'Barbusse allows this apocalyptic tone to get quite out of hand, merging it with a grandiose imagery and a religiosity which are no longer controlled by a firm

documentary purpose.’¹⁸ Few would argue to the contrary, although one might add that the concept of the apocalyptic is by its very nature religious, and that Barbusse makes use of it here, as in *Le Feu*, to subvert Judaeo-Christian notions of divinity and all that this implies. As will be seen, he uses other religious concepts, figures and symbols to the same end, in his quest for a new, secular faith.

To return to the apocalyptic, eschatological passages abound and, collectively, they bear all of the characteristics analysed in the previous chapter (see pp. 120-23).¹⁹ The important point to make in assessing Barbusse’s intensified use of eschatological imagery is that in this novel, unlike in its predecessor, the author shows his hand, enabling the reader quite readily to make sense of his intentions. Shortly before the explosion of the shell that has him slipping in and out of consciousness in the pivotal chapter, ‘De profundis clamavi’, Paulin reflects on the situation in which the ‘poilus’ find themselves: ‘Nous sommes venus ici parce qu’on nous a dit d’y venir. Nous avons fait ce qu’on nous a dit de faire. Je pense à la simplicité de notre réponse au *Jugement dernier*’ (p. 186; my italics). While it is not at all clear from the immediate context or the earlier part of the war-narrative precisely what is meant here, it is clear that Barbusse wants the reader to read his interpretation of the war against the Final Judgement as related in Daniel and Revelation.

In his delirium in ‘De profundis clamavi’, Paulin anticipates a recommencement and continual reproduction of war (p. 206). He sees a multiplication of every aspect of it, to such an extent that war becomes humankind’s very *raison d’être*:

Il n’y aura plus sur la terre que la préparation à la guerre. [...] Les autres dépenses se tariront avant celles de la destruction, et aussi les autres aspirations, et toutes les raisons de vivre. *Tel sera le sens du dernier âge de l’humanité.* (p. 207; my italics)²⁰

The narrator’s subsequent likening of ‘canons illimités’ to ‘des clairons d’apocalypse’ — the only use of the word in both *Le Feu* and *Clarté* — is in keeping with the author’s

general representation of the war in both novels. The reader is given to understand that the cause of this war and of war in general is not an abstract theological notion such as sin or a refusal to acknowledge God as the creator of heaven and earth. It is, rather, the failings of men amongst men, the ultimate failing being the grossly unjust socio-economic system they have produced. In *Lueur*, which Barbusse published shortly after *Clarté*, he states his case quite clearly:

Il y a eu des gens pour dire que la guerre est un châtement d'en haut, mérité par les péchés des hommes. Ils n'ont qu'à moitié tort, mes camarades. La guerre est un châtement. C'est le châtement énorme mérité par la multitude, qui est la force même, et qui accepte de se détruire avec ses propres mains. [...] Quand les soldats sombres défilaient le long des trous sans fin, ployés sous leur fardeau et sous le fardeau plus grand du ciel tombant comme une mer [...] ils portaient sur leur dos le poids de toute l'iniquité du monde.²¹

The phrase 'toute l'iniquité du monde', taken in conjunction with the previous analysis of the eschatology of *Clarté* and the content of some of Paulin's visions, leads to another important characteristic of apocalyptic literature, namely the dualistic universe. In the previous chapter, consideration was given to Barbusse's tendency in *Le Feu* to divide society, for all its many and varied sub-groupings, into two basic, mutually exclusive, and mutually hostile camps — masters and slaves, winners and losers in the capitalist system. He does the same in *Clarté* but the dichotomy becomes increasingly politicized as Paulin's — and his own — political education progresses.

The dualistic universe is something that the narrator is already aware of at the outset of the novel: 'Viviers se divise en deux parties, comme beaucoup de villes sans doute; la ville riche, la Grande Rue, où sont le Grand Café, les hôtels de luxe, les maisons sculptées, l'église, puis le château sur sa colline' (p. 7). It is in the other part, 'le quartier bas', that Simon Paulin lives. Although he perceives a certain ambiguity in his status ('je suis déjà trop pour me mêler aux uns, trop peu pour fréquenter les autres', p. 32), temperamentally, he quite clearly belongs to the other, 'better' half: 'je suis plus qu'un ouvrier' (p. 5). He is perfectly content to leave the status quo unchallenged. He is

drafted into the army with patriotic pride when war is declared; his petit-bourgeois background predisposes him to accept the facile, nationalistic divisions that adjutant Marcassin (formerly known as Pétrolus) makes between German and Frenchman.

His 'De profundis' experience, however, radically alters not just his view of the war but the whole way in which he views life. He tries to arrive at an explanation for war, a microcosm of the peacetime socio-economic macrocosm, and makes a major discovery: 'ils ne se battent pas parce qu'ils sont face à face. [...] Obscurément, ils se tuent parce qu'ils sont pareils' (p. 195). Paulin goes beyond the superficial divisions of nationality and discovers an altogether more profound dualism, one which produces wars that are fought by the multitudes and caused by the privileged few. Of the victims in war, he states: 'Ce sont d'autres qui manient leurs mains, et les poussent, et les tirent; d'autres qui en tiennent tous les fils, dans la distance, au centre des cycles infernaux, dans les capitales, dans les palais' (p. 196). He thus goes on to distinguish between 'peuples' and 'maîtres', 'les grands et les petits': 'il n'y a qu'une seule peuplade de parasites et de meneurs, qui est vainqueur, et qu'un seul peuple, qui est vaincu' (p. 212).

This analysis is taken a step further in the eponymous chapter, in which the myriad political parties and points of view are reduced to but two:

Il n'y a pas tous les partis qu'il semble y avoir [...] il n'y en a que deux: les révolutionnaires et les conservateurs; tout acte politique aboutit fatalement soit à l'un soit à l'autre, et tous les dirigeants ont toujours tendance à agir dans le sens de la réaction. (p. 287)²²

Although 'révolutionnaires' and 'conservateurs' are words that belong to the political sphere, this type of language at a general level is, in its binary oppositions, the language of apocalyptic literature, in which the wicked are punished and the righteous exalted. Barbusse had already made use of the concept in *Le Feu*; in *Clarté*, he gives it a clearly political dimension. Furthermore, he resituates the Church in the conservative camp in

far more emphatic a manner. In *Le Feu*, his positioning of the Church is achieved, often, by subtle juxtapositions and the use of language that is metaphorical, symbolic or synecdochic. In *Clarté*, the alignment between the Church and the other forces of the Right is clearly stated. Paulin may or may not be alive at the outset to the implications of the location of his parish church in the local topography. By the end of the narrative, he is in no doubt as to where it should be placed in black-white ideological terms:

En partant de la notion de l'égalité, on arrive à l'internationale populaire. Si on n'y arrive pas, c'est qu'on n'a pas pris le raisonnement droit. Ceux qui partent du point de vue opposé: Dieu, le droit divin des papes, des rois et des nobles, l'autorité de la tradition, aboutissent, par des voies fabuleuses, mais sans faute de logique, à des conclusions opposées. On ne doit pas cesser de croire qu'il n'y a que deux doctrines en présence. (p. 291)

The Church is placed not only amongst the forces of the Right but at their very head.

In addition to the prophetic and the apocalyptic, a third theme which in *Clarté* is given further attention, and a political dimension lacking in *Le Feu* is that of Jesus. In the text of the latter, direct references are surprisingly few and far between given Jesus's prominence in the earlier novels.²³ Nowhere does the narrator or anybody else comment upon him in the way that Barbusse did in his 'Carnet de guerre': 'Jésus-Christ est un pauvre bonhomme à l'âme pure; il ne méritait pas tout le mal qu'ont fait ses idées.'²⁴ There are various indirect references (*Le Feu*, pp. 190, 370). The infantryman's 'sac' is described in terms that evoke the Cross (*Le Feu*, pp. 233, 287). The terrain that Joseph Mesnil has to traverse in order to reach the first-aid post represents 'la dernière étape de son calvaire' (*Le Feu*, p. 246). When Volpatte discovers the body of Bertrand, he finds the 'bras étendus en croix' (*Le Feu*, p. 340); later, in the first-aid post, the narrator uses the adjectives 'crucifiés' to describe the attitude of two wounded soldiers lying on the ground (*Le Feu*, p. 363).

For much of the war-narrative in *Clarté*, the reader has the impression that Barbusse is content, once again, merely to suggest parallels with Jesus. Again, the

burden that the infantryman is required to carry is likened to the Cross. Before he sees action at the Front, Paulin remarks on the unbearable weight of the 'sac': 'Cette douleur devint vite aiguë, impossible à supporter. J'étais suffoqué, poigné, aveuglé d'un masque de sueur' (p. 114). He is overwhelmed by the feeling that he will not be able to complete the march but complete it he does. A little later, on a fatigue, he is ordered to carry a thirty-kilo load of barbed wire as tall as a man: 'Quand on la porte, cette roue souple s'étire comme une bête; et elle danse au moindre mouvement, pétrit la chair de l'épaule et bat les pieds' (p. 167). He has to carry it, this 'fardeau rebelle et acharné', up an embankment to a 'sommet qui récule.' Such is the effort required to haul to this Golgotha-esque summit a burden redolent both of Jesus's cross and his crown of thorns that the narrator longs for the bullet that will put him out of his misery.

There are other, more obvious allusions that trigger associations with the death of Jesus. Under fire for the first time, in 'Où vas-tu?', the narrator describes the various attitudes adopted by himself and his fellow 'poilus': 'Nous nous sommes vus: redressés, assis ou crucifiés dans cette seconde de plein jour qui est venu dans le fond de la terre ressusciter votre ombre' (p. 172). Lying injured in no man's land after a counter-attack by the French, Paulin looks around the battlefield at the legions of dead and dying and states simply: 'Tout est consommé, tout a abouti là' (p. 186), recalling the final words that Jesus utters on the Cross in John's version of events.²⁵

However, in *Clarté*, unlike in *Le Feu*, there is direct reference to Jesus and Barbusse is at pains to dissociate his words and deeds from the practices of the Church he is held to have founded. Barbusse goes so far as to have his narrator point out that Jesus has been misrepresented to such a degree by those purporting to venerate him that he has been crucified time and again throughout the ages: 'Voilà longtemps que les vendeurs cupides et passionnés l'ont chassé du temple à leur tour, et mis les prêtres à sa

place. Il est crucifié dans chaque crucifix' (pp. 215-16). The point is reiterated later, somewhat less laconically, in the 'Clarté' sermon:

On aurait pu rêver une Eglise sage et régulatrice, puisque Jésus-Christ aura raison dans sa leçon humaine tant qu'il y aura des âmes. Mais ceux qui ont pris en main sa morale et fabriqué leur religion ont empoisonné la vérité, et, de plus, ils ont montré pendant deux mille ans qu'ils plaçaient leurs intérêts de caste avant ceux de la loi sacrée du bien. (p. 293)

The narrator goes on to describe the sign of the cross, whenever it is made, as 'un soufflet à Jésus-Christ. D'amour du sol natal on a fait nationaliste, comme de Jésus on a fait jésuite' (p. 293).

It will be remembered that similar observations are to be found in *Les Suppliants*; but in Jesus's politicization in *Clarté*, this novel differs from the novels of the first phase of Barbusse's career. When Jesus appears to Paulin in the final stages of the latter's delirium in 'De profundis clamavi', the role that religion has played in this and previous wars is underscored: 'et tout près de lui', according to the narrator, 'sur une façade de toile, je revois la croix sanglante' (p. 215). This observation is reminiscent of one made earlier in the war-narrative when, in describing the landscape produced by the war, Paulin notices a stretcher laden with corpses, and 'une tente de toile grise qui claque comme un drapeau, et sur cette muraille palpitante, l'aube éclaire une croix de sang' (p. 165). In 'De profundis clamavi', Jesus contemplates 'la tache immense faite par le christianisme sur le monde, tache chaotique et noire' (p. 215). In addition to various forms of weaponry and the human catastrophes war causes, Jesus's self-appointed supporters, the conservative triumvirate of the clergy, the monarchs and the politicians, are beheld:

Et tout près de lui je revois la croix sanglante [...] et l'alliance cérémonieuse, par-dessus les pauvres, de ceux qui ont des tiaras avec ceux qui ont des couronnes, et à l'oreille des rois, le geste des éminences grises ou des moines cauteleux de la couleur de l'ombre. (p. 215)

Although Jesus makes only two comments, they are profound in their political implications: 'Je ne méritais pas le mal qu'ils ont fait avec moi', a remark that is very close to the observation Barbusse made in his 'Carnet de guerre' in late 1915; and 'Ne reconstruisez pas les églises. Elles ne sont pas ce que vous croyiez qu'elles étaient. Ne reconstruisez pas les églises' (p. 216). The Church built in the name of Christ is thus dissociated from its 'founder' by the 'inventeur spolié' (p. 215) himself.²⁶ In political terms, in this scheme of things, the Christian Church has shown itself to be a reactionary force throughout the vast majority of its two-thousand-year history and so Jesus, as seen by Paulin/Barbusse, is keen to distance himself from it.

While it does not necessarily follow from the above quotations that Jesus is thus to be aligned with the revolutionaries, this can be inferred. Jesus's appearance and the disclaimers he makes to a severely wounded soldier who is about to embark on a revolutionary career after a lifetime of conservative affiliations is in itself telling enough. Furthermore, it is quite clear from what Barbusse said elsewhere that to some extent he thought of the First World War experience of the average combatant in Christian terms. In *Lueur*, he talks of soldiers labouring under their burden towards their graves, 'comme les Réprouvés de l'Écriture, comme la Bête Emissaire, l'incarnation biblique et effrayant de l'innocence' (*Lueur*, pp. 145-46). By the end of his period of active service, during which time he wrote *Le Feu* and began work on *Clarté*, he had come to the conclusion that the war could be made sense of only if it were understood in terms of the need for drastic social reforms brought about by political means. As the sermon in 'Clarté' makes explicit, the ultimate aim was to create 'la république universelle'. The deaths of the millions of soldiers in the war are seen as sacrificial deaths to that great end, likewise the death of Jesus. The use of the word 'calvaire' in Simon Paulin's anticipation of the struggle between Right and Left in the creation of the universal republic — 'le long calvaire des peuples opprimés, la loi des

forts changeant en renaissances et inutiles hécatombes l'humble fête de la vie, la chronologie de cet écrasement d'existences et d'idées où des novateurs ont été toujours suppliciés' (p. 272) — is far from arbitrary. The role in which Barbusse was to cast Jesus in 1927 was not suddenly arrived at. In *Clarté*, Jesus already has a place on the left of the political spectrum, thereafter moving further to the left in step with Barbusse.

In the above analysis, an intensification and politicization of the themes of the prophetic, the apocalyptic and Jesus have all been considered. What this examination illustrates is that while Barbusse continued to work within the religious framework of *Le Feu*, a political framework of growing proportions was superimposed upon it. The 'vague invocations of futurity' that Cruickshank has written of in reference to the ideals advocated by Barbusse in *Le Feu*²⁷ had not hardened into the political certainties provided by the doctrine of party politics. Nevertheless, it is clear from the political credo that emerges as a result of the author's usurpation of his narrator towards the end of the post-war narrative of *Clarté* that Barbusse was writing from the perspective of an increasingly radicalized republicanism, in which there was no place for traditional forms of religion. That Barbusse expressed this view in his first two novels is beyond dispute. This is true also of *Le Feu* but because of the form that the narrative takes and its seemingly unstructured presentation — quite apart from the fact that the focus lies elsewhere — the political dimension to Barbusse's earlier wartime critique of religion is less forceful.

The formal and structural differences presented in *Clarté*, which make for a more conventional novel of apprenticeship that is also a *roman à thèse*,²⁸ allow this political dimension to emerge organically. The switch from microcosm to a macrocosm which contains a microcosm in the war-narrative section of the novel; the tripartite structure presenting events before, during, and after the war; and the use of a narrator

who is given a social setting in which to develop, a profession, antecedents, relationships and political affinities all provide the author with a breadth of scope not available to him in *Le Feu*.

In Paulin's 'itinéraire politique', Barbusse is thus able to examine in considerable detail the status and function of the Church at an institutional level in France, and elsewhere, by extension. In his previous literature, he had been content to look at individual representatives, namely the abbé Ursleur in *Les Suppliants*, the Roman Catholic priest in *L'Enfer*, and the 'sergent-infirmier' in *Le Feu*. As has already been pointed out, these characters receive increasingly less coverage from one novel to the next. In *Clarté*, the named cleric, the abbé Piot, is hardly developed at all, in what appears to be an inverse proportion to the treatment of the Church as an institution. It should be noted that the individual cleric in *Clarté* is dealt with sympathetically, as is the case with all three clerics in Barbusse's earlier novels. Brisville's attack on Piot after the Mass celebrated at the 'fête du Souvenir', which clearly mirrors the earlier, pre-war incident (p. 94) and is designed to demonstrate the progress Paulin has made in his political education, elicits a description of the priest: 'ce saint vieillard qui est le dévouement en personne, et ne ferait pas de mal à une mouche, n'est qu'un humble serviteur du mensonge, il apporte son petit chaînon à la chaîne, et il sourit du côté des bourreaux' (p. 262).²⁹ In *Clarté*, then, the Church is largely dehumanized, and portrayed in a much broader context. The novel can thus be read not just as Barbusse's second war novel³⁰ but as a critique of the Church in general; and as a case study of the impact of the Church and religion in the life of yet another Barbussian *alter ego*, in particular.

The regulation of life by the Church, the atemporality of the institution, the sense of *in saecula saeculorum* continuity it provides are suggested in a number of subtle ways in the narrative. Synecdochic reference to the tower of Vivier's parish church both before and after the war indicate that although life has been turned on its

head for one such as Simon Paulin, nothing has changed for the institution or for the keepers and committed followers of the faith. The narrator looks out of his bedroom window in the opening chapter and sees the church tower: 'Je discerne, plus loin, le clocher qui est dans le creux' (pp. 19-20). In the penultimate chapter, 'Clarté', he looks out of the same window and beholds the same sight: 'Comme dans les nuits d'autrefois, je regarde le sombre tableau, d'abord invisible, prendre forme: le clocher qui est dans le creux' (p. 283).

The rhythm of life is both established and marked by the Church in more senses than one. Although the Church itself exists outside time, the Church it is that marks the passage of time: 'Les cloches se mettent à sonner [...] l'église, en même temps qu'elle chante, se met à parler' (p. 92). In the second chapter, 'Nous', the narrator describes what can be taken to be a typical Sunday. From all sections of the community (Brisbille excepted), the inhabitants of Viviers gather together to celebrate Mass and are made to feel equal members of the same family, God's children one and all: 'Du fond de son buisson de lumières, le bon curé nous murmure le grand langage infini, nous bénit, nous étreint chacun et tous ensemble, paternel et maternel' (p. 31). The religious calendar is observed. The narrative relates the celebration of Mass on All Saints Day and, in addition to the customary Sunday service in 'Les yeux', 'une messe de saint Hubert' is held at the castle,³¹ the residence of the baroness Grille and her son-in-law, the marquis de Monthyon, who at public services occupy the 'banc seigneurial, en avant de tous' (p. 31).

The alliance between the nobility and the Church has already been intimated in Paulin's brief sketching of the local topography: the 'ville riche' is comprised of, *inter alia*, 'l'église, puis le château sur la colline' (p. 7). From his window the narrator sees the two, once again, juxtaposed: 'Je discerne, plus loin, la croix du clocher qui est dans le creux, et très haut, largement illuminé sur la colline, le château riche couronne de

pierreries' (pp. 19-20). Later, it is spelt out in no uncertain terms. Observing the hunters' mass, the narrator takes in the spectacle with rising anger:

Ces ministres du culte officiant en grande pompe, chamarrés, côte à côte avec ces riches accoutrés militairement en chasseur, les femmes comme les hommes, sur le perron d'un château, en face d'une foule contenue à l'écart par des cordes [...].

Les prêtres, les puissants, tous toujours attachés ensemble. [...] Ils édictent l'autorité; ils dissimulent la lumière. Ce sont des hommes qui défendent leurs intérêts d'hommes, des maîtres qui défendent leur règne. (p. 232)

The word 'lumière' here recalls those instances in *Le Feu* in which it is used metaphorically to mean a quest for a purpose, direction, or orientation (e.g. *Le Feu*, pp. 243, 435). The link with the title of this novel, *Clarté*, is obvious; the implication is that it is the task, or even duty of the narrator/author to reveal the light of the truth, which the clergy, above all, strives to keep hidden.

From the above point in the narrative onwards, the Church is consciously seen by Paulin as an upholder of the status quo, culminating in its inclusion in the conservative concatenation outlined in 'Le culte':

Moi, je me souviens qu'il a été dit que la logique a des chaînes terribles et que tout se tient: le trône, l'autel, le glaive et le drapeau. Et j'ai lu, dans les déchaînements et les enchaînements de la guerre, que ce sont là les instruments du culte des sacrifices humains. (p. 269)³²

This observation is slightly misleading, however, for the Church is shown to be more than a mere link in the conservative chain; it is *primus inter pares*, the arch-conservative force. For Barbusse and his narrator, this is beyond dispute. The point is made by means of a religious syntagma, 'Ce qui fut sera',³³ which, as a subversive leitmotif, is to *Clarté* what the 'De profundis' syntagma is to *L'Enfer*. The underlying concept is one of inertia.

Crillon, the petit-bourgeois municipal councillor, is the voice of socio-political conservatism in the novel. 'Et y a, comme partout', he intones to Paulin, his successor designate prior to the war, 'les deux espèces de gens qu'y a: les malcontents, et les

comme il faut, parce que mon p'tit, c'qui a toujours été sera toujours' (p. 37). To Fontan's distasteful rejoinder to a woman whose child is trembling with illness because he has not eaten enough — 'Eh bien! moi, je suis malade comme lui [...] parce que je mange trop' — Crillon remarks, with equal absence of compassion: 'Il a raison, c'monsieur élégant [...]. Ça a toujours été comme ça, et ce sera toujours comme ça!' (p. 248) At the Front, the narrator recalls Crillon's having made precisely the same observation about war (pp. 201/96). Following his discharge from the hospital, the narrator attends the annual 'fête du Souvenir' which, to have attended once, is to have attended a thousand times, 'presque dans les mêmes rites et les mêmes formes, au cours de mon enfance et de ma jeunesse. L'année dernière, il en fut ainsi, et les autres années, et il y a un siècle, et il y a des siècles' (p. 251). Tradition is the theme of an officer of the 'Légion d'honneur' in a speech made after Mass on All Saints Day: 'Il faut faire ce qu'ils ont fait, et croire ce qu'ils ont cru', he says of ancestors, 'sinon on tombe dans l'erreur et dans l'utopie' (p. 91). Those in power, observes Paulin, 'les rois, les majestés, les hommes surhumains', find themselves still in power for no *good* reason: 'leur pouvoir est surnaturel. Il est parce qu'il fut. Son explication, sa formule, c'est: Il le faut' (p. 200). On the 'colline des Châtaigniers', Paulin, reflecting on an education that has filled him and others with 'siècles d'ombre, d'humiliation et de captivité', points out that in an unstable world:

où la faiblesse de quelques-uns opprime la force de tous, depuis que la religion de Dieu des armées et de la résignation n'est plus suffisante à elle seule pour consacrer l'inégalité, règne la Tradition, dogme de l'adoration aveugle de ce qui fut et de qui est, Dieu sans tête. (pp. 271-72)

Thus Barbusse uses a religious syntagma to make a political point; and to illustrate both the all-pervasiveness of religion in contemporary society and the proportions of the immovable object that the Church represents to the irresistible revolutionary force unleashed by the Great War.³⁴

With regard to its role in that war, Barbusse once again criticizes the Church for the misappropriation of God by the national churches to endorse the war effort of the various countries involved. The risible notion of a partisan God is expressed far more laconically in *Clarté* than it is in the earlier novel (p. 204); it is also tied more specifically to a perceived dichotomy between the teachings of Jesus the historical figure and the Christ of Christian doctrine. When Jesus appears to Paulin by the side of an imagined lake in 'De profundis clamavi' and contemplates the stain that Christianity has left on humankind, he sees, in the middle of it:

des hymnes, des holocaustes, des files de cagoule et de persécutions pleines de haches, de hallebardes et de baïonnettes, et le choc, dans de longs nuages et des traînes d'armées, de deux croix qui n'ont pas tout à fait la même forme. (p. 215)

These two crosses, differing slightly but only in shape and size, are objectifications of the ' "Gott mit uns"-*"Dieu est avec nous"* ' antinomy of the present conflict. They represent at the same time, however, the perennial misappropriation of God by enemies in bilateral conflicts throughout the ages.

One of the many possible interpretations of the first of the two statements made by Jesus ('Je ne méritais pas tout le mal qu'ils ont fait avec moi') is that he, like God, has been heinously wronged in the misuse of his name to sanctify the barbarity of war. Such an interpretation is supported by the narrator's ruminations on the hunters' mass at the castle. It is not the only hunt in the narrative but like the first, which occurs immediately before the outbreak of the war ('On égorgea les bêtes [...] au milieu d'un silence parfait et religieux, un silence de messe', p. 86), it is a metaphor for the slaughter of men, endorsed by the Church, in the name of a higher, Supreme authority. Paulin watches the blessing of the pack and the hunting knives and guns, and comments that 'ce spectacle marque d'une façon plus éclatante que n'importe quelle parole la

distance qui sépare l'église actuelle de l'enseignement du Christ, et tout ce qui, sur ces pures et frustes origines, s'est accumulé de pourriture dorée' (p. 232).

It is not just in its distortion of the teachings of its putative founder that Barbusse took the Church to task. The logical conclusion of the position that he adopted with regard to the Church and the war is that the former ought to have vehemently denounced the latter and abstained from the conflict entirely. In not only lending its considerable moral authority and support to the 'Union sacrée', but also contributing *manpower* to the cause, it committed two grave sins of commission.³⁵ It earned Barbusse's further reproof for the perceived subsequent failure of the clergy in paying only lip service to its resolve to share the infantryman's burden. If it was bad enough that the Church should have blessed, then fought in a war of which Jesus and, by extension, God, would have thoroughly disapproved, it was even worse that the massed ranks of the 'embusqués' should have been populated largely by the clergy.

Analysis of *Le Feu* has already pointed up Barbusse's controversial contention that the clergy dodged *en masse* the real war of the infantryman; and that he repeated his claims in June 1918, following the conference on *Le Feu* in Chicago (see p. 135). He made no compromises in the fictional environment of his next novel, either. Shortly before Paulin leaves Viviers for the war, he is told of the young vicar's enlistment: 'Tu sais, le vicaire est parti simple soldat, ni plus ni moins, comme tous les prêtres' (p. 101). On his return from the war, Paulin refutes this belief when he encounters said vicar, 'qui a dit et fait dire qu'il allait partager les souffrances des soldats comme tous les prêtres' (p. 224). And with that Paulin ignores the man he had saved from Brisbille before the war. He goes from the particular to the general a little later in the narrative, making precisely the same point that Barbusse had made in his rebuff of Eckenfelder, and in much the same terms:

Les prêtres pullulent dans les hôpitaux; on lit leur origine sur les figures des infirmiers, des vagemestres, des cyclistes, des portiers. Je n'ai jamais vu,

moi, de prêtre en première ligne dans l'uniforme de simple soldat combattant, l'uniforme de ceux qui font les corvées et combattent aussi contre toute la misère. (p. 246)

As stated in the previous chapter, the putative 'embusquage' of the French clergy is of fundamental importance to an understanding of Barbusse's attitude towards religion in relation to the First World War, and within the socio-political context, generally. He may or may not have faithfully recorded or transposed his own experience in making contentions of the above sort. The essential point is that the anticlerical attitudes of the soldiers in *Le Feu* and of the transformed Paulin in *Clarté* appear to derive from little more than a belief that the priests have badly let the side down. Not all commentators have been convinced by Barbusse's reasoning:

Pourquoi Paulin développe-t-il si longuement ses idées antiréligieuses, son athéisme et son anticléricalisme? Le seul argument explicite est qu'il n'y avait pas beaucoup de prêtres en premières lignes! On comprendrait mieux que la monstruosité de la guerre l'amenât à refuser l'idée d'une providence et par là celle de Dieu.³⁶

It is true that the narrator's volte-face constitutes far too neat a reversal of his stance before the war and that it is not satisfactorily accounted for either psychologically or ideologically within the text. Prior to his experience of the war, Paulin believes in God in an undemonstrative, unquestioning fashion fully in tune with his general propensity to subscribe to the 'idée reçue' ('je me laisse emporter', p. 5). There is no carefully formulated reasoning to justify a belief in God and minimal use of the word itself (pp. 78, 145). In his readiness to believe in the fantastical because of a lack of intellectual curiosity or a desire to avoid the unpalatable ramifications of God-denial, Paulin is like many another. He attends Mass in Chapter two; his aunt's funeral and his wedding are both held in church (Chapters three and four, respectively). One has the impression, then, as Rieuneau has objected, that a believer such as Paulin would simply choose no longer to believe as a result of the war; and his sudden hostility towards all things

religious (Piot excepted, to some degree) strikes the reader as excessive and unsatisfactorily precipitate.

At the same time, to share Rieuneau's view completely, seeing clerical scrimshanking as the only — and improbable — catalyst for Paulin's conversion, is to miss the obvious parallels between the narrator and the most famous convert in the history of Christianity, an association that is clearly implicit in the narrator's name. As with Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, so with Paulin on the 'chemin des Dames'.³⁷ Saul is blinded by a light which he takes to be the risen Christ and hears the voice of God. Once his sight has been restored, a few days later, he embarks on an apostolic mission which, as Barbusse was to insist time and again years later, was far more responsible than anything Jesus ever said or did for the spread of Christianity to all four corners of the globe.³⁸ Saul's conversion from zealous persecutor of 'The Way', as the inchoate Christian Church was originally known, to equally zealous propagator of Christianity could not have been starker. It is to this that Paulin's conversion from tepid Christian and petit-bourgeois conservative to emphatic anti-Christian propagandist and socialist republican revolutionary must be compared. Any attempt to explain it by applying the laws of literary probability is doomed to failure; and, arguably, so intended.

That said, in addition to the onomastics, the parallel between the narrator and Paul the convert is furthered by references to blinding light. Already prostrate and lying injured in no man's land in 'De profundis clamavi', Paulin is stunned by a shell exploding in his immediate vicinity: 'Un coup de lumière me remplit les yeux; toute la lumière. Je suis soulevé, je suis brandi par une lame inconnue au milieu d'une sphère de clarté extraordinaire' (p. 189). Before or after he slides into unconsciousness, he sees more, brilliant flashes of light: 'Je tombe, je roule comme un oiseau cassé, dans les éblouissements de lumière, dans les gorges d'ombre' (p. 191). He is not blinded by the

light as such but it could be argued that he has been metaphorically blind for the whole of his life prior to his 'De profundis' experience, a view supported by remarks made in the following chapter, 'Matin'. Convalescing in hospital, the narrator repeatedly refers to a new-found ability to see in the sense of perceive: 'J'ai dormi. Je vois plus clair que la veille. Je n'ai plus ce voile qui est devant moi' (p. 220).³⁹

Most important of all, of course, in the Paul-Paulin parallel is the appearance of Jesus:

J'ai vu Jésus-Christ au bord du lac. Il est venu comme un homme ordinaire sur le sentier. Autour de la tête il n'a pas de nimbe. Il n'est révélé que par sa pâleur et sa douceur. Des plans de lumière se rapprochent, se superposent, se fondent, à l'entour de lui. Il brille comme dans le ciel, comme sur l'eau. (p. 215)

Crucially, this Jesus has no halo. However extraordinary an individual, he is portrayed as but a mere mortal who has been badly abused by those with a vested interest in his name. Furthermore, he disabuses those who have perverted his teaching — Paul in particular — and his message is *not* to reconstruct the churches, or rather the Church of institutionalized Christianity, whose moral authority has been irreparably damaged by its stance in the war: 'Ne reconstruisez pas les églises. Elles ne sont pas ce que vous croyiez qu'elles étaient. Ne reconstruisez pas les églises' (p. 216). Just to reinforce the subversive inversion that the reader is supposed to detect in the narrator's surname, Barbusse chose to give him the first name of Simon, recalling the name of Simon Peter, the 'rock' on whom Jesus's church is held to have been built. In the 'De profundis' episode, then, Simon Paulin undergoes a conversion and as a result, endorsed by Jesus, he begins a pseudo-apostolic mission to attract converts to a faith that will stand in opposition to the traditional religion of Christianity, which is to be left in the ruins of its self-destruction.

Chapter eighteen, symbolically entitled 'Les yeux', represents the high-water mark in *Clarté* in terms of the hostility towards Christianity of both narrator and author.

With its Sunday service, it is clearly intended to mirror Chapter two. Paulin, the former believer, has become an ardent atheist. Thus, rather than attend Mass, he observes the crowds around the parish church from the heights of the 'colline des Châtaigniers' (p. 229). He notices scaffolding around the church, which evidently has been damaged in the war (p. 230). He becomes keenly aware of the absence of God: 'La terre, le ciel ... Je ne vois pas Dieu. Le regard qui parcourt l'espace revient abandonné. Et je ne l'ai jamais vu, et il est nulle part, nulle part' (p. 230). There follows a lengthy stream of consciousness containing reflections already articulated in *Les Suppliants* and *L'Enfer*:

Je comprends pourquoi on veut croire en Dieu, et par conséquent pourquoi on y croit, puisque la croyance se commande. [...]
Il n'y a pas d'autre preuve de l'existence de Dieu que le besoin qu'on en a. Dieu n'est pas Dieu, c'est le nom de tout ce qui nous manque. C'est notre rêve porté au ciel. Dieu, c'est une prière, ce n'est pas quelqu'un. (p. 231)

There are also observations that recall the important religious dimension given to the war in *Le Feu* ('toutes les religions armées les unes contre les autres. L'absence de Dieu surmonte comme le ciel [...] le charnier des soldats innocents', p. 230); but the overt anticlericalism that has grown steadily in proportion within the text of Barbusse's novels since *Les Suppliants* attains its fullest expression yet.

The passage on the hunters' mass, already analysed within the Jesus context, is introduced as follows: 'Je ne vois pas Dieu, mais je vois l'église et je vois les prêtres' (p. 232). Now that he has 'woken up' from religion (p. 232), no longer capable of believing in God and all that follows (p. 230), the narrator states his implacable opposition: 'mon regard est impitoyable et ne peut pas ne pas découvrir partout le faux Dieu et les faux prêtres' (p. 233). On their way back home, he and Marie pass the church and the post-Mass bystanders inspecting the damage it has sustained. The narrator hears the wise words of Jesus resonating inside him. A supplication, 'au nom de la lumière, au nom de la pitié', takes shape in his mind:

Ne reconstruisez pas les églises! Vous qui viendrez après nous et qui, dans la netteté du déluge fini, serez peut-être capables de voir plus distinctement

l'ordre des choses, ne reconstruisez pas les églises! Elles ne contenaient pas ce qu'on croyait, et elles n'ont été pendant des siècles que les prisons des sauveurs et le mensonge monumental. (p. 234)

He goes on to urge those who insist on believing to keep their faith a private matter: 'si vous apportez des pierres à la tradition bornée et méchante, c'est la fin de tout' (p. 234), by which he means that society would be better off if the churches were left as rubble and the clergy divested of any pastoral role within the community. In the long sermon in 'Clarté', Paulin-Barbusse first advocates a lay education system in line with the well-established position of the Left ('Plus une seule école où l'on enseigne l'idolâtrie, où les volontés de demain grandissent sous la terreur d'un Dieu qui n'existe pas', p. 292), then a personalization of traditional religion, if religion there must be: 'Tu [le peuple universel] supprimeras partout la publicité des cultes, tu effaceras l'uniforme d'encre des prêtres. Que chacun des croyants garde sa religion pour soi, et que les prêtres restent entre les murs' (p. 293).

The alignment between Church and the forces of political conservatism subtly indicated by the announcement made at the end of 'Les yeux' by the grieving Madame Marcassin (she has had a memorial mass celebrated for her right-wing, patriotic husband, '[...] parce que ça se fait [...]', p. 235) is stated in the clearest possible terms in 'Clarté'. For two thousand years, members of the clergy have consistently placed 'leurs intérêts de caste avant ceux de la loi sacrée du bien':

Aucun mot, aucun chiffre ne pourra jamais donner une idée du mal que l'Eglise a fait aux hommes. Quand elle n'a pas opprimé elle-même et maintenu les ténèbres de force, elle a prêté son autorité aux oppresseurs et sanctifié leurs prétextes, et, aujourd'hui encore, elle est partout étroitement unie avec ceux qui ne veulent pas du règne des pauvres. [...] l'Eglise invoque la poésie des évangiles, mais elle est devenue un parti aristocratique semblable aux autres [...]. (p. 293)

There can be no doubt that these categorical statements reflect the author's own beliefs. It may be the case that he always held such extreme views about the Church, although this seems unlikely given the development in his anticlericalism traced

hitherto in this thesis. It would seem, rather, that Barbusse's views were radicalized by his experiences during the war. Whatever the explanation, nowhere in his previous fiction are such overtly hostile opinions stated so baldly or at such length. By the end of *Clarté*, the reader is left in no doubt that the author held the Church and religion to be perennial accomplices in the universal crime of war, the present war most particularly (pp. 269-70); and that he had come to see in the institution not just a conservative force but the conservative force *par excellence*. The second half of the novel provides a critique of organized religion not provided elsewhere hitherto and, unsystematic though it may be, it receives far more sustained an analysis than do any of the other barriers to reform in contemporary society, including the capitalist system itself.

As in his previous works, then, Barbusse shows Christianity to be bankrupt as a viable form of faith and he propounds an alternative. The use of language one would normally expect to find in religious contexts, so conspicuous in *Les Suppliants* and *L'Enfer* and largely absent from the narrative of *Le Feu*, reappears in *Clarté*, much of it applied to the relationship between the narrator and Marie. The two fall in love following the death of the aunt who has looked after the former since he was orphaned as a young boy. Marie helps him with the immediate practicalities and offers her emotional support thereafter. Their courtship is described in terms that are highly reminiscent of the 'mysticized' human relationships portrayed in *L'Enfer*.

In attempting to sound out Marie's feelings for him, the narrator asks her to meet him by the river shortly after his aunt's burial: 'Je l'attends, avec cette prière' (p. 49). There is something angelic about her appearance: 'Je discerne la blancheur de sa figure [...] toute sa beauté comme de la lumière enveloppée' (p. 49). Filled with her presence, his ears hum: 'un hymne remplit le monde' (p. 51). He is later overcome by 'une émotion divine [...]. Sombres et cachés comme nous sommes, il me semble que nous montons au ciel' (p. 53). On the staircase leading to her bedroom, they read a

fragment of a 'billet doux' discovered earlier, the writer of which waxes lyrical about 'les cœurs pieux' and 'l'extase et le martyr' of love (p. 54). On another walk, they discover a statue of the Roman goddess Flora.⁴⁰ In the 'solitude de ce bois sacré', says Paulin, 'pour qu'elle ressemble à la déesse, j'ai dénudé ses larges seins bombés et droits' (p. 55).

Those who, like King, are content to pigeon-hole *Clarté* as Barbusse's other 'war novel' would do well to take another look at the final page, and at the final paragraph in particular:

Elle sourit, vague comme un ange flottant dans la pureté du soir entre la lumière et la profondeur. Je suis si près d'elle qu'il me faut m'agenouiller pour être plus près. J'embrasse sa figure mouillée et sa tendre bouche, en tenant ses mains entre mes deux mains jointes. (p. 312)

The likening of Marie to an angel, the genuflection, the hands joined in prayer are all reminiscent of the divinization of human beings by their lover-worshippers in *L'Enfer*. However, by the time that Barbusse began work on *Clarté* his earlier, metaphysical concerns had been largely displaced by socio-political concerns; and significant though the relationship between Paulin and Marie may be, it is overshadowed by the pseudo-religious cult of republican ideals.

Intent on chasing religion out of the education system, Paulin the secular prophet/apostle, who, as such, sanctifies through his association with the divine, speaks of 'l'école sacrée' (p. 292); the interests of the masses are described as 'la loi sacrée du bien' (p. 293). 'Et voici un commandement qui se présente à mes yeux, écrits sur le roc', he states of 'la loi tenace qui doit s'abattre sur tous les voleurs publics' (p. 294). In calling upon the people to build a better society, one based on 'la justice, la logique, l'égalité, toutes ces vérités divinement humaines dont le contraste avec la vérité actuellement réalisée est déchirant', the narrator articulates his desire to give them his

certainty of success, 'à la fois comme un ordre et une prière' (p. 298). Logic engulfs in its 'tourbillon divin' those who are prepared to accept its rule (p. 273).⁴¹

While *Clarté* contains no allusion to an historical Messiah-figure (unlike *Le Feu* with its reference to Liebknecht), it is quite clear that the American President Woodrow Wilson was very much on Barbusse's mind in the final stages of the composition of the novel. In June 1918 Barbusse, referring to Wilson, declared: 'je considère comme une gloire d'avoir été l'un des Français ayant parlé dans le même sens que cette grande voix, et je défie qu'on me montre dans mon livre', he added, thinking of *Le Feu*, 'un seul passage sur les buts de guerre et les conditions de la paix qui ne soit pas conforme aux principes dictés par elle.'⁴² This was even more true of *Clarté*. Indeed, Barbusse's biographer reports that the author was keen to see the novel published in time to coincide with Wilson's visit to Paris in December 1918.⁴³ Although this turned out not to be the case, Barbusse wrote an article entitled 'Le Citoyen du monde', which appeared in *Le Populaire de Paris* on 15 December 1918. In it, he likened Wilson to the Christian Messiah, describing him as a 'logicien splendide, qui a osé dire qu'il fallait placer l'intérêt général au-dessus de l'intérêt national — grande parole apportant dans la morale universelle un éclat comparable à celui dont les préceptes des premiers chrétiens ont révolutionné les âmes.'⁴⁴ In the words of Baudorre, 'grâce au président Wilson, les convictions républicaines de Barbusse ont trouvé un visage, un programme, une expression politique. [...] Wilson est pour Barbusse une voix, c'est-à-dire un crieur de vérité, la plus haute réalisation de son idéal humain.'⁴⁵ A young, extreme left-wing militant by the name of Jean de Saint-Prix felt obliged to write to Barbusse and express his dismay that the author who had praised Liebknecht in *Le Feu* should now be waxing lyrical about a bourgeois reactionary like Wilson.⁴⁶

Barbusse's Wilsonian idealism was to pass after the writer had met Wilson in June 1919 and been disappointed with the encounter, having received but vague replies

to his questions about the practical application of the Fourteen Points. By the end of that year, Barbusse had lost any lingering illusions about the capacity of traditional forms of democracy to produce the kind of social renewal he wished to see. Nevertheless, *Clarté* remains as a testament to Barbusse's pseudo-religious cult of socialist republican ideals in keeping with Wilson's Fourteen Points. Contemporary reader-response to the novel is instructive. The young fellow former combatant Pierre Paraf, future president of the AAHB stated in a letter to Barbusse: 'Je suis illuminé par votre *Clarté* comme par la lumière d'un nouvel Évangile.'⁴⁷ Albert Lôpe wrote from Canada and declared: '*Clarté* n'est pas qu'un livre, c'est un Évangile!'⁴⁸ Barbusse specialists have taken much the same view. Michel has described the novel as 'cet évangile socialiste'.⁴⁹ Picciola has entitled his study of the novel '*Clarté* ou le nouvel Évangile' and has remarked that 'Les références aux écritures [...] sont trop constantes, trop systématiques pour que nous puissions n'y voir qu'un jeu. Elles balisent en quelque sorte la voie où Barbusse engage son lecteur.'⁵⁰

All of the religious elements that feature in Barbusse's earlier works are to be found in *Clarté* and they are used by the author to the same end, namely to subvert traditional forms of religion as represented by Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular; and contrive a new form of secular faith. In comparing the works of the first phase of Barbusse's literary career with those of the second, one is struck by a strong sense of continuity and development, arising from the shift in Barbusse's critique of religion from a metaphysical and largely apolitical perspective to one grounded in socio-political concerns. Barbusse was certainly no more of an atheist, and was arguably no more antireligious during the First World War than he had been when composing *Les Suppliants* and his poetry, but an anticlericalism that is largely implicit in the earlier novels becomes glaringly explicit in *Le Feu*, and in *Clarté* in particular. It

acquires a much harder edge, culminating in Jesus's plea to humankind not to rebuild the churches destroyed in the war and with them institutionalized Christianity. The individual cleric becomes increasingly marginal a figure as the institution that he represents gradually emerges in Barbusse's work as the Left's principal political adversary. In *Le Feu*, the Church is heavily criticized for its stance during the war; the criticism is repeated in *Clarté*, but the structure of the latter novel and the expanded social setting enable Barbusse to illustrate in much greater detail the importance of the Church in maintaining the political status quo — a point that is paradoxically reinforced throughout the narrative by the author's repeated use of the religious 'Ce qui fut sera' syntagma.

Jesus reappears in *Clarté*, having been referred to, by and large, only indirectly in *Le Feu*, and Barbusse begins to dissociate him from the Church, where in the previous novels he had been content simply to draw parallels between him and Maximilien Desanzac, the unnamed narrator of *L'Enfer*, and various minor characters. In *Clarté*, Jesus, like Barbusse himself during the war, is politicized and placed in the revolutionary camp in Barbusse's dualistic scheme of things. The trilogy of works devoted to him in 1927 is clearly anticipated in *Clarté* and it comes as no great surprise to find in these works that Jesus has followed the author from left of centre to the far left of the political spectrum.

A religious concept common to all of Barbusse's works at this point is that of the prophetic. The narrator of *Clarté* is the sixth in line of the secular prophets in Barbusse's novels. After Desanzac, the unnamed narrator of *L'Enfer*, Bertrand and the unnamed narrator of *Le Feu*, and Brisbille, Simon Paulin, the convert whose name is a conflation of Paul and Peter, is both the most obvious religious symbol and the most political of Barbusse's prophetic figures. There is perhaps a degree of authorial untidiness here in that Paul and Peter were apostles and disciples of Jesus (self-

appointed in the case of the former) rather than prophets; but the essential point is that if Barbusse's works are full of secular prophets, it is because from his youth onwards he aspired to play the part of secular prophet himself. Furthermore, the alternative to traditional forms of religion that he and his literary prophets advocated evolved as Barbusse evolved politically.

To the religious faith of Christianity, Barbusse opposed in *Les Suppliants* and *L'Enfer* a secular humanist faith, a divinization of the human espoused by Desanzac and the unnamed narrator of *L'Enfer*, respectively. In *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, a secular faith is fashioned out of the basic tenets of socialist republicanism as exemplified by Woodrow Wilson. What the reader of *Clarté* is faced with is a spiritualization of the political to offset the author's politicization of the spiritual.

In his study of Barbusse's pre-Communist work, the writer's German contemporary Leo Spitzer noted that the former poet was becoming more and more of 'a preacher and Messiah' seeking to alleviate human woes by means of 'the gospel of a mystical socialism'.⁵¹ Gide's friend and collaborator Henri Ghéon described the *Clarté* team, led by Barbusse, as moving 'dans un épais brouillard ... dans leur nouveau paradis terrestre, ils rêvaient, parlaient, agissaient, dans un état mystique.'⁵² When Barbusse's quest for faith eventually led him to Communism, a militantly atheistic belief-system whose purist proponents recoiled at any suggestion of religiosity, there were bound to be difficulties.

Notes

¹ See Barbusse, *Lettres*, p. 252.

² Flower, *Literature and the Left in France*, p. 45.

³ Barbusse, *Clarté* (Flammarion, 1978; first published 1919), p. 15. All subsequent page references, given in parenthesis in the text, are to the 1978 re-edition of the novel.

⁴ Cimon, 'Les Romans d'Henri Barbusse: Une évolution vers la propagande', p. 128. According to Vidal, Barbusse planned to entitle the novel 'Le Crieur', finally opting for *Clarté* in an attempt to evoke the twin concepts of 'Vérité et Espoir'. *Henri Barbusse* (p. 86). The author's thinking is evident from a notebook for the novel, in which he wrote: 'LA FORCE DE PARLER Le Crieur'. FHB, *Naf* 16512, f. 34.

⁵ It should be noted that unlike the 'writing' prophets of the Old Testament, Simon Paulin is a prophet who, somewhat paradoxically, prefers to express himself *in* writing (pp. 284-85). Rare are the occasions when his written words are matched by deeds (pp. 253, 281).

⁶ Flower, *Literature and the Left in France*, p. 47.

⁷ In his review of the novel, Vandérem, a critic whose literary opinions Barbusse held in high esteem, wrote: 'La troisième partie [du livre] résume en traits ardents le credo du socialisme orthodoxe et ne présente d'intérêt que pour la forme.' *Le Miroir des lettres*, (p. 37).

⁸ Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 171.

⁹ Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse (1873-1935)', p. 238. Weems points out that shortly after the ARAC was co-founded by Barbusse in 1917, it had a membership of some 50,000, 'with hundreds of local sections and forty federations represented' (p. 234). It eventually led to the creation of the IAC, of which Barbusse was also president.

¹⁰ Barbusse, 'A Gabriele d'Annunzio' / *Paroles*, p. 97.

¹¹ Vandérem, *Le Miroir des lettres*, p. 38.

¹² Charasson, 'Clarté d'Henri Barbusse'/*Naf* 16526, f. 113.

¹³ Génold, 'Livres - Henri Barbusse: *Clarté*', p. 316.

¹⁴ *Naf* 16485, f. 586.

¹⁵ *Naf* 16536, f 326.

¹⁶ By the time Gordon Comstock is seen to be haunted by such visions in Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), they had already become a reality in Spain. It is a testament to the visionary powers of Barbusse that he had envisaged destruction of this sort some twenty years earlier.

¹⁷ As the exegete Delcor has pointed out, the phrase most commonly used by apocalyptic writers to denote the divine inspiration that has produced their visions is 'J'ai vu'. *Le Livre de Daniel*, p. 30.

¹⁸ King, 'Henri Barbusse: *Le Feu* and the Crisis of Social Realism', p. 48. In Rieuneau's brief analysis of the novel, the observation is made that Barbusse's critics, including Cru, reproached him for producing 'une image [...] déformée par une passion pacifiste et surtout par une imagination spontanément portée vers l'horreur et l'apocalypse.' *Guerre et Révolution*, p. 13.

¹⁹ See pp. 143, 155, 170, 172, 188, 193, for examples.

²⁰ Barbusse made the same cataclysmic predictions in his newspaper articles: 'pour qui se donne la peine de regarder plus loin que la minute présente, c'est la bataille inévitable et sans cesse renaissante, de la fin du genre humain [...] la guerre finie et la paix faite, c'est la menace de l'expansion d'un autre pays à l'horizon, la multiplication farouche des armements, les villes devenant des casernes, les campagnes devenant des champs de manœuvres, des champs de bataille et des cimetières.' 'Les écrivains et l'utopie'/*Paroles*, p. 32. See also 'Aux anciens combattants'/*Paroles*, p. 25; and 'Le groupe "Clarté" '/*Paroles*, p. 101.

²¹ Barbusse, *Lueur*, pp. 114-15.

²² Barbusse expressed the same reductionist view in 'Vers les temps nouveaux': 'Les porteurs d'idées se divisent en deux masses: ceux qui veulent un changement de l'ordre social, ceux qui veulent ou acceptent le maintien de l'ordre ancien des choses. Toutes les tendances qui se dessinent entre ces deux extrêmes ne comptent pas'. *Paroles*, p. 114.

²³ Twice his name is taken in vain (see p. 130).

²⁴ Barbusse, *Le Feu* (Flammarion-Livre de poche, 1965; first published Flammarion, 1916), pp. 458-59. Subsequent page references are given in parenthesis in the text, preceded by *Le Feu*.

²⁵ Camus also makes use of the expression on the final page of the narrative of *L'Etranger*.

²⁶ Barbusse used precisely the same term in reference to Jesus in *Force* (Flammarion, 1926), p. 229. See also Barbusse, 'Jésus d'Henri Barbusse'.

²⁷ Cruickshank, *Variations on Catastrophe*, p. 85.

²⁸ See Rieuneau, *Guerre et Révolution*, p. 169.

²⁹ The individual cleric is a mere link in the chain. It was the chain rather than the link that Barbusse loathed, just as Orwell loathed Fascism but found it impossible to shoot a Fascist with his pants around his ankles in no man's land when fighting for the Republicans in the Spanish civil war.

³⁰ See King, 'Henri Barbusse: *Le Feu* and the Crisis of Social Realism', p. 48.

³¹ According to Attwater, Hubert, an eighth-century bishop, became the patron saint of hunters and trappers in Ardenne. *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (p. 170).

³² The title of Barbusse's next novel is clearly anticipated in this passage.

³³ Ecclesiastes 1.9: 'Ce qui fut, cela sera, ce qui s'est fait se refera; et il n'y a rien de nouveau sous le soleil!' (*La Bible de Jérusalem*.) 'Ce qui fut sera' is the title of one of

the chapters of Barbusse's next novel. Slightly modified, it was published by Flammarion in 1930 as a 'nouvelle' about the First World War.

³⁴ In 'Les écrivains et l'utopie', Barbusse described 'les ministres des religions' as 'fervents et actifs partisans d'un système qui enjoint de faire ce qu'on a toujours fait et de croire ce qu'on a toujours cru, et contemplant avec regret et convoitise la tache sombre et barbare que l'Église a étalée sur le monde pendant des siècles où elle a vraiment régné.' *Paroles* (p. 34).

³⁵ In *Judas* (p. 215), Barbusse wrote: 'Est-il besoin de flétrir la faillite massive, définitive, du catholicisme lors de la guerre de 1914? Dans cette mémorable circonstance, les clergés nationaux ont embrassé imperturbablement la cause militariste.'

³⁶ Rieuneau, *Guerre et Révolution*, pp. 170-71.

³⁷ Apel-Muller, 'Aragon devant le texte de Barbusse', p. 149; Danielle Bonnaud-Lamotte, 'Principes éthiques et procédés esthétiques de Barbusse dans le roman *Clarté*', p. 17.

³⁸ Barbusse's thoughts on Paul can be examined in *Judas*, pp. 36ff, 43, 46, 91, 110, 127, 133, 153, 243; on the conversion in particular, see pp. 48-49. For two recent studies by scholars, see Wilson, *Paul. The Mind of the Apostle*; and Grant, *Saint Paul*.

³⁹ See pp. 224 and 226 for further examples.

⁴⁰ According to Harvey, Flora was an Italian deity of fertility and flowers who had a temple near the Circus Maximus and in whose honour games (*Ludi Florales/Floralia*) were held. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (p. 178).

⁴¹ In 'Vers les temps nouveaux', Barbusse likewise uses sanctifying adjectives, viz: 'Toutes les saintes multitudes opprimées se réveillent'; and 'Beaucoup de nous accompliront cette mission sacrée [de nous multiplier] ensemble'. *Paroles* (pp. 112-13, p. 118).

⁴² Barbusse, 'Réponse à mes calomniateurs' / *Paroles*, p. 70.

⁴³ Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 168. Barbusse had already sent Wilson a telegram offering support on behalf of the ARAC. See 'Un télégramme de Barbusse à Wilson'.

⁴⁴ Barbusse, 'Le Citoyen du monde'. Such talk was not at all unusual at the time. A writer for *La République Française* enthused: 'Comme le Christ, il s'adresse aux hommes de bonne volonté. Il a des préceptes qui ressemblent à ceux du vieil Évangile'. Quoted in Baudorre, *Barbusse* (p. 172). One of Barbusse's fellow co-founders of the ARAC, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, sang Wilson's praises in *Le Populaire de Paris*, 5 February 1919, in a similar vein: 'C'est un pasteur qui parle, avec toute sa pieuse ferveur, c'est l'apôtre des peuples qui prêche'. Quoted in Baudorre, 'Barbusse en 1919: De Wilson à Lénine' (p. 47).

⁴⁵ Baudorre, 'Barbusse en 1919: De Wilson à Lénine', p. 46.

⁴⁶ Much of the letter, dated 6 November 1918, is reproduced in Baudorre, *Barbusse*, pp. 192-93.

⁴⁷ *Naf* 16524, f. 178.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 171.

⁴⁹ Michel, 'Henri Barbusse (1873-1935). Littérature et engagement', p. 139.

⁵⁰ Picciola, 'Clarté ou le nouvel Évangile', pp. 143-44.

⁵¹ Spitzer, *Studien zu Henri Barbusse*, p. 47; my translation.

⁵² Ghéon, 'Georges Duhamel et le règne du cœur'.

PART THREE

CHAPTER SIX

‘... NOUS, QU’ON NOMME LES CHRÉTIENS’: *LES ENCHAÎNEMENTS* (1925)

Published in two volumes in February 1925, *Les Enchaînements* is Henri Barbusse’s longest, and most ambitious novel;¹ and his first as a member of the nascent PCF, which he joined in February 1923 as a result of the anti-Communist clampdown that followed the French occupation of the Ruhr.² Although much of the novel was composed before Barbusse decided to join the Party — according to Vidal, preparatory work began in 1920³ — Barbusse’s sympathy for the Bolsheviks and the Russian revolution had been made unmistakably clear both in his increasingly abundant newspaper articles and in his non-fictional works, *Lueur*, *Paroles* (both 1920) and *Couteau* (1921).

According to Vidal, Barbusse described *Les Enchaînements* in the following terms:

Les thèses qui ressortent de ce livre sont que le panorama historique donne le spectacle d’une éternelle oppression des masses par une minorité privilégiée et qu’il y a nécessité, pour changer cet ordre de choses séculaire, de pousser la révolution jusqu’aux fondements même de la société: sinon, c’est l’éternel recommencement avec des noms différents.⁴

In his preface to the novel, Barbusse says that he began by immersing himself in a mass of ‘précisions documentaires’, bringing ‘aucune idée préconçue ni quant au fond ni même quant à la forme de l’ouvrage.’⁵ Be this as it may, *Les Enchaînements* is clearly the work of a pro-Communist author. A first-century social revolutionary is described, anachronistically, as a ‘communiste’ (I, p. 184); there are references to the hammer and sickle (I, pp. 167, 280) and ‘La logique rouge; la vérité rouge’ (II, p. 274). In the closing pages of the narrative, there is praise for, amongst others, Karl Marx (II, p. 290).

Unwilling to write another ‘war novel’ after *Le Feu* and *Clarté*,⁶ but eager to denounce the Great War still further and explain its underlying causes, Barbusse expanded what was to have been a ‘nouvelle’ into a fictionalized history of the human

race from pre-Antiquity to the present. The culmination of the novel is the longest and antepenultimate chapter, 'Ce qui fut sera', which deals with the First World War, the defining experience of Barbusse's life. Thus, *Les Enchaînements*, like the novels of the second phase of Barbusse's career, is not a critique of religion, as such; it is a literary exposition of a capitalist system that is thought to make war inevitable, a thesis which the author projects backwards to the very dawn of human history.⁷ As in *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, however, Barbusse's religious preoccupations are conspicuous to such an extent that they cannot be ignored. It will be seen in this chapter that Barbusse the Communist, like Barbusse the socialist republican, was intent in *Les Enchaînements* on demonstrating the perceived link between religion and war, and the central position of the Church within the conservative camp. The development in his treatment of religion is provided by the expanded time-frame, which lends an historical perspective that is merely implied, or stated in the earlier works. Significantly, also, he proposes Communism as an alternative form of faith in the parallels he draws between the contemporary Communist movement and primitive Christianity.

As in *L'Enfer* and *Le Feu*, the narrative perspective is that of a sketchy first-person narrator. In this case, however, Clément Trachel, a young poet struggling to establish himself on the literary scene in 1912, travels far and wide in time and space, assuming a large number of personae and living out their experiences. The phenomenon which enables Trachel's spatio-temporal displacements is 'Métempsychose. Le voyage de corps en corps de l'âme indestructible' (I, p. 79). Some of the narrator's personae have no names; others do, some of them recalling the narrator's, as in the case of the thirteenth-century monk, Clément Nourrit, or the post-Napoleonic liberal 'baron conseiller d'Etat', Séraphin Trachel. Sometimes he is a conscience amongst the oppressed masses — a slave worker building a pyramid (I, pp. 46-54); sometimes he is

the oppressor — the medieval despot Egbert, the baron of Elcho (I, pp. 245-68). There is constant movement from one level of first-person consciousness to another and often the lines between the two are so blurred that it is impossible for the reader to ascertain the level at which actions and thoughts are being relayed. Although it is a novel of ideas, there is some dramatic interest in the shape of Trachel's relationship with Marthe Uriel. The tension, such as it is, derives from the narrator's indecision as to whether or not to reveal to Marthe his unusual psychological experience. He chooses not to do so and they grow apart as his political consciousness develops.

Despite the flux and superimpositions of consciousness, there is an underlying linearity in the chronology; and thematic unity is provided by the war motif. In the pre-Christian era, the narrator hears in a three-way exchange between a Greek, an Egyptian and a Jew the observation that the world is now 'à bout, vaincu par la guerre' (I, p. 145). En route to Ireland at some date posterior to 1228,⁸ twelve monks on a voyage to Ireland discuss the political situation in contemporary Europe. 'Chacun est en guerre avec chacun', remarks one of the migrants (II, p. 83). Later in the narrative, the Renaissance may well have brought a flowering of the arts and their export to the New World but war continues to blight the human race: 'La chance, le jeu de la guerre, ah! On aime tant la guerre, on le désire si fougueusement' (II, p. 136). By the time of the First World War, a conflict sold to Barbusse's generation as 'la der' des der's', the point has been well and truly established: 'La guerre est nécessaire, pourquoi? Parce que tout le monde le laisse dire' (II, p. 252). As the title of 'Ce qui fut sera' is intended to indicate, history has repeated itself, time and again, war begetting war, in an endless cycle resulting from human inertia. The comments on wars past are essentially an authorial comment on, and a denunciation of the First World War just ended; the logic of the narrative condemns the generations of the present and the future to still more

wars, on ever greater scales, unless the vicious circle of 'les enchaînements' is broken by means of social reform on the back of a genuine revolution.

As was pointed out in the analysis of *Clarté*, 'Ce qui fut sera' is a religious syntagma which Barbusse makes extensive use of in that novel to subvert traditional forms of religion as represented by Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular by highlighting the role played by religion in the preservation of the status quo. In *Les Enchaînements*, Barbusse employs the syntagma taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes to the same end.⁹ The narrator is present to hear a Chaldean priest expatiating on the historical reasons for the primacy of Chaldean culture, during the course of which he remarks that 'Tout ce qui fut fait sera refait. Les premiers actes ont asservi d'avance tous les hommes à venir' (I, p. 91). During the above-mentioned passage to Ireland, the narrator is given a detailed disquisition on the 'changing' hegemonies in western Europe. These are, in fact, essentially always the same: 'Le pouvoir de l'occident n'a fait que changer des mains — comme l'empire des Perses, qu'Alexandre sauva tout puissamment lorsqu'il parut le détruire. Refaire, refaire! Tout ce qui fut sera refait, selon la grossière fatalité des ressemblances' (II, p. 11).

In *Les Enchaînements*, much more so than in *Clarté*, however, the 'Ce qui fut sera' syntagma is used to establish the perceived link between religion and war. If 'Chacun est en guerre avec chacun', if war is always happening or is about to happen somewhere on the face of the earth,¹⁰ it is because 'chacun, dès qu'il le peut, fait entrer le jeu de ses affaires dans les stables et larges rivalités *religieuses* et politiques' (II, pp. 83-84; my italics). It is no coincidence that Barbusse should have decided to entitle the key chapter of *Les Enchaînements* 'Ce qui fut sera'. Immediately after pointing out that war is 'le sujet du drame des hommes', the narrator adds, evoking the title of the chapter in a further reprise of the motif: 'L'échelle subsiste, qu'on n'a pu désarticuler du milieu des choses, et ce qui fut sera [...] l'avenir est noué grossièrement au passé

[...], j’y vois la guerre. Des souvenirs, des souvenirs: la guerre future!’ (II, p. 203). He reiterates the point on the same page: ‘Tout ce qui fut fait sera refait. Je ferme à demi les yeux sur cette genèse’. When an interlocutor, having suggested that war is ineluctable because human inertia makes it ineluctable, asks Trachel whether he does not see that it is ‘partout et toujours la même chose’ he can but answer in the affirmative: ‘Oui. [...] N’avaient-elles pas retenti depuis des éternités, ces paroles, heurtées aux têtes dures et obscurcies des hommes, leur montrant les mêmes évidences, le même crime d’évidence [?]’ (p. 252).

In his brief analysis of the novel, one of the three lexical fields that Relinger identifies in *Les Enchaînements* is what he labels ‘le discours biblique’. In addition to ‘Ce qui fut sera’, Relinger alerts the reader to a number of syntagmas from the same biblical provenance, such as ‘dieu des armées’ (II, p. 104), which evokes the ‘Seigneur des Armées’ to be found in the Epistle of James (5.4). He provides numerous examples of sentences, or even passages that he relates to the Old Testament. Relinger’s conclusion is that while the function of all three lexical fields is to denounce war, the biblical discourse in the novel has also a subversive purpose: Barbusse makes use of Holy Writ, paradoxically, to show that war is *not* a form of divine punishment like famine, drought and the plague, but entirely human in origin. In doing so, he subverts God, the Jewish matrix out of which Christianity grew, and the Church *vis-à-vis* the latest war and war in general: ‘La solution n’est [...] pas en l’Eglise qui est au service du pouvoir et de la Guerre. Elle n’est pas davantage en Dieu. *Les Enchaînements* utilisent la lettre de la Bible pour lui donner sens contraire.’¹¹

As with the biblical syntagmas, so with the eschatological markers. These are less pervasive than they are in *Le Feu* and *Clarté* but it is clear that in *Les Enchaînements*, Barbusse is once again intent on giving his portrayal of the war a pseudo-apocalyptic dimension.¹² In ‘Ce qui fut sera’, there is no shortage of references

to the element of fire. The narrator sees six soldiers, one after another, who have been ‘brûlés par une flamme qui a passé’ (p. 233). The effects of fire on human flesh are everywhere apparent. There are ‘poings carbonisés, en paquets, en fagots [...] en même temps qu’une odeur de viande grillée’ (p. 239). The fire that rains down from above will not let even dead men be. The narrator beholds skeletons, ‘morts ossifiés [...] déterrés par le feu avec les croix qui leur ressemblent’ (pp. 239-40). As in *Le Feu*, the polysemous word ‘ciel’ or its adjectival derivative ‘céleste’ are used in reference to the origin of the destruction visited upon the earth and mankind in the shape of the French and German front line troops: ‘D’effrayantes nuques grises ont été disjointes, le tenon cassé, pilées et enfoncées dans la terre par la fureur céleste’ (p. 232); ‘On ne voit pas les hommes, mais on voit les orages qui les enveloppent, les montagnes tombant du ciel sur eux’ (p. 223). On one occasion, the temptation to make his purpose perfectly clear to the reader seems to have got the better of the author. In conversation with an observer, the narrator is told about the barrage that has preceded the French attack: ‘Nous en avons vu depuis minuit se passer partout!’ the observer exclaims. ‘Si vous aviez vu! La nuit, la fumée se change en flammes comme dans la Bible’ (p. 224).

There can be little doubt thereafter that Barbusse, as in his earlier war narratives, is again drawing on Daniel and Revelation in order to create the impression that the End is nigh. As in *Clarté* and *Le Feu*, the narrative is studded with nouns and their derivatives that are redolent of disaster on a universal scale.¹³ As a result of his unusual psychological experience, Trachel has known little but war, the latest engendering the next. There is, however, a sense in which the war that effectively brings to a close the narrative of *Les Enchaînements* brings with it, also, the end of the world:

Nous sommes à la fin des âges. Le monde est à bout, usé par la guerre [...]. Depuis les *déluges*, la masse humaine est de plus en plus vaincue. Telle est la forme de suicide que prend la fin du monde [...]. (p. 263; my italics)

In the final chapter, the narrator observes that it is exploitation, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, a phenomenon as old as the human race itself, that causes the tensions that ultimately lead to conflict. Such is the history of humanity. In the fading light of dusk, he sees the result of the capitalist system, 'la guerre blanche et noire aussi clairement que si on la regardait au loin dans les cieux avec les écailles lumineuses de ses continents, la planète qui va aux abîmes' (p. 289).

As Relinger has remarked, Barbusse is using the Bible to make a secular point, namely that it is the socio-economic system rather than God, who does not exist, that has determined human experience throughout history; and that it is this system that makes war, and the misery that war entails, inevitable. Trachel is under no illusions that the 'châtiment' attributed to the heavens is entirely human in origin and, as such, self-inflicted. He also inverts/subverts the biblical explanation for man's Fall: 'Cette punition, les religions l'attribuent au péché originel, et cette explication sauvage dans son absurdité, est la seule qui ait eu au moins les proportions immenses de la réalité. [...] Ma voix dit toute seule: Le péché originel de l'obéissance' (p. 238).

As in *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, the great disaster that has befallen humanity is shown to have been the work of not God but humankind, since it is human beings that have created the capitalist system, the weapon of their own destruction, either employing it in order to protect vested interests or ensuring its preservation by not rebelling against it. This latter point is reiterated a little later in the narrative of 'Ce qui fut sera'. 'Tout ça', comments the narrator's interlocutor, referring to the situation that the soldiers find themselves in, 'c'est parce qu'on a obéi'. He adds that, 'à leur manière', their superiors ('chefs') are right to send them off like cattle to slaughter, if they are passive and foolish enough to obey: 'Ce n'est pas eux, c'est nous les malfaiteurs. S'il n'y avait pas toi et moi, ils ne pourraient rien faire' (pp. 251-52).¹⁴ The enlightened soldier who

speaks here contends that war is necessary only because human inertia makes it so, and nobody objects.¹⁵

Although it is the author's belief that war is the inevitable corollary of the capitalist system, this belief is not demonstrated in the fiction of *Les Enchaînements* in the way that it is demonstrated in Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle*, for example; it is merely stated and the reader has the impression that *the* major cause of war generally is not capitalism as such but religion. Because of the length of *Les Enchaînements* and the scope provided by its shifting levels of narrative consciousness, the author was able to expand the cultural horizon of that of his earlier works. By continually moving his narrator (and the reader) both spatially and temporally, Barbusse presents a much broader historical overview than had hitherto been possible. The narrative features lengthy polemical discussions about the perceived merits and defects of Chaldean, Egyptian and Jewish religious beliefs and practices, as well as those of Ancient Greece (I, p. 157), Rome (I, p. 168) and the Far East (I, pp. 77, 130).¹⁶ Each religion is shown to have its God or gods, its rituals, practices and beliefs, sacred texts, and intermediaries in the form of an all-powerful priesthood: 'L'épaisseur du mystère nécessite le redoutable commentaire des prêtres et l'épouvante aigue fait pénétrer dans tous le culte du roi sacerdotal interposé entre ce qui est en haut et ce qui est en bas' (I, p. 99). Power is, therefore, concentrated in the hands of priests: 'Le bien, c'est d'obéir, non pas à sa conscience, mais à la parole des prêtres' (p. 103).

Given the constitutional similarities of the vast multiplicity of religions to which human history is shown to attest, the non-partisan is bound to reject them all.¹⁷ For the respective keepers of each individual faith, however, for whom each religion is generally the one *true* faith, the mere existence of other religions is an inevitable source of tension, intolerance and, ultimately, conflict. This would be the case even if the

various religious hierarchies were not cheek by jowl with their respective military hierarchies.

These points are brought together in Chapter three, 'Il y a deux vérités', the two truths being a belief in the primacy of Chaldean religious culture, on the one hand, and a belief in the primacy of Egyptian religious culture, on the other. At his primary level of consciousness, Trachel visits what turns out to be the Louvre (I, p. 104). He stops before a statue of a 'pontife [...]: la chose princière et sacerdotale de Chaldée dressé comme un autel dans le sanctuaire d'Egypte' (p. 104).¹⁸ The sight of the figure acts as a catalyst that takes the narrator to another level of consciousness. He suddenly finds himself in a temple in Eridu (p. 87). Those present become aware of 'un souffle de dispute' (p. 89). A question is asked to which an answer must be found as a matter of urgency: 'des deux grands pays, lequel est le plus grand, lequel est le premier? La création triomphante appartient-elle à la Chaldée?' A priest, described as 'le prêtre étranger qui nous ressemble pourtant comme un frère', makes the case for Chaldea, providing a plethora of proper nouns — cities, kings and gods as supporting evidence (pp. 89-90).¹⁹ The Egyptians, the narrator included, are infuriated by this display of nationalistic bombast (p. 91).

The Chaldean priest's assertion that his people are responsible for the religion on which all other religions are based ('Ceux que j'ai nommés épelèrent les premiers l'informe religion qui devint toutes les religions', p. 91) draws an angry refutation from an Egyptian speaking on behalf of the others. Undeterred, the Chaldean priest launches into an even longer disquisition in praise of Chaldean religious culture (pp. 92-95), beginning with the time when 'le pasteur d'Abraham s'établit du pays d'Ur en Chaldée dans celui d'Aran' (p. 92). Chaldea, 'la mère des mères', has had an enormous influence in Mesopotamia (p. 92); the Far East (p. 93); Assyria (pp. 93-95); and in Jewish Palestine, in particular (p. 95). The foreigner concludes with the comment that although

‘le règne chaldéen’ is long since over, ‘il faut rétablir sur son beau trône la géante et fragile vérité.’

A man described as the ‘maître’, who eventually appears also to be a priest (p. 101), mounts a passionate counter-attack in favour of Egyptian religious culture, giving an inventory of hallowed Egyptian cities and men, god-kings and gods (pp. 96-99). It is Egypt, not Chaldea, that has provided the template for all other religions: ‘Et dans tous les temples du monde, tu reconnaîtras la même initiation fatidique du profane, avec ses degrés et ses épreuves copiées sur celles des cérémonies initiatrices d’Isis et d’Osiris’ (pp. 99-100). Like his Chaldean counterpart, the Egyptian rejects any claim that might be made for the originality of Judaism, its much vaunted temple in Jerusalem being no more than an ‘imitation du système cosmique, modelé sur le même plan que le temple tyrien d’Astarté et de Melkhart’ (p. 100). If the Jews are guilty of appropriation, however, so is every other religious culture in the known world. In the temple of Agra, Isis is known as ‘Demeter’, ‘comme elle l’est aussi à celui d’Eleusis en Attique, et à Corinthe, et en Argolide et en Phocide’. Isis is the original name not just of one god that is really an Isis ersatz but of *all* the divinities, ‘du Septentrion ou de la Perse, de la Chaldée ou de la Pentapotamie, dans les monastères des Esséniens et des Thérapeutes, des Druides, des Pythagoriciens et des Kabbalistes’ (p. 100).

Predictably, given that this is not a dialogue so much as two juxtaposed, defensive monologues, the outcome is stalemate. The ‘pontife noir’ declares the universe to be round; the ‘pontife blanc’, square. Somewhat surprisingly, however, these two representatives of their respective cultures are not intransigent enough to be unable to share a knowing smile of complicity (p. 101):

Ils savent bien qu’entre eux, par delà les signes rétrécis et les palissades en forme de mots, il n’y a qu’une seule religion, et au fond de la vie: celle qui a été inventée par les cœurs qui existent, celle qui est la sincérité des hommes, le cri des cris; mais qu’il faut qu’il y en ait plusieurs, afin de consacrer par le jeu de la dispute, le pouvoir de chaque souverain et l’ordre établi à travers la mêlée humaine. (p. 101)

Here the link between religion and power is clearly articulated, as is the concept that the identity of a culture is dependent upon the existence of a significant Other. If Chaldea did not exist, Egypt would have to invent it, and vice versa.

Reflecting at what appears to be his primary level of consciousness again, the narrator remarks that the two cultures, the two 'vérités' in question, interpenetrated, 'par quelques surfaces visibles et quelques pratiques'; that this interpenetration and cross-fertilization occurred 'parce qu'on l'a voulu, pour des raisons d'état, et à la suite de conciliabules et de pactes entre des prêtres, des généraux vainqueurs et des penseurs' (p. 102). It is not difficult for the narrator to see why 'les religions se haïssent autant qu'elles se ressemblent, et aiment le luxe des complications, et s'épient, à l'affût, dans les maçonneries disparates des races' (pp. 102-103); it is to keep men in ignorance and 'l'éblouissement désespéré et la docilité, autour de la grande affaire des rois' (p. 103).

Although all religions are essentially the same, then, religion is a marker of cultural distinctiveness and an instrument for subjugating the masses. As such, religion is, in terms of domestic politics, the conservative force *par excellence*, as well as an inevitable source of intercultural tension and conflict at international level. During the part of his monologue dealing with the Assyrians, the Chaldean priest details this people's bloodthirstiness and penchant for war, telling of their brutality in the conquest of the district of 'Saraoush': 'Je [the Assyrian] châtaï leurs armées, je les décapitai, je semai leurs cadavres et les empilai dans les gouffres. Leurs chefs, je les empalai et les écorchai vifs devant les restants des populations enchaînées'. Death, destruction, suffering without end were imposed upon the Other and for one simple reason: 'j'ai pris les armes pour glorifier mon Dieu Assur!' (p. 94) Crucially, although the cultural context is totally different and dozens of centuries have since elapsed — not to mention several hundred pages of narrative — it is precisely these words that Trachel recalls at

the end of his experience in the trenches of the Western Front: ‘Et je ne sais pourquoi se refait obstinément d’un bout à l’autre de ma tête la ligne tonitruante du mensonge humain dans les nuées: “J’ai pris les armes pour glorifier mon Dieu Assur!” ’ (II, p. 270) While the text of ‘Ce qui fut sera’ itself contains no analysis of the causes of this particular war, the reappearance of the above line at the end of the narrative suggests that religion is the principal cause of this and every other war during the period between the Assyrian conquest of ‘Saraoush’ and the present.

For Barbusse, no religion had more blood on its hands than did Christianity. In *Clarté*, he had already demonstrated his belief that Jesus should be dissociated from the Church that built itself on his name. Although Jesus does not appear in the text of *Les Enchaînements*,²⁰ the same point is made on his behalf by Sérya on the journey to an Ireland whose Christians have remained faithful to Jesus’s teaching: ‘S’il n’y avait qu’une seule créature pour ne pas reconnaître le christianisme, ce serait Jésus-Christ!’ (II, p. 29). The cleavage between Jesus and the Church that Barbusse had created in *Clarté* is widened further in *Les Enchaînements*. What is implied — albeit not too subtly — in the earlier novel is now stated quite explicitly by the party of emigrant monks: ‘*aujourd’hui* le catholicisme est antichrétien, et il signifie la cruauté, l’ambition, la corruption et la simonie — le cadavre de Christ, l’Ante-Christ, que les vendeurs du temple et les verseurs de sang présentent aux hommes’ (p. 17).²¹ In *Clarté*, there is no mention of the first generations of Christians. In *Les Enchaînements*, there is and, as will be seen later in this chapter of the thesis, there is evident warmth for them. The revolutionary changes that they set in motion were halted, then reversed: ‘C’est la force chrétienne qui a triomphé, ce n’est pas la vérité chrétienne. Le vrai christianisme, mon frère, n’a jamais fait que peu d’adeptes, et n’a pas réussi sous les cieux’ (p. 17). Thus, having been a dynamic, revolutionary force for good, the Church, as Barbusse saw it, became a repressive, ultra-conservative force, the cause of mass death and destruction,

and actually anti-Christian, if one understands the Christ to have been ‘Celui qui poussa le cri de douleur, de sagesse et d’égalité’ (p. 28).²²

The reason for the alliance between the Church and the secular powers is explained by one monk as that mysterious inversion of aims and values that would appear to be the inevitable outcome when the disenfranchised finally obtain power: ‘Nous avons été esclaves, maintenant ayons des esclaves! Nous avons souffert, maintenant faisons souffrir! Nous avons été ignorés, bâtissons l’ignorance divine’ (p. 15). A somewhat more perspicacious commentator expands upon this observation, asseverating that the political and the religious are merely reverse sides of the same will to dominate and control, and that even though the two are united in a common endeavour, it is by the grace of the former that the existing accommodation has been reached:

Si le pape et l’empereur bataillent l’un contre l’autre, ce n’est pas comme disent les docteurs, qu’ils soient chacun dépositaires d’un principe différent, le spirituel et le temporel. C’est au contraire parce que leurs ambitions se ressemblent, que leurs appétits sont exactement les mêmes, et qu’ils sont accrochés l’un à l’autre: deux brutes royales. Le pouvoir doit à la religion une âme, un signe de ralliement visible sur une bannière, mais la religion doit plus encore au pouvoir, soit qu’il la persécute, soit qu’il se l’approprie. Sans lui elle ne serait qu’une douceur étonnée, timide, semée dans les maisons et même dans les maisons des cœurs, attachant secrètement chaque tendresse aux nuages. Il lui a fourni la structure, et la domination, et le riche cri de guerre. (pp. 15-16)

Whatever the exact balance of power between the Church and the secular powers of imperial Rome may have been,²³ it is clear from the above that by entering into its alliance with the former, the Church is deemed to have turned its back on its revolutionary beginnings; forfeited its moral authority; and necessarily made itself an accomplice of the State in the mass murder that is war. Consequently, ‘le christianisme qui devait tout détruire s’est d’abord détruit lui-même’ (p. 17).²⁴

All of the above points — the transformation of Christianity from a force for change into an upholder of the status quo, the blood on its hands as a result of its

association with the secular powers, its paying only lip-service to the teachings of Christ, the political expedient that religion represents — are insisted upon time and again in the narrative of *Les Enchaînements* once the focus switches from religions in general to Christianity in particular. Chapter nine, ‘La cause’, relates the wrongdoings of the medieval despot ‘Egbert, baron souverain d’Elcho’. The occasion is the banquet he hosts to celebrate the birth of a son. Forever waging war, he derives considerable sadistic pleasure from the unspeakable, Nero-like suffering he inflicts upon the peoples he conquers. His eyes ‘pleuraient de plaisir’ (I, p. 248) the day he had the eyes of some victims poked out after they had been forced to watch the slitting of the throats of their children. He satisfies his sexual desires with whomsoever it takes his fancy, whenever the urge makes itself felt (p. 257). Even though they keep him in power, he is witheringly disparaging in the comments he passes on his soldiers, ‘insectes qui brillent de l’éclat pointu des armes’ (p. 258). He is equally dismissive of his civilian subjects, who, to his great disdain, spend most of their time on all fours in the fields.

A greater sinner it is more difficult to imagine and Egbert readily acknowledges himself to be a sinner. He has every intention of repenting, too, confident that his sins will be forgiven him by suitably compliant men of the cloth:

Ah, j’ai commis bien des péchés, et je serais damné, s’il n’y avait pas la religion. [...] Mais il y a des grâces pour nous autres. Charlemagne confessa à Saint Gilles tous ses péchés, sauf un. Et Dieu fit déposer par un ange une petite lettre sur l’autel pour dire à Saint Gilles qu’il fallait l’absoudre tout de même parce que c’était Charlemagne. (p. 262)

Obviously, there is no question of repentance here, despite which Egbert counts on, and, like Charlemagne before him, is bound to be granted, absolution at the hour of his death. It is to the Church’s eternal discredit, and a heinous insult to Jesus, that the likes of Egbert be allowed to be seen to be acting with total impunity, confident of the blessing of Christianity. Upon the arrest and the bringing into his presence of ‘Doon le Réchin, baron vassal de Rulamort’, with whom and his kind Egbert is rarely not at war,

the tyrant declares war again (p. 266). When he does so, significantly, he is holding a crucifix in his hand. Even though he drops this, picks up 'un morceau de bois dur qu'il emporte pour l'aider à détruire les virginités' (p. 267), and leaves, the Church will soon have another war to endorse, and even sanctify.

The extent to which the Church has sold its soul in its pact with the secular powers becomes painfully apparent in the next chapter. Egbert has died suddenly, before the investiture of his successor, which in this instance is problematic: 'Il faut que les hommes d'Eglise, avec leur luxe oriental de crosses, de mitres et de rubans, déclarent le fils mâle investi, du vivant de son père, de la dignité souveraine' (p. 272). With the collusion of these 'hommes d'Eglise', Egbert's corpse, attired in full royal regalia and bound to his throne, is presented to his subjects — kept at a safe distance — as though the king lives on (pp. 270-71). Just to compound matters, Dorilon, a poacher, is hanged in front of his son, immediately after this charade, at the behest of the late king, for having stolen a pheasant (pp. 264-65). The poacher's claim that the animal was already dead has fallen on deaf ears and clemency has not been shown, although the life of Doon le Réchin, the representative of Egbert's deadly rival, *has* been spared. Once again, the clergy and by extension, the Church as an institution, are implicated in this wrongdoing: 'Après les actes solennels, et en manière de réjouissance, on procéda sur la colline ornée d'une parure scintillante d'hommes d'armes et d'église, à la pendaison du vilain' (p. 273). Dorilon is associated with the ultimate human symbol of sacrifice: 'Et dans le soir où l'on est obligé de voir que le pendu — qui a râlé: non! — ressemble à son voisin crucifié, s'agrandit l'espoir, bonheur des malheureux' (p. 276).

In the meantime, Réchin, taking advantage of Egbert's clemency and the distractions caused by the investiture of the new king, has reappeared on the scene with his troops and put Elcho to the torch. By accident or design, everything is destroyed except the baronial castle, the church, and the convent; and, 'La croix du calvaire devint

sanglante dans l'ombre' (p. 276). The scene changes but also stays the same: the investiture of an 'enfant royal', by an archbishop, in a French cathedral. The alliance between Church and State is at its most apparent. The crown prince 'récite de sa voix légère qui, par moments, semble n'être qu'une voix d'enfant, les devoirs religieux' (p. 278). The archbishop places more than just 'la dalmatique des sous-diacres' on the shoulders of the young king: 'Il lui a mis ainsi le catholicisme sur les épaules'. All of this is approved, 'selon l'usage', by 'les dignitaires de l'Eglise', 'les feudataires', and 'le bon peuple'. Crown, Sceptre and 'Main de Justice' are all his; the affairs of this little boy of flesh and blood 'se trouvaient désormais directement jointes à celles de Dieu' (p. 279). Whatever the crimes the new king now commits, he will be forgiven them by a compliant Church, because the Church has a vested secular interest in forgiving its partners in the conservative alliance.

The alliance between Church and State, the murder and the plunder of others in the name of the king and a nationalistic God, are starkly illustrated in 'Le cercle du monde', which is spread over two chapters.²⁵ In the first of them, Chapter eighteen, the date is 1461 (II, p. 100). The narrative perspective is that of one of the descendants of the shipwreck of the *Sainte-Baume*, which had set sail some two hundred years previously; the setting, somewhere in the New World, as yet largely unknown to the Old. Isolated for so long, the descendants have lost 'le secret de la grandeur' (p. 99) and are on peaceful terms with the indigenous population (pp. 101-102). One day, a point appears on the distant horizon and it turns out to be 'magiciens d'Europe, pleins du secret du monde!' (p. 103) Eager for news about developments on the Old Continent, the descendants are brought quickly up to date: 'Tout est changé! Le monde est transformé! [...] Le monde est à bout, vaincu par la guerre. Mais nous sommes à la fin des âges de fer' (pp. 103-104).

Pressed to do so, the new arrivals go into detail and it becomes quickly apparent that religion has been a major factor — again, perhaps, *the* major factor — in the wars that have scarred the face of the Europe of the last two centuries:²⁶ ‘Là-haut, là-bas, où les chevaliers Teutoniques sont venus, après les chevaliers de Livonie, Frères du Christ et Porte-Glaives, planter la Croix dans le sang au bord de la mer’ (p. 105); ‘L’archevêque de Riga combattait l’Ordre dont cependant il faisait partie. Jadis l’évêque de Riga avait bien appelé contre la milice du Christ, le Grand-Duc idolâtre de Lithuanie’ (p. 106); ‘Comme les survivants des Colonna ne furent plus que des bêtes sauvages dans les fôrets, après qu’ils eurent été chassés, et leurs palais labourés, par Boniface VIII. Mais des Colonna, il en resta un qui tua le pape’ (p. 107).²⁷ The fracture of the unity of Christendom has caused internecine war amongst Christian nations and led to the loss of the Holy Land (pp. 113-14). ‘Espoir!’, however: ‘Tout va changer, tout est changé! Le passé est passé. Les temps nouveaux!’ (p. 115) For it is Reason that now rules the day: ‘Désormais, la pensée, on peut la semer comme des grains de blé’ (p. 118).

At this point in the narrative, for the first time in Barbusse’s fiction, the focus in his critique of Christianity switches from Catholicism to Protestantism, and a hopeful note is struck. With the Renaissance in full swing, the texts of Antiquity have been rediscovered; the one true religion reformed by the ‘retroouveurs de chemins’ (p. 121) — ‘Lollard, et Jean de Wicliffe [...] et Jean Huss [...] et aussi Jérôme de Prague’ (pp. 120-21). They have transferred authority from the Church to the Bible, with devastating effects: ‘Avec le livre grand ouvert devant soi comme un autel, chacun est son pape. Ceux-là ont commencé à traduire les textes sacrés en langue populaire, ils ont rendu par brassées leur livre aux hommes’ (p. 121). Naturally enough, given the secular stakes, the Roman Catholic Church has fought back (p. 123)²⁸ but the process set in motion by Huss and his colleagues has acquired an irresistible momentum: ‘Une nouvelle église

chrétienne se forme avec un pur rameau originel dans chaque cœur' (p. 123). The chapter concludes with the observation that the apogee of civilization has been reached: 'l'univers est enfin au bout de ses malheurs, pour annoncer la liberté, l'égalité, la fraternité [...]. Après les époques gaspillées, tout reprend dans le grand sens naturel, et quand on a tenté cette voie, on ne sait plus s'arrêter' (p. 126).

In the second of the two chapters entitled 'Le cercle du monde', the setting is the same but decades have elapsed and it is Clément (p. 149), the son of the narrator of the previous chapter that continues the narrative. The long-departed visitors from the Old Continent had left behind high hopes for both social and religious renewal: 'Plus de peuples opprimés par des hommes prédestinés ou par d'autres peuples [...], la probité intime de l'effusion religieuse; plus de bûchers, plus de violences; le temple personnel, l'appui de l'humanité à l'humanité, remplaçant la loi sauvage de guerre' (p. 128). More visitors appear, this time Spanish conquistadors, speaking a very different kind of language. Everything, 'rivages, ports, îles, avec royaumes, villes, dépendances et populations, ayant existé, existant ou devant exister un jour' (p. 133), is seized in the name of the Spanish king underwritten by the Pope, 'qui coupe les parts de chacun des deux rois catholiques, du Pôle Arctique à l'Antarctique sur la mer du Sud' (p. 135).²⁹

In a lengthy dialogue with the king's notary, the narrator is disabused of all of the hopes of an earlier age. The New World is in the process of being stripped of its precious metals, and proselytized: 'Le continent, on en a extirpé l'or, et on l'a exorcisé de son idolâtrie' (p. 135). The narrator questions the notary about 'la sainte fraternité des hommes' and 'l'Eglise [...] revenue à ses sources pures' (p. 136). 'Elle est mieux que purifiée', he replies, by which he means that it has been purged, by flames that have consumed millions (p. 137). The notary concedes that the 'religion reformée' has taken root here and there, but only because 'elle est devenue une religion comme les autres. [...] Les princes et les rois s'en sont servis comme d'un instrument' (p. 139). He scoffs

at the theologians who have earned their doctorates by patiently working out, then explaining the doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism: 'Les frontières entre papistes et protestants, elles ont été faites au moyen du fer et du feu. [...] Il y a de graves cycles de guerre, que préparent là-haut les orages religieux' (p. 140).

Whatever the doctrinal differences might be, the fact is that religion has become inseparably tied to the affairs of state. The Protestants have made of their version of Christianity 'une religion comme les autres. Ils sont les suppôts des hommes exceptionnels dont les crimes ne s'appellent pas des crimes, et ils se déchargent sur le Seigneur Dieu' (p. 144). Eventually, the notary demands that Clément reveal the whereabouts of the gold, torches the locality, and cuts the throat of Clément's wife before his very eyes: 'Il avait fait vœu à Saint Jacques de Compostelle de tuer de sa main douze Indiens chaque jour en l'honneur des douze apôtres' (p. 149).

Thus, long before 'Ce qui fut sera', the chapter to which the entire narrative of *Les Enchaînements* tends, the link between war, on the one hand, and, on the other, religion in general and Christianity in particular has been established, and repeatedly and forcefully underscored. In *Les Enchaînements*, in a departure from Barbusse's previous works, there is no named cleric; and no priest is developed at all as a character. In other words, the Church is further dehumanized as the author sharpens his attack on the institution. In 'Ce qui fut sera', as in *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, the French Church is seen to lend its considerable moral support to the war effort, and the fight against an enemy who worships the same God (II, p. 263). It is also seen to collude in the suppression of dissident elements amongst troops on the French side. In a discussion between the 'prophète de malheur' and his two 'acolytes' (p. 247) which is overheard by the narrator, examples are given of men from the ranks who have been summarily executed by the French military authorities. One such is killed by firing squad simply for having inadvertently raised the alarm after mistaking a returning patrol for the enemy. He was

shot, 'pour l'exemple. Au milieu de tout l'régiment, avec l'aumônier, au premier rang, qui dit *amen*, et les baïonnettes comme des cierges' (p. 248).

This likening of bayonets to candles suggests a symbiosis between the respective institutions of the Church and the Army, a suggestion which is made elsewhere in the chapter. The narrator is only too aware that the bombardment that had preceded the French attack has not had the promised effect of destroying all of the enemy's defences. That these defences *would* be destroyed, the officers had promised the troops, 'avec des serments solennels et des effusions de prêtres, la main sur leur cœur, pour ne pas "porter atteinte au moral" ' (p. 236). Among the human and material debris that this, and other unkept promises have brought about, Trachel later discovers a soldier's letter: 'ce papier sans doute a été souillé et violé par les jésuites en uniformes, par les froides mains qui rampent autour de la conscience des foules' (p. 261). On his return to headquarters having accomplished his mission, Trachel learns that losses on the French side have been relatively light ('on ne fait pas d'omelette sans casser des œufs'), a 'mere' two and a half thousand. As the figure is deemed to be not quite light enough, however, the decision is taken to reduce it by a thousand. This is the figure that will go down in the official records, 'le chiffre historique, définitif, que nul ne pourra jamais modifier' (p. 266). The narrator points out that the headquarters have been established in a 'sanctuaire', the irony heightening his irritation: 'Dans le passé, les moines disposaient des événements sous la dictée de leurs supérieurs. Le militarisme imite la machination religieuse' (p. 266).³⁰ Both the religious and military hierarchies are determined to preserve the 'truth', and they lie blatantly in order to do so, by means of their false, hypocritical, and ultimately self-serving dogma, doctrines and commands. The conversation to which Trachel is privy prior to the above reflections underlines this point: the front line troops are cut to ribbons in pointless attacks; their leaders receive commendations, medals and the 'Légion d'honneur' (pp. 265-66).

The text of *Les Enchaînements*, like that of all of Barbusse's previous works, identifies a religious impulse in human beings. The 'suppliant' is never very far away from the narrator's various levels of consciousness: 'Les créatures lèvent les bras au ciel, cherchent à toucher le bleu avec leurs mains' (I, p. 39). Later in the narrative, observing a Greek in the pre-Christian era, Trachel remarks: 'il ne comprend pas que les deux bras tendus de l'adorateur fassent un triangle de l'infini, il ne distingue pas cette chute sans fond de la prière' (I, p. 159). In Chapter eight, 'Le Mystère d'Adam', which in its title carries obvious echoes of Barbusse's unfinished verse play of the mid-1890s, the narrator discusses man in the generic sense, and makes a number of generalizations about his destiny: 'Il vit — debout, plié, couché — voilà tout. Il vit. De l'enfance à la vieillesse, il ne chemine pas, il tombe. Il donne autant d'effort que de souffle. Rien ne reste pour lui: inutilité de sa vie.' The narrator adds, tellingly: 'Il lève les bras au ciel. Lui aussi, comme tous les autres, il s'acharne à ne pas mourir, à résister au temps qui le chasse, à durer' (I, p. 221).³¹ As in *L'Enfer*, where the narrator wonders who will write 'la bible du désir humain' having just written it himself, Trachel talks of 'Le livre des angoisses, la bible des histoires intimes; car chacun a une bible qui serait: se raconter [...] tout cela, ce sont de grandes choses que désormais je sais mieux qu'un autre embrasser' (I, p. 121).³²

Although this human need to believe is profound, Barbusse argues in *Les Enchaînements*, as in all of his previous works, that traditional forms of religion are not the answer, and least of all Christianity, which is once again portrayed as being completely unworthy of faith, this time in both its Catholic and Protestant forms. Not only is it shown to have compromised itself irredeemably through its association with the secular powers and the many wars it has either caused or blessed, it is also shown to be but one religion amongst many, and a hybrid religion at that.³³ The narrative makes

this clear in a number of subtle ways. When the narrator first enters the temple in which he witnesses the juxtaposed monologues of the Egyptian and the Chaldean priests, he passes through 'la porte qui perce le piédestal de la statue de la Sainte Trinité' (I, p. 88). What this Trinity consists of is nowhere specified but it has obvious connotations for the western reader.

According to the Egyptian priest, the religious practices in the Ancient world that he alludes to are all Egyptian in origin; and can be reduced to immolation, obsequies, and 'la résurrection rayonnante d'un homme. Cet homme, dont le mystère de toutes les initiations du monde joue le rôle symbolique de sacrifié et de sauveur, est un dieu; c'est le soleil', (p. 100). For 'C'est le soleil', Christians and those from a Christian background will read, 'C'est Jésus-Christ'. On the boat journey to Ireland, to which reference has already been made, Jesus Christ is seen to be merely another name for Mohammed, Siddartha and Lao-Tse: 'Il y en eut plusieurs, qui étaient le même. Son vrai nom, c'est: Celui qui poussa le cri de douceur, de sagesse et d'égalité'. Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Christianity; regardless of the name, a religion, 'c'est une religion comme toutes les autres' (II, p. 28).

In the long discussion between shipwrecked galley-slaves in the first volume, the conversation is dominated by a Greek, an Egyptian and a Jew. The narrator notices differences in emphasis between three more representatives of their respective religious cultures, 'le grec qui regarde tout ce qui vit, l'Egyptien qui regarde tout ce qui a vécu, le Juif qui regarde tout ce qui ne vit pas encore' (I, p. 159). The narrator is suddenly convinced by an unexplained insight that the greatest of the three is the Jew, 'l'adorateur en déséquilibre d'un dieu qui doit venir et qui ne vient pas. — Le plus grand c'était celui dont la plaie fraîche du Messie fendait éternellement le cœur.' Just as the Chaldean priest has pointed out, *en passant*, that the Tower of Babel was not a Jewish concept originally, but derives from the Chaldean 'Tour des Langues, qu'arrêta

avant le faite la confusion des langages, puis que fondit le vent des siècles' (p. 90), the narrator reminds the reader that the Messiah is not a Christian, but a Jewish concept in origin. Long before the narrative begins to focus on Christianity proper as the Faith of the western world, Christianity's credibility as a religion has already been seriously eroded. The reader has been well primed for the observation, made at the outset of the narrative of the second volume of the novel, that 'la plus grande des supercheres, c'est d'avoir planté le Nouveau Testament dans l'Ancien, le christianisme dans le mosaïsme rituel, et par là dans l'antique formule religieuse venu d'Egypte' (II, p. 16).³⁴

In short, then, Barbusse had no faith in the willingness or capacity of traditional religions as represented by Christianity to bring about the kind of social renewal that he was calling for. Indeed, as already stated, he had come to see it as a means of subjugating the masses.³⁵ As a member of the PCF, he looked upon the Church as a *political* enemy to be engaged in combat in the political arena.³⁶ This is made abundantly clear on the final page of the narrative of *Les Enchaînements*. Intent on using his literature as a vehicle for the direct expression of his political beliefs, Barbusse once again usurps his narrator and calls upon the people to throw off their chains.³⁷ The part played by the Church in the subjugation of the masses is stated not only extremely explicitly, but in a language loaded with religious associations.

Having declared on the penultimate page that 'il faut que l'intelligence règne' (II, p. 295), Barbusse/Trachel, likening himself to the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus, makes known the shame he feels at having been a witness to the Inquisition, 'une apothéose d'ignominie et de grotesque' (p. 296). He continues:

Il m'assaille, le souffle qui s'appuyait sur moi quand, un peu avant moi, le feu écrasait le coeur ardent des hérétiques, et que leurs corps illuminaient. [...] Et les supplices qui ne sont pas encore, je les subis d'avance, comme Jérémie. Est-il possible qu'on crucifie encore la chair fraîche de ceux qui ont montré la simplicité des enchaînements! Pitié, peuple, pitié pour lui. Sois ton coeur, sois ton génie. Lève-toi. Secoue l'ignoble respect encore cramponné sur toi avec ta souffrance. Deviens le démolisseur monumental, et ne lâche plus le monde. Prends-les par leurs habits sacrés, les pontifes de

la Patrie, de la Démocratie et de la Religion, et crache-leur à la figure. (p. 296)³⁸

When in the preface to the novel Barbusse indicates that at certain junctures in the narrative he has been unable to keep in check his anger and even hatred, ‘contre les causes trop visibles des grandes calamités communes’ (p. xii), he may well have had his paroxysmal ending in mind.

Although he was unable or unwilling to prevent his hostility towards institutional Christianity from finding very direct expression in his literary works from *Le Feu* onwards, *Les Enchaînements* marks a development in this respect, in the warmth shown to keepers of the Christian faith in its original, unadulterated form, as Barbusse saw it. Moreover, in *Les Enchaînements*, for the first time in his literature, Barbusse sought to illustrate a perceived parallelism between primitive Christianity — Jesus’s real legacy to humankind — and the contemporary Communist movement.³⁹

The relevant episode occurs in Chapter six, ‘Sur le rivage du temps’. At his primary level of consciousness, Trachel occasionally meets a fisherman by the seashore. The man is socially disadvantaged. He has a large family to feed and struggles to do so (‘la loi est mal faite, frappant les gens au hasard, [...] il faut faire une loi neuve’, I, p. 175). In the evening, the narrator returns to the spot and, at another level of consciousness, encounters a different fisherman. To the narrator’s unspoken thoughts (‘Il serait si simple que la loi de tous fût faite de manière à donner à chacun la place de vivre, et que la vie fût un arrangement et non une bataille’, p. 176), his mysterious companion replies, ‘C’est ce que nous avons commencé à faire au bord de ce lac’, the place being of considerable thematic significance, since, it will be remembered, it is by a lakeside that Jesus appears to Simon Paulin in *Clarté*. The fisherman, Etienne, is being hunted by Roman legionnaires and in his presence the narrator experiences a disconcerting combination of fear and hope (p. 177).

Etienne reveals to the narrator his identity as the head of a community of fishermen who live together, sharing their work and its fruits equally, each ever mindful of the collective, and determined to correct 'l'injustice du sort qui, si on le laisse faire trouve toujours le moyen de combler l'un aux dépens des autres'. Above all, Etienne's community is opposed to sovereignty and slavery. For this reason, 'la nouvelle famille qu'ils avaient inventée était aussi grande qu'elle était petite' (p. 178). Questioned by the narrator, Etienne states that the tenets by which they live have not been invented by him; he simply heard them being preached one evening at a crossroads and what he heard pleased him, because it seemed to correspond entirely to the needs of man (p. 180). The narrator is filled with admiration for his interlocutor. Etienne then reveals that he and his fellow commune-members are what are known as 'chrétiens' ('... Nous, qu'on nomme les chrétiens') and the narrator recoils in horror. For him the word 'chrétien' is synonymous with 'le rebelle, l'agitateur, l'anarchiste; celui qui hait l'ordre consacré, qui souille le respect dû à la Loi et au Temple, fomenté un complot contre l'Etat, celui qui exploite la rancune des misérables' (p. 181).

Despite his apparently mainstream, anti-Christian Jewish revulsion, the narrator accompanies Etienne on a hurried journey through the city and catches a glimpse of a condemned man, 'une étoile dans la foule' (p. 182), carrying his own cross towards Golgotha. Etienne starts to draw attention to himself. A baker who is a relative of his refuses to sell him bread, reproaching him for having rejected 'la croyance de ses pères' (p. 183). The 'marchands' are all in league against him. A 'petit employé du fisc' suddenly appears on the scene and publicly denounces Etienne. This causes a stir. The Christian's immediate reaction is to distance himself from the narrator for the narrator's own good (pp. 183-84). A priest on the threshold of the entrance to a nearby temple lends his voice to the outcry: 'C'est un sacrilège. Il bafoue la Loi et veut détruire le Temple et chasser les prêtres', adding to the distortions about Christianity with the

accusation that this particular believer slits the throats of children (p. 184). An old 'fonctionnaire' emerges from a public building and rails against Etienne for challenging the secular power in Palestine ('Il veut voler sa part d'obéissance à César!'), which, in the context, is tantamount to signing his death warrant: 'cette accusation porta le comble à l'exaspération de la foule, qui s'était adoucie jusqu'à rire parce que le *communiste* trébuchait, et qui se ressaisissant devant le fantôme de César, cria: A mort!' (p. 184; my italics)

Etienne, who is visibly starving (p. 186), is stoned to death, but not before being further denounced for the Christians'/Communists' opposition to the pagan gods, games, and, crucially, war: 'Il ne hait pas l'ennemi! Il voudrait qu'on jetât, tous, les armes, comme si la guerre était une chose honteuse' (p. 185). Etienne's dying words are words of defiance: 'Tout va changer!' (p. 186) By now the narrator realizes that the martyr is right, although when forced to choose between the individual and the crowd, he had opted for the latter. The episode ends on a note of hope and expectation: 'Maintenant que l'homme s'est retrouvé, son règne arrive. Oui, tout va changer puisqu'une aube nouvelle a commencé sur le grand soir du monde. La Croix apporte la délivrance et la joie' (p. 187).

In connection with the above episode, a number of observations need to be made. Firstly, although in strict chronological terms Jesus's crucifixion predates by a number of years the stoning of Stephen, his death is evoked both in the execution of Barbusse's fictionalized saint and in the crucifixion of the unidentified figure, the 'étoile dans la foule'. Furthermore, the 'Croix' referred to in the final paragraph, which is separated from the narrative as a kind of self-conscious summary of, and commentary on the episode in question, is manifestly the Cross of Christ's Passion.⁴⁰ This episode makes a proto-Communist of the Christian 'proto-martyr', Stephen;⁴¹ and, by extension, a proto-Communist of Jesus also.

Secondly, the parallel that Barbusse began to draw in *Les Enchaînements* as a whole⁴² and in this episode in particular can to some extent be ascribed to the persecution of the contemporary Communist movement in France and the harassment of Barbusse himself in the early 1920s.⁴³ Clearly, though, there is much more to it than that. The writer's attack on Christianity had been the mainstay of his critique of religion up to 1920. From that point onwards, he attacked it with more energy than ever, but there appears in his work a certain amount of tension (examined in Part four of this thesis) between his denunciation of institutional Christianity, on the one hand, and, on the other, his propensity to see primitive Christianity as a proto-Communist phenomenon.

As the analysis in this chapter has shown, there is, the historical overview aside, very little in Barbusse's ongoing critique of religion in *Les Enchaînements* that is not highly prominent, adumbrated, or at least implied in the works of the earlier phases of the writer's career. In other words, in terms of Barbusse's treatment of religion, *Les Enchaînements* is a work that is generally characterized by continuity. It is abundantly clear, however, that Barbusse's critique of religion is now grounded firmly in socio-political concerns where in the first phase of his career the perspective had been largely apolitical and metaphysical. Furthermore, there is one highly significant development. In Woodrow Wilson Barbusse had seen a Christ-like saviour; socialist republicans he had indirectly likened to the first Christians. Having joined the Communist Party in 1923, he now thought of the contemporary Communist movement in these terms.

Barbusse's quest for faith had finally resulted in his joining a political party for the first time in his life, and although he was later to reject claims that he was intent on 'mysticizing' revolutionary politics and making a secular religion of Communism, he had presented Communism as such as early as October 1920. In an article entitled 'Le

devoir socialiste', written to bolster support in France for the new Communist regime in the USSR, Barbusse declared: 'Notre conception de la religion sociale, à nous qui ne voulons pratiquer, au-dessus des chapelles et des églises, que le théisme de la vérité, nous fait un devoir de juger les réalisateurs politiques'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, a trilogy of works about a Communist Jesus was hardly the way to convince Barbusse's critics that his perception of Communism was devoid of all trace of religiosity.

Notes

¹ It was also the novel of his that he thought the most highly of. See FHB, *Naf* 16504, f. 409.

² For the socio-political context in which Barbusse decided finally to join the PCF, see Baudorre, *Barbusse*, pp. 235-38.

³ See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 104.

⁴ Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 114.

⁵ Barbusse, *Les Enchaînements*, 2 vols (Flammarion, 1925), p. vii. Subsequent page references, given in parenthesis in the text, are to this, the only edition of the novel.

⁶ Vidal quotes Barbusse as saying: ‘Je ne suis pas un exploiteur de filon — On écrit une fois *Le Feu*, on ne peut en faire des resucées’. See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 105.

⁷ With only a few exceptions, most notably Chauvelon’s review, ‘Le chef d’œuvre prodigieux de Barbusse’, Communist reaction to the novel was not favourable. The novel was considered to be impossibly difficult for working-class readers and the working class itself is conspicuous by its absence from the narrative. Furthermore, Barbusse’s linear, deterministic depiction of history is at odds with a dialectical interpretation and it evinces no real familiarity with Communist theory, other than a fairly superficial grasp of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine that capitalism leads inexorably to war.

⁸ The year the narrative begins is given as 1912 (I, p. 24). There is no other time reference in the narrative at the primary level of consciousness. The narrative ends with the date ‘Août 1924’ (II, p. 296), which can be taken as both a paratextual marker *and* a part of the narrative. Thus the narrative time-frame stands at twelve years.

⁹ In a speech given in Nice in March 1920, Barbusse said: ‘“Faites cela parce qu’on l’a fait, croyez cela parce qu’on l’a cru”. Cette espèce de religion qui tend à maintenir ce qui est et ce qui doit être, dans les cadres glacés de ce qui fut, s’appelle la tradition.

C'est une des plus grandes maladies qui aient empoisonné l'esprit humain.' *Paroles* (p. 200).

¹⁰ At the narrator's primary level of consciousness, the geographical setting for the novel moves from Paris to Alicant (formerly known as Elcho) on the south coast of France. Much of the action at the various secondary levels occurs here also, after the galley-slaves are washed ashore in Chapter five. But there are numerous other settings, such as the New World (Chapters seventeen and eighteen) and the Western Front (Chapter twenty-four).

¹¹ Relinger, 'Le lexique de la guerre dans *Les Enchaînements* de Barbusse', p. 167.

¹² Not lost on at least two contemporary readers. Gregh praised Barbusse's 'immense talent, mystique jadis, apocalyptique aujourd'hui'. *Naf* 16524, f. 199. An American reviewer described the novel as 'quite simply an apocalyptic vision of man's inhumanity to man'. Stuart, 'Man's Inhumanity to Man'.

¹³ For example, 'cataclysmes' (p. 227); 'désolation' (pp. 231, 239); and 'abîme' (pp. 204, 220, 235, 250, 257). Hell walks on earth ('cité d'enfer', p. 220; 'résonance d'enfer', p. 226; 'enfer flamboyant', p. 235; 'vignes d'enfer', p. 236); and natural phenomena — glaciers (p. 204), avalanches (p. 223), storms and hurricanes (pp. 229, 242), and volcanoes (pp. 231, 245), to name but a few — are all included and used metaphorically.

¹⁴ The point is reiterated on pp. 268-69.

¹⁵ The soldier is described as a 'prophète de malheur' (p. 247) and he speaks with a decidedly Bertrandesque accent when he declares: 'On n'en reviendra pas. Si on ressuscite de cette affaire-là, ce sera pour une autre. Alors, ce qui a été fait, personne ne le saura jamais. Je te dis tout ça à toi, mais personne — personne — ne saura jamais' (p. 250). There are other references to the prophet/prophetic (see, for example, pp. 197, 198, 203, 250), and although the narrator can hardly be described as a secular prophet,

there is something decidedly prophetic about his final tirade, in which he likens himself to two biblical prophets. As with Barbusse's previous works, contemporary readers saw the author himself as the prophet at work in the novel. Albert Doyen called the novel 'Une vraie prophétie, animée du souffle des vieux prophètes.' Quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 113. For Corday, Barbusse was a throwback to the prophets of the Old Testament. See 'Les Enchaînements par Henri Barbusse'.

¹⁶ The scope of this chapter does not permit a detailed analysis of all of them. For references to sun worship, see I, pp. 40, 43-45; to Taoism, II, p. 29; and to Zoroastrianism, II, p. 193.

¹⁷ In *Judas*, Barbusse wrote: 'L'incalculable amas disparate de religions consacrées qui se nient l'une l'autre, et se proclament unique dans l'absolu, la cacophonie des propagandes, suffit pour discréditer la valeur ontologique de chaque idéal religieux et démontrer le peu d'importance qu'a en soi le contenu de la croyance errante des hommes' (p. 20). See also p. 40. He had made the same point as early as 1917 in 'Pourquoi te bats-tu?' See *Paroles*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁸ The location of the statue is significant in the light of the anti-Egyptian polemic that the priest is about to unleash.

¹⁹ The lists of proper nouns — a feature of the narrative in the novel as a whole — are quite formidable, the fruits of several years' intensive research on the part of the author. See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 102-104. Barbusse mentions some of the sources he had used in a brief note at the end of the second volume of the novel.

²⁰ Indirectly, he is of considerable importance, however. As in Barbusse's two previous novels, the 'poilu' is depicted as a figure of suffering reminiscent of Jesus Christ. The common soldier is capable of remarkable, not to say, miraculous things: 'Ils ont respiré l'air qui foudroie, la pluie de pierres, d'acier, et de cendres. Ils se sont avancés sur la terre brassée et qui germait épouvantablement sous les pieds. Ils ont marché sur la mer'

(II, p. 237). Explicit parallels are provided also. At the height of the pre-attack bombardment, the narrator, 'étendu au milieu du bourdonnement', reflects on the wars past, present and future: 'Je pense au mystère mondial de la Passion, au grand jeu des Pauvres' (p. 203). Later in the narrative, he himself now exposed to the wrath of the canon and the horrors it produces, he becomes more explicit still in identifying the 'poilu' with Christ: 'On voit se dresser dans l'azur inscrutable et pâissant de la lune, le sacrifice des Christs du premier rang, avec leurs corps sans défense, avec leurs robes pâles dont flottaient les pans' (p. 230).

The narrator is likewise identified with Jesus. Trachel takes up his burden, in his case the body of a fallen comrade, a symbol for humanity as a whole: 'je l'ai trainé; il m'a arrêté, raidi et s'enfonçant dans le sol ainsi qu'une lourde croix' (p. 245). By the end of this particular episode in the novel, Trachel's burden has assumed almost universal proportions, on a par with that which Jesus Christ is believed to have taken upon himself. Death now seems his only recourse: 'je souffre de la vie; le mal des autres s'est détaché des autres pour tomber sur moi' (p. 270). For further direct or indirect references to Jesus, see, for example I, pp. 136, 182, 274, 276; II, pp. 58, 62, 72, 118, 105-106, 124, 203, 273, 291-92.

²¹ My italics. Although the time-setting for this section of the narrative is some date posterior to 1228 (p. 11), it is clear from Barbusse's other writings of this period that this is as much a comment on the contemporary situation as it is on the situation prevailing in thirteenth-century Europe as he saw it. Indeed, it is precisely *because* of his views at the time of writing that he expressed such views about an earlier epoch. There are other instances of this in the novel. See, for example, II, p. 165.

²² In reply to a survey in 1927, Barbusse wrote: 'Passée une courte période révolutionnaire, le christianisme est devenu une force d'Etat, un impérialisme comme

celui de l'empire romain, qu'il n'a remplacé que d'apparence.' Barbusse, 'Henri Barbusse et les catholiques' (p. 2). See also *Judas*, p. 211.

²³ See previous note. In *Judas*, Barbusse contends that Christianity did not triumph over Rome: 'Il ne s'est substitué à lui qu'en lui ressemblant servilement' (p. 209).

²⁴ In the survey mentioned in note 22, Barbusse was quite categorical: 'Le catholicisme est incontestablement, et irrémédiablement, du côté de la guerre [...] l'avocat spirituel, le soutien, le pilier moral, si je puis dire, de l'ordre d'oppression et de réaction' (p. 1).

²⁵ This chapter would appear to have been of great importance to Barbusse. Vidal reports that he produced no fewer than forty-two drafts for it. See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 104.

²⁶ Other causal factors given are the considerations of geo-politics, capital, and the monarchical system of rule (see pp. 107, 112, 114).

²⁷ According to Kelly, Boniface (December 1294-October 1303) 'constantly intervened on the international plane'. *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (p. 209). See the page in question for a detailed account of the incident related in the novel.

²⁸ Chapter thirteen, 'Le règne de l'homme', deals with the Inquisition.

²⁹ A reference to the Treaty of Tordesillas, brokered in 1494 by Pope Alexander VI (August 1492-August 1503). See Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, p. 254. Roberts writes that the treaty 'gave to Portugal all the lands east of a line of longitude running 370 leagues west of Cape Verde and to Spain those west of it'. *The Pelican History of the World* (p. 507).

³⁰ Barbusse openly condemned monastic orders in *Judas*: 'Les monastères ont été des usines de falsification et d'effacement des œuvres d'esprit' (p. 216).

³¹ These references are made by the narrator about other characters. Speaking in what appears to be his own voice, Trachel declares himself to be impermeable to all religions: 'Je ne veux pas croire aux esprits, aux évocations magiques, aux revenants à

la mode du jour' (I, p. 78), a stance which distinguishes him from the pre-war Simon Paulin and the pre-hotel narrator of *L'Enfer*.

³² In his review, Chauvelon compared the novel to Chateaubriand's *Le Génie du christianisme* and described it as a Bible for Communists. See note 7.

³³ 'La religion chrétienne ressemblait à toutes les autres religions, et pour cause', states Barbusse in *Judas*, 'elle était faite des morceaux méthodiquement découpés de la plupart d'entre elles' (p. 201).

³⁴ The operative word here is 'supercherie'. Later, as 'le baron conseiller d'Etat', Séraphin Trachel implicitly describes Christianity as 'la plus grande duperie qui fut jamais jouée sur la scène historique' (II, p. 165).

³⁵ In his preface to Lorulot's *L'Église et la guerre*, Barbusse contends that the Church's aim is to change 'les foules en troupeaux domestiqués, taillables, corvéables, équisables et tuables à merci' (p. 10). He made much the same point in his review of B. Groethysen's *L'Église et la bourgeoisie*. See Barbusse, 'L'Église et la bourgeoisie'.

³⁶ In an interview given shortly after *Les Enchaînements* was published, Barbusse stated that the world was divided into two camps, the socialist (USSR) and the capitalist (USA). He added: 'Et il y a un troisième réseau universel dont le centre est à Rome. Celui-là est l'organisation du système de défense suprême du capitalisme menacée par la multitude.' AAV, 36.67.

³⁷ Barbusse made no apologies for this in the preface to the novel: 'ai-je [...] à m'excuser de ne pas considérer la littérature comme un jeu de tout repos, et de la faire déborder dans des domaines que lui ferme la pudibonderie spirituelle de mes contemporains?' (p. xii).

³⁸ 'These words contain the essence of Barbusse's gospel', is Mancisidor's assessment of the ending to the novel. *Henri Barbusse* (p. 113; my translation).

³⁹ He had already explored the idea to some degree in his works of non-fiction, as will be seen in Part four of this thesis.

⁴⁰ In a film scenario of the novel which Barbusse sent to the prestigious director Abel Gance, Barbusse wrote: 'Le grand espoir de la Croix a avorté, le christianisme n'a rien guéri. Souffrances de tous les humbles du Moyen-Âge.' FHB, *Naf* 16491, f. 96. He was clearly convinced that the Communists were animated by the same spirit of revolt that had motivated the first Christians; and that the former would succeed where the latter had failed.

⁴¹ Cooper, *The Cassell Dictionary of Christianity*, p. 259. For Barbusse's thoughts on Stephen's contribution to Christianity, see *Judas*, pp. 35-36, 53, 105, 165; and FHB, *Naf* 16503, f. 508.

⁴² For further, less overt references to this parallelism, see I, pp. 211, 280; and II, pp. 142, 291-92.

⁴³ See note 2.

⁴⁴ Barbusse, 'Le devoir socialiste', p. 1.

CHAPTER SEVEN 'J'AI VU JÉSUS, MOI AUSSI': *JÉSUS* (1927)

Although *Le Feu* is the work for which Henri Barbusse will always be remembered, *Jésus*, published in January 1927, is the quintessential Barbussian novel. While it surprised a good many of Barbusse's political friends, associates, and literary commentators when it first appeared on the politico-literary scene, it is, as has been shown in the previous chapters of this thesis, anticipated far more clearly in Barbusse's earlier work than is *Le Feu*. In general terms, *Jésus*, and Barbusse's Jesus trilogy as a whole,¹ can be ascribed to an authorial interest in Jesus bordering on the obsessional, to which various acquaintances have attested.²

Of his encounter(s) with Barbusse in Moscow, in what must have been between autumn 1927 and the late summer of 1935, Fischer remembers only that the writer talked to him 'chiefly about Jesus Christ'.³ Vidal, Barbusse's faithful personal secretary from 1917 to his death in 1935, was 'un peu choquée' at Barbusse's outpourings on New Year's Eve 1924, although it is not entirely clear from the immediate context whether it was Barbusse's intention to write a book about Jesus, or more particularly, his 'fascination pour Jésus, à ses yeux la plus haute réalisation de la figure humaine' that she found so surprising.⁴

The work of Pierre Paraf is littered with references to this 'fascination'. At their first meeting, in autumn 1916, Paraf saw Barbusse in his Paris apartment against the background of 'le vitrail d'une fenêtre sur lequel un Christ en croix témoignait de la douleur humaine'.⁵ He later added, perhaps as an intentional play on words, that Barbusse was 'tout près du Christ en croix, sur le vitrail qui dominait son bureau'.⁶ In short, Paraf was in no doubt as to the centrality of Jesus in Barbusse's work. In 'Jésus et Barbusse', in which Paraf provides a brief synopsis of all three elements in the Jesus triptych, he stated that the figure and the teaching of Jesus 'tiennent une place insigne,

inattendue, dans l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse'; that Barbusse felt drawn to Jesus, 'comme vers un ami dont il était plus que tout autre apte à revivre en esprit les combats'.⁷ Elsewhere, Paraf used the verb 'hanter' in trying to account for the spiritual ties between Barbusse and Jesus.⁸ According to Paraf, what Barbusse saw and admired, not to say loved about Jesus, was the human suffering and sacrifice that he symbolized, as well as Jesus's perceived rebellion against both the secular and religious authorities of ancient Palestine. In a letter to Guille, Paraf described Barbusse's 'admiration pour le message de paix des prophètes d'Israël', an admiration which, in the Jesus trilogy, centres on Jesus in particular, 'auquel il vouait une tendre ferveur.'⁹

As for Barbusse's specific aims with regard to *Jésus*, and the two other works and numerous articles to which it gave rise, Guille quotes Barbusse as saying: 'Inquiet de la propagande religieuse réactionnaire, je dénonce l'exploitation que l'Eglise a faite de la personnalité de Jésus.'¹⁰ In Vidal's account of Barbusse's life and work, Barbusse makes much the same point, if somewhat more expansively:

Je suis, sinon effrayé, du moins inquiet de la recrudescence de la propagande religieuse, propagande réactionnaire, par le moyen des livres, brochures, films, conférences, mais aussi propagande dans la classe ouvrière par l'intermédiaire du syndicalisme et du socialisme chrétiens.
Il est, d'autre part, important de combattre la superstition religieuse en dénonçant l'exploitation que l'Eglise a faite de la personnalité de Jésus.¹¹

It would appear, then, that the writer was intent, for political reasons, on challenging the Church's monopoly of Jesus. As a member of the PCF, Barbusse had come to think of the Church as the Communists' main ideological adversary in the battle to win the hearts and minds of the masses.¹² In the mid-1920s, the Church in France was undergoing something of a resurgence following the renewal of diplomatic ties between the French State and the Vatican in 1921. Left-wing Christians were particularly buoyant in the wake of the papal condemnation of *L'Action Française* in 1926.¹³ In making public his personal interpretation of Jesus, Barbusse aimed to combat the

Church, making paradoxical use of the most potent religious symbol of all. In the words of Picciola: 'Jésus était un missile envoyé au coeur d'une société qui avait fait de la religion un gendarme, gardien de l'ordre établi. Barbusse entendait retourner contre cette société l'arme dont elle s'était servie.'¹⁴

Furthermore, he clearly sought to further the Communist-Christian parallelism outlined in the episode involving Etienne in *Les Enchaînements*. In the postface to *Jésus*, dated September 1926, Barbusse informed the reader that, despite its setting and subject, the novel is not the work of a self-indulgent artist intent on smoothing out the contradictions and anomalies in the Bible: 'C'est pour pouvoir m'adresser aux inquiets et aux tourmentés des temps où nous sommes'. He added that the prevailing socio-political, economic and cultural conditions were such that contemporary man could not but follow 'l'exemple sacré qu'il ne lui a jamais été donné que d'entrevoir', namely Jesus, 'un briseur d'idoles,'¹⁵ or, more specifically, a proto-Communist: 'La thèse que j'entends soutenir est qu'il y a une distinction absolue entre le prophète Jésus qui était un révolutionnaire et le Christ qui n'était qu'une entité théologique abstraite'.¹⁶ As will be seen in the subsequent analysis of the text of *Jésus* and other sources, by the late 1920s Barbusse was convinced that history was repeating itself, with the Communists now in the position that the first followers of Jesus had been in two millennia before; and that they were inspired by the same spirit of revolt.

Before considering the ways in which Barbusse sought to challenge the Church in *Jésus*; and give literary expression to a perceived parallelism between primitive Christianity and the contemporary Communist movement, it would be as well to recall the author's words, articulated in *Judas* and already considered in this thesis with regard to *Les Suppliants*, in which the author warns the reader against facile assumptions about his recent depiction of Jesus (see p. 51). According to Barbusse, Maximilien Desanzac,

the chief protagonist of Barbusse's first novel, and the Jesus of *Jésus* have much in common. A comparative study of the two characters shows this to be the case. Indeed, such is the content of the message of Jesus, so strong is the sense of philosophical continuity between what he says about the existence of God and man's true status in creation, on the one hand, and the outlook of Maximilien in *Les Suppliants*, on the other, that *Le Feu* and *Clarté* seem almost like an interregnum in Barbusse's thought and work. For roughly the first half of the first-person narrative of *Jésus*, the interest is predominantly metaphysical in nature; this Jesus acts as the mouthpiece for an author who, the best part of a quarter-century after the publication of his first novel, is still apparently opposed to transcendent religions *per se*, and from a largely apolitical perspective.

Long before Maximilien within one time-frame, and long after him within another, the Jesus of *Jésus* takes the view that all objects within the material world are perceived/perceivable only because of the sense organs of the perceiver, and that all abstractions, all concepts, exist 'en nous' (29. 8-15). When Nicodemus comes to Jesus not quite sure what to expect (11. 6-7), he is given a lesson which, since it is at the heart of Jesus's teaching, is repeated at regular intervals thereafter. To this particular Pharisee's initial question ('Que faire?'), Jesus replies: 'L'heure est venue de rentrer en nous-mêmes et d'y découvrir ce qui y est enfermé. Car la vérité est du dedans, non du dehors' (11. 8-9). Nicodemus asks whether there exist 'en dehors de nous, des choses qui sont vraies?' The reply is cryptic but repeats the point made at the beginning of the dialogue: 'il n'est rien de vrai, et non plus, rien de grand ni de beau, qui ne soit tenu dans les grandes lignes de la justice qui est en nous' (11. 19-20). Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to understand 'l'homme dans le monde et le monde dans l'homme, il faut se débarrasser de toutes les idoles' (11. 33), in other words, any attempt to make sense of

the human condition that does not begin and end with man is doomed to failure. The truth, justice, love, life, happiness, death, all exist 'en nous'.¹⁷

Strictly in keeping with the immanentist philosophy espoused by Maximilien, the reader has already been given to understand that this particular Jesus does not accept the traditional understanding of the relationship between man and God. Contemplating the night-sky following the death of his all-too human carpenter father, Jesus ponders this relationship:

La vérité a un autre sens que celui qu'on croit. La vérité ne va pas de Dieu à nous, mais de nous à Dieu. Voilà la direction de la vérité. Et l'esprit vient d'en-bas. Il ne faut plus commencer par l'au-delà. Ce qui n'a pas commencé en nous, n'est pas. Nous ne tombons pas du ciel, nous qui nous levons. (9. 25-29)

This remains Jesus's conviction throughout the narrative, faltering only once, on the eve of his execution, which he has foreseen, 'sans être prophète' (33. 2): 'Mon Dieu, mon Dieu. En pensant à ma destinée qui aura passé si vite, j'ai laissé échapper comme un enfant: mon Dieu' (32. 38-39). Of all of the various aspects relating to his immanentist message, it is this aspect, the notion that God, the Kingdom of God, the Messiah are all self-referential, existing not outside but within the self, that Jesus returns to the most often.

When asked for the first time whether he is the long-awaited Messiah, he states: 'Le Messie, c'est l'esprit, et l'esprit est en nous [...]. Le règne de Dieu est au milieu de vous. Cela n'est-il point clair comme le jour?' (16. 15-16). In the Sermon on the Mount, he tells his listeners to believe in themselves: 'Le ciel n'est pas un objet qu'on gagne en levant les bras en l'air. Ayez du ciel en vous-mêmes' (20. 46-47). Having recovered his *sang froid* in Gethsemane after his brief moment of doubt (31. 62), Jesus considers the reason for it, reaches the same conclusion as Maximilien in *Les Suppliants* and, word for word, makes the same ultra-heretical declaration that Maximilien makes to Ursleur: 'Mon Père, qui êtes aux cieux, vous rendez le son de toutes nos douleurs. Et

je sentis pourquoi on croit en Dieu. Si j'étais fou je croirais en Dieu' (31. 63-65; see p. 61).

In his encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (borrowing from Johannine tradition), Jesus is reminded that for the Samaritans, God is to be found 'sur cette montagne-là', Mount Gerazim, whereas for the Jews he is to be found in Jerusalem — a point of sectarian conflict for centuries. 'Femme', says Jesus, 'le jour est venu où l'on n'adorera plus à Jérusalem ou sur la montagne, mais en esprit et en vérité. [...] Il n'est pas dans les sanctuaires faits par la main des hommes' (22. 3-5). He goes on to point out that she, like everybody else, is looking for the image of God in order to give God an external form, and worship accordingly. He reminds her of the tetragrammaton and the second commandment: 'Car lorsque je dis que Dieu est quelque part en dehors de nous, je fais une image. [...] Dieu est en nous. Donc il n'est pas ailleurs' (22. 16-19).¹⁸

God is the word that human beings have given to their need for a God: 'O Dieu de ma justice! Nous en avons besoin, de l'Etranger démesuré, et ce besoin est Dieu. On a peur de Dieu, et cette peur est Dieu' (22. 24-26). In the Tabernacle, the 'portable shrine instituted by Moses during the wanderings of the Jews in the wilderness',¹⁹ the Jews worshipped two black stones, 'qui étaient Dieu' and, as such, 'aussi grandes que le monde' (22. 32-33). Such worship is, for this Jesus, sacrilege (22. 35). Since 'Tout est en nous' (22. 37) and 'il n'y a que nous' (22. 40), God exists only as a concept in the human mind which has been externalized. To worship God as though God were a transcendent being is to abdicate before 'une image posée devant toi' (22. 48). Jesus returns to the company of his followers after this passage of reflection at the well: 'ils disaient: Gloire à Dieu! Tout va de Dieu à nous. Moi, je songeais: Tout va de nous à Dieu, même Dieu' (22. 52-53).

In the next chapter, John Zebedee, who is the most prominent disciple in this particular gospel, encounters Jesus. ‘Tu me cherchais?’ asks Jesus. ‘Je me cherchais moi-même’, he replies (23. 1-2).²⁰ Clearly disconcerted by the latter’s immanentist teaching, John wishes to know where the spirit of which Jesus talks comes from. Well may it exist within us but how did it come to be there? Jesus realizes what his disciple is hinting at: ‘Il attendait que je disse: Il vient du Dieu de nos pères’ (23. 11). Jesus gives him no such answer. Given that Jesus himself clearly does not believe in the transcendent God of Israel, John asks why it is that he talks about this God at all. This is the crux of the matter, a matter to which Barbusse will have given a considerable amount of thought. He has his Jesus reply that he teaches by means of parables and analogies (‘similitudes’) because many are those who do not have eyes to see, ears to hear or a heart to understand (23. 19). Jesus declares that he is not a magician who has invented the truth; he has merely revealed it (23. 27-28). John seems unconvinced, as are many:

Mais après ces jours où cela fut dit, je vis bien que les hommes, et même les meilleurs, ne sont pas capables de comprendre les géantes formes humaines de la chose divine, ni tout ce qu’on dit quand on dit: que l’intérieur et l’extérieur soient un. Car le besoin de croire c’est le besoin de posséder, à savoir: de prendre ce qui n’est pas à nous. Et ils veulent voler l’impossible. (23. 36-38)

John accuses Jesus of killing ‘la grandeur’ and expresses his fear at the implications of Jesus’s philosophy. Jesus counters that by re-placing prayer ‘dans le droit chemin’ (23. 43-44), he is aggrandizing man (23. 23-26). He declares that ‘chacun est son propre Christ’ and ‘celui qui s’est vu, a vu Dieu’ (23. 43-44). In summing up Jesus’s message, Mary Magdalen, in Jesus’s estimation one of only two disciples to have fully understood him (the other being ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’), states, without correction or qualification by Jesus: ‘croyez pleinement à vous-mêmes, refaites la vie selon votre image, et vous serez sauvés. Que chacun maîtrise son Dieu, que tous

maîtrisent leurs rois. Et tu as divinisé' (32. 91-93).²¹ Thus Jesus shows himself to be audaciously out of sync with the thinking of his age. He is aware that he has enemies who desire his death (23. 56).

While Relinger is correct in his assertion that Barbusse's Jesus distinguishes himself from the Jesus of a writer like Proudhon by virtue of his atheism,²² the Jesus of *Jésus* is not just an atheist but is, like Maximilien Desanzac, an *anti*-theist. More than simply not believing in a transcendent God because he is unable to countenance such a concept, he is actively opposed to such a concept, since belief in it forces man to turn away from himself, preventing him from achieving his full potential. In his exchange with John Zebedee, he describes religious belief as 'le joug de Dieu' and he realizes that men choose not to remove the yoke: were they to do so, they would have to replace it and they know not what they would replace it with (23. 39). In a universe without God, contingency rules. The posited existence of God is, therefore, a source of relative comfort, even though man's subservience necessarily follows.

Jesus mounts a vigorous opposition to this subservience, portraying God as a self-protecting enemy of the human race. This is made clear in 'La Tour des Hommes'. After the imprisonment of John Zechariah (John the Baptist) for his energetic preaching as 'un bon ouvrier démolisseur' (19. 5), Jesus and his disciples make a pilgrimage to Zechariah's hut in the wilderness, where they discover the prophet's written testament, in which he claims that the greatest thing man has ever made is 'la tour qu'ils avaient voulu élever jusqu'au ciel' (19. 46). He has God declare: 'S'ils sont unis et forment un seul peuple et si, en plus, ils travaillent, alors, moi, Dieu, je suis perdu' (19. 47). As a defensive measure, God afflicts the various peoples of the human race with mutually unintelligible languages and thus guarantees discord and disunity, and the privilege of primacy for himself. The peoples of the world cry: 'Seigneur, qui donc es-tu?' The one who said, replies God, in accordance with Scripture (Genesis): 'Si l'homme mange du

fruit de la connaissance, il sera semblable à nous, les dieux, et il ne le faut pas. Car il transporterait les montagnes. Car il aurait la foudre de soleil. Je suis l'Ennemi divin' (19. 57-61). John Zebedee is with Jesus. Jesus asks him whether he understands. He sees (19. 64) but given his earlier doubtings, it seems unlikely that he understands.

This episode raises complex issues, not the least of which is the fact that the narrative contains references to 'Dieu' and 'les dieux' (19. 47-48, 19. 57-58), and an apparent allusion to Prometheus, which juxtaposes the monotheism of Judaeo-Christianity and the polytheism of pagan cultures. Furthermore, the interpretation Barbusse would appear to want the reader to make of the Tower of Babel episode is not easily differentiated from the divide-and-rule interpretation it is given in its biblical context. However, the important point is that for the original creator of the image, the God of Israel is the one true living God, existent independently of the material world as the Creator of it. For Barbusse and his Jesus, on the other hand, all gods are equal, and belief in them is possible only as a result of an abdication from human responsibility. To challenge God is to liberate humankind.

Maximilien Desanzac champions the very same cause in *Les Suppliants* and uses much the same language that Jesus uses in *Jésus*. The former character is also portrayed as a messianic figure. That said, there is, of course, a world of difference between the central figures of their respective narratives. Despite the conspicuously thick religious patina that he is given, Maximilien is a secular figure who is opposed, on exclusively immanentist grounds, to traditional religions with their transcendent God. Jesus, by contrast, though at pains to stress his atheism, reject the title of Messiah and insist upon his mortality (5. 36, 14. 25, 32. 101), is a religious figure, the object of worship for hundreds of billions of people over the last two millennia. He cannot *not* be a religious figure. Thus, for the author to have Maximilien the pseudo-Messiah declare that the personal God of western tradition does not exist is one thing; for him to have Jesus

make the same declaration is quite another, all the more so when one considers that the Jesus of *Jésus* is portrayed as a Jew.²³ The observation has been made that an atheist Jew is a contradiction in terms; and that the Jesus that Barbusse portrays could scarcely have attracted a following amongst the Jewish population of first-century Palestine.²⁴ This is not the only anomaly that becomes apparent with regard to Barbusse's treatment of Jesus in the pro-Communist phase of his career; but he may well have been prepared to overlook it (and others) for strategic reasons. In short, it does not suit Barbusse's purpose to deny Jesus's Jewishness. On the contrary, he is careful to point it up. The gospel that he has produced is emphatically that of Jesus the Jew.

Thus the reader sees Jesus the boy in a synagogue in Chapter four, listening, as all devout Jews do, to teachings from, and interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures. He later makes an unspecified pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. In keeping with the gospel according to Luke, he gets separated from his parents and they return to the Temple, where they find their son debating with the scribes and the Pharisees. Elkania declares him to be 'la grande âme d'Israel' (7. 40). In the Sermon on the Mount, he declares himself to be the 'dépositaire' and 'annonciateur' of the 'grande âme' of the Jewish people (20. 54-55). The temporal reference he provides for his movements after the Sermon on the Mount derives from daily religious ritual: 'Puis, à l'heure de l'oblation du soir, nous nous trouvâmes trois hommes tout seuls sur la route qui s'en va' (20. 61). He is orthodox enough to be in Jerusalem for Passover; and eat the obligatory Passover meal with his disciples (31.1ff). Furthermore, it is the cleansing of the Temple that seals his fate and, whatever his deeper motives might be, like the Jesus of the New Testament, he is indignant about *the* place of worship's having been turned into a den of iniquity: 'C'était la maison des prières, mais vous en avez fait une caverne de voleurs. [...] Le Temple n'est plus qu'un vaste abattoir géré par une caste' (30. 31-34). On the Cross, Jesus associates himself with Jewry one final time: 'Le peuple juif dont

j'ai tenu l'âme debout, m'aidera, après moi, à semer ce levain dans l'univers lorsqu'il y aura été lui-même semé à la volée, au milieu du peuple unique sous les cieux' (34. 15).

Above all, Barbusse's Jesus, like the author himself, is extremely familiar with the Jewish canon. His discourse is punctuated by allusions to biblical figures, both familiar to the general non-Jewish reader (Moses, 2. 6; Abraham, 7. 44; Adam and Eve, 8. 42, 23. 7; Cain, 9. 41; and Jacob, 31. 66) and not so familiar (Agar, 8. 63, and Eliphaz Themanite, 9. 51). He often paraphrases Scripture from the various books of the Bible, such as Ezra (4. 11, 29. 36), Nehemiah (4. 9, 29. 31/36, 30. 55), Job (21. 6, 21. 13) and Ecclesiastes (31. 71). He has a penchant for the prophets, referring to Isaiah in particular (11. 21, 30. 51, 30. 72), and Jeremiah and Daniel (30. 51). He alludes also to the Psalms (22. 24, 23. 42). Like his creator, this Jesus does not reject religion out of hand, still less out of ignorance.

Reject it he does, however, the major sticking point being his inability for both philosophical and, as will be seen later, political reasons, to accept the concept of God. For Jesus, God is nothing but a metaphor, a concept that has been invented so that human beings do not have to confront the extremely uncomfortable notion of human responsibility in a contingent universe. Once he has been given an object lesson in non-conformity by John Zechariah (2. 9-2. 15), Jesus shows himself to be a sceptic. Although he goes to the synagogue, he will not accept the authority of a rabbi simply because the latter is a rabbi. He is told to follow a certain rabbi, 'un savant maître': 'Je réponds: Non. Car une telle confiance est idolâtre. Il faut que je donne par moi-même, et non par ouï-dire, l'autorité à mon maître. Il faut que chacun se recrée toujours tout entier: sa foi, ses certitudes' (5. 2-5).

Although he makes pilgrimages to Jerusalem, he is appalled by the practice of animal sacrifice — the very basis of all religious worship in the ancient world: 'J'avais un souvenir malade de tuerie [...]. Comment se fait-il que la prière fraye avec ces

ignobles fumées? Et la vie avec ce déchirement de viandes?’ (7. 58-60)²⁵ Antiritualistic, Jesus also challenges the Judaeocentrism of orthodox Judaism, because of an internationalist outlook that will be considered in more detail later in this chapter. When in the Sermon at the Temple Jesus tells the masses that they must first recognize their enemies before they fight them and that their enemies are not foreigners and Gentiles, he is accused of committing ‘le péché national’ (30. 65). It is highly significant that it is one of the priests there gathered that exclaims: ‘Il parle pour les incirconcis!’ (30. 62-63)²⁶

All of the above aspects of Jesus’s non-observance and non-conformity with regard to religious matters — his rejection of God and ecclesiastical authority, his sense of repulsion at animal sacrifice, and his internationalism — are brought together in the key dream he has in Chapter twenty-nine, ‘Apocalypse du futur’. This chapter reflects the apocalyptic imagery evoked in Chapter four, in which Jesus paraphrases from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In this scheme of things, the Jews are punished with exile in Babylon for having neglected the Law. Upon their return to Jerusalem, Ezra drew the attention of the Jews to their ‘péché commun’, reading from the Law, which was to become the basis of a renewal of the people’s covenant with God (4. 9-15). According to Selman and Manser, ‘the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single work.’ As they now stand, the former ‘shows how God worked through human politics to re-establish his people in Judah, and emphasizes the central role of the temple and of the law in the process of reformation’; the latter ‘concludes with various reforms, including the repopulation of Jerusalem, purifying temple worship, dealing with mixed marriages, and reinstating the Sabbath as a day of rest.’²⁷

In his dream, Jesus the adult takes refuge from the Apocalypse ‘dans les grands jours de Néhémie, dans l’instant pur de ma race’ (29. 31-32). A critical voice tells him to look more closely at the events that had marked his childhood (29. 34) and when he

does so he sees that Ezra was, after all, ‘un petit homme’ (29. 35). He then describes his and Nehemiah’s calling upon the Jews to marry only amongst themselves as ‘le crime d’Esdras et de Néhémie’ (29. 36-39). Worse was to follow:

Ils [Esdras et Néhémie] profitèrent de leur courage extraordinaire à recommencer, à tous ceux-là, pour instaurer une règle terrible d’observances, et d’obligation d’offrandes, et de contributions au culte, de dîmes, d’oblations, en argent et en premier-nés, pour engraisser les sacrificateurs par milliers, et l’armée des lévites, des portiers, des chantres et des Nethiniens et de tout le reste des conducteurs de la maison de Dieu. (29. 41-42)

Although the people resisted this legalism, ‘la machination d’en haut était plus solide que les générations’ (29. 44); eventually, the consequence was acquiescence and conformity, albeit, ultimately, to Israel’s detriment (29. 45-48).

The scenario changes to the Temple at a time before Solomon’s Temple and Jesus sees a man, ‘un voleur’, place on the altar of the Most High God the Book of Books. The myth of God’s handing down the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai is exploded, ‘car ce livre vient d’être fait. Une armée de scribes et de prêtres l’ont confectionné à leur goût’ (29. 55). The book has been written and rewritten, expanded, abridged, manipulated every which way, ‘selon les exigences politiques’ (29. 56). Because it was politically expedient to do so, Ezra claimed that the Torah came from Moses himself: ‘Il a dit cela, alors que la Thora était neuve, et mille ans après Moïse’ (29. 69). Jesus sees also, written down, the damning sentence, ‘Les Livres de Daniel et d’Hénoch ne sont ni de Daniel ni d’Hénoch’ (29. 65). His critical voice screams that ‘dans les Livres Saints, les prophéties ont été fabriquées selon les événements. Et [...] il y aura de nouveaux livres saints où les événements seront fabriqués selon les prophéties’ (29. 66-67). Much earlier in the narrative, Jesus had realized the power of the written word in an ultra-religious culture (‘on écrit ce qu’on croit. Puis on croit ce qui est écrit’, 3. 14), which partly explains why he himself has not been taken in by what amounts to a massive conspiracy connived at by the religious authorities in order

to subjugate the masses and ensure a continuation of their power. As Jesus later remarks after the cleansing of the Temple, the centre of Jewish religious worship is now no more than an abattoir 'géré par une caste' (30. 41) and Judaism itself has become but a labyrinthine exercise in legalism.

Although he rails against the rich and the warmongers; and it is the Roman authorities that eventually put him on the Cross, Jesus's chief opponents in *Jésus*, as in the four gospels of the New Testament, are the Jewish and therefore religious authorities of Jerusalem. To great public acclaim, Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount by challenging the authority of the Pharisees, scribes and doctors. When one of their number challenges his authority as an expert on the Scriptures, he ripostes: 'Comment parleriez-vous de la vérité ne l'ayant jamais apprise?' (20. 12). Emboldened by his reception generally, he instructs the multitudes to believe in themselves and strive for justice:

Vous êtes pris dans des pratiques, des observances et des règles, comme dans des filets. Et aussi des préceptes mortes. [...] Repoussez de la main ces docteurs qui sont des ignorants ne sachant qu'une chose, qu'ils appellent la Loi, mais qui n'est que leur loi. (20. 37-41)

In his second sermon, not surprisingly, Jesus immediately notices upon his arrival, acting in concert, 'déjà assemblés, les chefs de la race sacerdotale et les sénateurs d'Israël', and behind them, the full might of imperial Rome (30. 5-6). Jesus is angered by their presence, 'car c'est d'eux que vient et que viendra tout le mal' (30. 8); the sight of the multitudes, 'face à cette rangée de puissants' (30. 10), fills him with compassion. Having thrown down the gauntlet at the established order by overturning the tables of the money-changers, aware that the act will cost him his life, Jesus launches into a tirade, urging the people to unite and throw off their chains (30. 40).

The Romans are indifferent (30. 38). 'Ceux d'en haut', by contrast, 'avaient été fustigés sur leurs faces par mon geste' (30. 36). The end of his anti-establishment tirade

is greeted by such an effusive outpouring of love for Jesus by the people that the authorities cannot move against him publicly, but 'je vis bien les statues pâles des puissants, les plaques des faces romaines et juives, et là, je lus que la fin de ma vie était écrite' (30. 142). Sure enough, judgement is passed on Jesus, who is 'enfermé avec les prêtres et les puissants, eux et moi, entre quatre murs'; at the head of the tribunal sits 'le pontife plein de joyaux' (33. 7-8). The 'fonctionnaire romain' perfunctorily accepts the charges brought against Jesus (claiming to be the King of the Jews — not guilty; stirring up the masses — guilty) and his soldiers execute him. It is, however, the Jewish religious authorities that have made the execution possible.²⁸

Be the above analysis as it may, it was manifestly not Barbusse's intention in writing *Jésus* to limit himself to an attack on religious institutions and ecclesiastical authorities at a generic level. Had this been the case, he would surely have confined himself to the sphere of Judaism and a Jewish Jesus within the specifically Jewish context of first-century Palestine. However, as has been demonstrated, Barbusse had a long-standing antipathy towards Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular, because of a deep-rooted conviction that the man from Nazareth had nothing to do with the foundation of the religion that built upon his name the most powerful institution the world has ever seen. In pitting a Jewish Jesus against the Jewish religious authorities of his day, Barbusse only partly achieves the first of his specific aims as stated at the outset of this chapter. In other words, he shows Jesus to have been a Jew, and *not* the first Christian. On the other hand, the Jesus he creates, an internationalist who is constantly at loggerheads with the guardians of the Jewish faith, is not at all dissimilar to the 'official' Jesus of the New Testament. On the strength of the above general confrontation alone, Barbusse is not able to establish fully the dichotomy between Jesus the historical figure, on the one hand, and the Christ of Christian theology, 'une formule de l'algèbre mystique', on the other.²⁹

For Barbusse, Jesus was not the Messiah; it is this point that he wished, above all, to impress upon the reader of *Jésus*. Although a Jew who has faith in the Jews (34. 15), Jesus rejects Simon the Zealot's appeal to him to assume the mantle of the political, Davidic, Jewish Messiah in 'Israël seul', because of the parochialism of the appeal: 'votre rêve est égaré, étant la revanche, non la justice, étant le rêve d'un peuple, non celui du peuple' (27. 29). Later, he adds: 'je ne crois pas que l'ouragan soit juif' (27. 94); and holds true to his earlier observation, made during the Sermon on the Mount, that the Jewish people 'est un petit peuple et une grande âme dont je suis le dépositaire et l'annonciateur' (20. 54-56). However unorthodox they might find the Jesus of *Jésus*, Jewish readers of the novel would have agreed with Barbusse that Jesus was not the Messiah but, as Jesus himself observes in the novel, 'un faux dieu' (22. 99). The point, however, is intended not for Jewish but for Christian consumption. To the Christian mind, Jesus was/is the Messiah — the words *ho christos*, 'the Christ', being the Greek translation of the Jewish term 'Messiah'.³⁰

If, as Barbusse believed, Christianity was a post-Jesus phenomenon that should be ascribed almost exclusively to Paul; and he wished to attack this Pauline creation at an institutional level for immediate political gain in his opposition to the Church as a Communist, then he would have to go beyond the portrayal of a Jewish Jesus in conflict with the powers of his day. And this is what he did. Making full use of his artistic licence, Barbusse makes Paul one of the two disciples (the other being Simon the Zealot) who, impressed by Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, go forth and spread the word about Jesus as they understand it (20. 62-67). Barbusse was fully aware that in presenting a direct encounter between Jesus and Paul he was leaving himself open to the charge of anachronism, which duly came.³¹ In a letter to one of his many correspondents, he described the encounter as such himself, adding the rider, however,

that by their very nature, the origins of Christianity do not make for historical precision.³²

Whatever the historical accuracy of the incident, when they meet for the second time in *Jésus*, on the road to Damascus, in a novel subversion of biblical tradition, Paul reveals to Jesus ‘une nouvelle forme [...] de la religion de nos pères’ (28. 9), which, with its Adam-Jesus lineage, body-soul dichotomy, New Covenant, resurrection, Holy Trinity and so on, is doctrinally complete. Like many since, Jesus finds the doctrine of the Incarnation preposterous (28. 41-43) and he categorically refuses to assume the identity of the one piece missing in Paul’s elaborate theological jigsaw — the divine Messiah, the Christ of Christianity, the Second Person of the Trinity which, in more than one sense, he has already become (28. 96-98). Independently of Jesus, indeed unbeknown to him even, the new faith has already begun to take hold north, south, east and west of Palestine (28. 59) and Jesus knows that there is nothing he can do to arrest its inexorable progress. Paul is quick to align *his* nascent but flourishing church with the power elites: ‘Il faut une loi fixe, appuyée sur des cérémonies inexorables qui forgent l’homme. Et soient tenues par les dirigeants. [...] Il faut la force visible et l’accord avec les rois, pour faire marcher le monde’ (28. 89-93). Although this has not yet happened within the fiction of the novel, it has happened outside it. Indeed, it is precisely because it has happened that Barbusse has produced the critique of Christianity that is central to his work as a creative artist. With even greater alacrity than that with which Jesus declines the Zealots’ invitation to become ‘le roi des Juifs’ (27. 75), in this encounter, which takes place immediately afterwards, Jesus declines Paul’s invitation to become ‘le roi des rois’ (28. 97).

In the dream that Jesus has in the following chapter, already analysed in connection with Jesus *vis-à-vis* Judaism, the ‘Apocalypse du futur’ turns out to be Jesus’s inadvertent destruction of Israel (29. 74-76) and his own, inevitable

divinization: ‘Gloire à Jésus, fils de Marie, fils de David, et fils de Dieu!’ (29. 69-70). He realizes that the ‘Livres Saints’ of the future will be written and rewritten in his name in accordance with political expediency. The suppression of the Jewish people by an institutionalized Church acting in concert with the secular powers will be visited also upon the Gentiles of the world: ‘Je vis de nouveau des scribes, des docteurs, des pontifes, des ermites, des églises, des conciles, tous fonctionnaires d’un trône, qui disputaient dans une enceinte’ (29. 72). His words and deeds will be forgotten, ignored, misrepresented, made to do work for which they were never intended. There will be nobody to defend the real Jesus; the disciples of his disciples will say but one word — ‘Amen’ (29. 78). Paul will fill the void that the collapse of Israel will create with a new idol (29.74) and Jesus will become a redemptive symbol for all those who suffer and are not disconcerted by the ‘mad’ idea that ‘un Dieu soit un homme, et un homme un dieu’ (29. 82). This in itself would not be so unfortunate but, he laments, ‘quand cette doctrine règnera solidement, avec son dieu cloué, elle sera la chose des riches et des bourreaux’ (29. 83). To the generations of the future, both near and distant, his message is unambivalent: ‘Ne croyez pas en Jésus!’ (29. 85).

Immediately prior to his being nailed to the Cross and mocked in the guise of the King of the Jews, Jesus thinks not of his Jewish past but of his Christian future. In terms reminiscent of those expressed in both *Les Suppliants* and *Clarté*, he foresees and bemoans his coming transfiguration:

J’ai pensé que ceux d’en haut feront un jour de moi comme ceux-ci, quand mon image et mon nom ressusciteront parmi eux. Ils me mettront l’habillement d’un roi, et me donneront le sceptre. Ils me mettront une couronne qui me fera mal. Ils se prosterneront devant moi. Et ils me soufflèteront. (33. 22-26)

Once on the Cross, Jesus anticipates the ‘crucifixion’ of his own thought (34. 18) and he goes so far as to describe himself as ‘l’antéchrist des crucifix’ (34. 28). Ironically,

this presupposes visionary powers that make of Jesus anything but the non-supernatural being that the narrative assiduously strives to portray.

Suffice it to say that the encounter between Jesus and Paul and the diametrical opposition that this encounter crystallizes enable Barbusse to project into the future historical developments belonging to the past as he sees it; and thus demonstrate the dichotomy between Jesus the man and Christ the theological construct. In *Judas*, originally to have been entitled *En suivant Jésus le Juste*,³³ the Judases are shown to be the Church as a whole; the betrayal, the effacement of the Jesus of history and his supersession by the myth.³⁴ ‘Lorsque Jésus parut’, states Barbusse, ‘le Christ n’existait pas encore. Lorsque le Christ parut, Jésus n’existait plus depuis longtemps. Jésus-Christ n’a jamais existé.’³⁵ In the final part of the Jesus triptych, *Jésus contre Dieu*, Barbusse takes even greater liberties with biblical tradition to make his point, having Jesus survive the Cross only to be put to death years later by early followers of Christ for refusing to believe in the resurrected Messiah.³⁶ Of course, this brutal and totally unjustified murder gives the lie somewhat to Barbusse’s contention that the first Christians were freedom fighters and seekers of justice, the Communists of their day; his use of it, even though it works against his thesis, serves to illustrate just how eager Barbusse was to dissociate Jesus from the Christ myth.

To return to the text of *Jésus*, the monolithic edifice that institutionalized Christianity was to become is offset against Jesus and his small band of followers (‘l’église n’était pas une secte, mais nous’, 24. 11; ‘Nous assemblâmes notre église pour le repas du soir, [...] mes disciples et moi’, 31. 1),³⁷ who are told, at the Last Supper, that they will find ranged against them ‘tous les puissants et la religion couronnée, qui a été faite pour lutter d’avance contre vous, et toutes les forces du monde’ (31. 42). The ironies are multiplied when, speaking of his disciples on the eve of the Passion, Jesus remarks that ‘ils me trahiront à cause de leur médiocrité. Simon Pierre même me

reniera' (32. 75-76). On his arrest, 'Il y eut une débandade des disciples. Le noyau de l'Eglise, source du monde nouveau, se dispersera' (33. 4-5). Ultimately, Jesus dies alone, betrayed, and misunderstood by all, save Mary Magdalen and the mysterious unnamed disciple who has asked Jesus for his pardon, 'toi, si grand, et si exposé, et qui ne ressusciteras pas, de ce que je t'ai méconnu, et de ce que je t'ai parfois, considéré comme un dieu' (32. 85).

In exploding the myth of the Incarnation, which is the touchstone of institutionalized Christianity, Barbusse strikes at the very heart of this religion. As analysis of Barbusse's earlier works has shown, subverting Christianity was a central aim, perhaps *the* central aim of Barbusse throughout his literary career. *Jésus* can be seen as the culmination of this subversive process. It is in order to prove his thesis, namely that Jesus and the Christ are separate entities, that Barbusse contrives the encounters between Jesus and Paul; but this is not the only evidence of rewriting to be found in the novel. Far from being murdered by Herod Antipas, John the Baptist is present, and lends his moral and vocal support during the Sermon at the Temple (30. 56-67), itself a figment of Barbusse's imagination. The temple episode in the Lucan narrative aside, the whole of this Jesus's life pre-public ministry (Chapters one to nine) has no correspondence with the first four books of the New Testament. As in these, Jesus is portrayed as an asexual being but only after he has had, and been disillusioned by sexual intercourse (8. 41), then abandoned by Priscilla for Jekhiel (10. 29-31). Naturally enough, the narrative concludes with the death of Jesus on the Cross, unlike the accounts of the four evangelists, although this does leave the reader with the problem of accounting for the first-person part of the narrative.

The supernatural features of these gospels are accounted for in *Jésus* in much the same way that they are accounted for in rationalist studies, foremost amongst which stands Renan's *La Vie de Jésus*, one of Barbusse's favourite books.³⁸ Although the lame

man, Hilquiah, cures himself in 'Marche' by virtue of his faith in Jesus (13. 17-18), which seems very close to the 'official' line in accounting for Jesus's physical cures, the storm on the Sea of Galilee in the following chapter is 'dompté par la grandeur invisible de l'homme' (14. 18). The people think that Jesus is 'un magicien de Dieu' (14. 19) and it suits his purpose to allow them to delude themselves. 'Mais quand verront-ils mon cœur?' he wonders. 'Quand dira-t-on, en me montrant du doigt: voici l'homme' (14. 24-25). The 'raising' of Lazarus, which plays such an important part in the eventual transformation of the thoroughly irreligious Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, is a question of wordplay: 'Mais Lazare qui naguère, n'avait jamais pu souffrir, m'a dit un soir: "J'étais mort et tu m'as ressuscité"' (21. 36).

With subversive intent, Barbusse reproduces lines from the Bible and invests them with a completely different meaning. In the Sermon at the Temple, for example, Jesus tells the people that, 'Ce qui se maintient par l'épée ne peut périr que par l'épée [*sic*]' (30. 126); and adds in the following verse that the sword, 'C'est votre outil'. The sword has to be wielded in order to wrest power from the established order and bring about a just society. The biblical Jesus says much the same himself, stating that he has come to bring not peace but the sword.³⁹ Famously, however, when arrested, he instructs his disciples to offer no resistance.⁴⁰ Another prominent feature of the narrative is the use of biblical forms peculiar to Jesus, such as parables and the beatitudes, the content of which Barbusse fashions to his own subversive ends.⁴¹

With regard to formal considerations, *Jésus* is no less subversive. The novel has been variously described by scholars — as a 'poem' by Rühle;⁴² 'biographie' by Baudorre;⁴³ and 'study' by Rhys.⁴⁴ It should be noted that the publisher for whom Barbusse became an 'auteur-maison', Flammarion, has had *Jésus* under the rubric of 'Etudes Sociales et Historiques' in every list of works accompanying subsequent publications, with the exception of both the abridged and unabridged versions of *Staline*

(1935) and the more recent re-editions of *Le Feu* (1965) and *Clarté* (1978), where it is listed as a 'Roman'.⁴⁵ Although there is something of all of the above genres in *Jésus*, there can be little doubt that Barbusse wanted to produce a book that resembled, and would be read as a parody of the first four books of the New Testament.⁴⁶

The narrative is presented in chapter-verse form. While it is true that the chapters all have titles, these are removed to an index at the back. For ease of citation, quotations from the text have been presented as continuous prose but the lay-out in which the verses appear in the book seems deliberately intended to emphasize the fragmentary nature of the discourse as presented in the texts of the evangelists, with each verse beginning on a new line, viz:

CHAPITRE PREMIER

1. — La bonne nouvelle de Jésus, fils de Marie.
2. — Il y eut un homme nommé Matthieu, et un, nommé Jean, qui, dit-on, le virent et qui en parlèrent. Il y eut Marc et Luc, qui, dit-on, en entendirent parler par Simon Pierre, et en parlèrent. [...]
3. — Maintenant, c'est lui qui parle à travers le monde de paroles qui furent dites sur lui.
4. — Car il n'y a qu'une vérité, et elle nous appartient à tous.

These first four verses and the last two verses of the narrative (34. 49-50) seem designed to be read as non-fictional addenda, the work of a hand that is neither that of Barbusse nor Jesus, and the aim of which is to heighten the authenticity of the narrative proper.

Ultimately, what the reader is confronted with in *Jésus*, is a pseudo-gospel written in the first person by no less a personage than Jesus himself, whose purpose is to remind us of his Jewish roots and Jewishness; reject the codified beliefs, practices and doctrines of Judaism, and of Christianity as it is presented to him by Paul; condemn both Churches for their long-standing association with the secular powers of his and subsequent ages; and illustrate a certain parallelism between Jesus and his first

followers, on the one hand, and the Communist revolutionaries of the future, on the other.

Barbusse made the final point time and again prior to, or shortly after the publication of *Jésus*. In a manuscript version of the postface to the novel, he stated that he had written his latest work ‘pour leur montrer, à tous ceux qui attendent, le parallélisme grandiose qui se dessine rigoureusement entre la décadence du monde moderne [...], et celle du monde antique; entre le christianisme naissant, et le communisme international naissant’. He went on to describe recent historical events as ‘le juste cataclysme révolutionnaire dont Jésus est l’un des pères.’⁴⁷ Quite why Barbusse chose not to publish this version of the postface is a moot point but it seems unlikely — as Relinger has suggested — that he was worried about the response that so bold a claim would trigger in the Communist world. If so, it is hard to account for the Etienne episode in *Les Enchaînements*, as well as the letter dated 24 July 1926 which Barbusse sent to an American would-be biographer. ‘Dans un livre que je suis en train d’écrire sur Jésus-Christ, sur les origines du christianisme, et la parenté profonde du mouvement révolutionnaire actuel avec le pur christianisme originel’, he wrote, ‘j’essaye de déterminer le dessin schématique, la direction et le sens de l’activité contemporaine tout entier.’⁴⁸

Furthermore, Barbusse made a case for the parallelism between primitive Christianity and contemporary Communism in various articles that appeared in *L’Humanité* either side of the publication of *Jésus*. Barbusse explained that he had, in his novel, pointed up the Jesus-Christ dichotomy, distinguishing between the personality and the teaching of the historical Jesus, on the one hand, and the mythological figure of Christian theology, on the other. He had stressed Jesus’s revolutionary dimension and what he, Barbusse, saw as Jesus’s internationalist, egalitarian tendencies: ‘Ce sont ses tendances mêmes qui, appliquées aujourd’hui d’une

façon plus méthodique et plus ample aux réalités sociales, économiques et politiques, et aux conditions formidables de la vie collective contemporaine aboutissent à notre doctrine communiste.’⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Barbusse remarked that ‘Jésus prototype ou plutôt acteur vivant du Messie chrétien fut, à mon avis, un prédicateur parfaitement réaliste et vraiment révolutionnaire, même dans le sens où nous l’entendons aujourd’hui.’⁵⁰

The Jesus of the narrative is presented accordingly. As has already been seen, his mission is partly religious, or rather, antireligious, the task being to return lost souls to themselves and point out that cries ‘De profundis’ are but self-suplications: ‘Du fond de mes abîmes d’angoisse, j’ai crié: non! Tout est en nous, et notre cri ne se dépasse pas [...] Alors Dieu n’est-il qu’en nous? Oui, il n’est qu’en nous’ (22. 37-39). The fact is, however, that Jesus is portrayed as a metaphysical revolutionary whose immanentist teaching is generally greeted with a muted response, perplexity, or outright hostility. He finds the masses far more receptive to his socio-political message, which is a long time in its gestation.

As a young boy in ‘La Révolution’, Jesus realizes that historical development has reached a critical juncture, that society stands on the threshold of the Apocalypse: ‘Les jours sont proches. Le vieux monde va mourir la mort’ (4. 20). The air is filled with talk of a great upheaval and Jesus feels it within himself:

J’ai dans l’esprit un soulèvement qui ressemble à la Révolution. Le grand abîme de mes pères crie en moi. On est fait pour quelque chose de juste. On est fait pour défaire ce qui est injuste. Il est écrit: Je ferai de la droiture une règle, et de la justice un niveau. Et un torrent. (4. 42-47)

At this point in the narrative, Jesus is only vaguely aware of the meaning of justice as derived from various books of the Hebrew Bible. It will become the cornerstone of his mission.

He gives the matter no great thought for the next five chapters, preoccupied with personal affairs, such as his first visit to Jerusalem, his first sexual experience, the death

of his father and, above all, his unrequited love for Priscilla, whom he discovers in the arms of the man he had thought his friend, Jekhiel. The lattermost experience has upon Barbusse's Jesus the same kind of transformative effect that immersion in the Jordan by John the Baptist has upon the Jesus of the synoptic gospels. On his way home, he notices, 'dans les campagnes et dans les cachots des maisons, des malheureux qui peinaient' (10. 26). He describes the experience as 'ma vraie rencontre avec les hommes' (10. 31) and he contrasts society's underprivileged many with the privileged few — 'les riches, les aisés, les satisfaits aux habits propres et aux lèvres grasses, ceux qui ont les mains des autres au bout de leurs bras et qui récoltent le travail' (10. 32).

In short, Jesus becomes class-conscious. He realizes that he has idled away his time 'loin du devoir que je m'étais donné: Faire quelque chose de juste' (10. 68). The thought occurs to him that he is now at a turning-point and must choose between 'deux voies et deux fatalités: Celle de chacun et celle de tous' (10. 70-71). As 'l'ouvrier des ouvriers' (10. 95) in a dualistic socio-economic system in which the exploitation of the working masses breeds war (10. 54, 10. 67), he naturally opts for the collective response.⁵¹ Jesus will agitate for the Revolution that will lead to a society in which 'tout serait à tous, et [...] il n'y aurait plus de maître ni d'esclave' (10. 63). He will take the burdens of the world upon himself: 'je porterai le poids de tout ce peuple, et je ne dirai pas: il est trop pesant. [...] Moi seul je suivrai ce commandement. Je ne leur demande pas de le suivre. Je ne leur demande pas l'impossible' (10. 96-101). Clearly, Jesus's primary aim is to help bring about an egalitarian society.⁵²

Throughout the second half of the narrative, broadly speaking, Jesus becomes increasingly aware of the collectivity. After he berates religious hypocrites in the Sermon on the Mount, the crowd sends up an enormous cry of joy, 'comme un grand frère à un petit' (20. 18). Jesus the individual realizes that he is part of a whole as well as its spokesman: 'A ce moment-là, j'avais deux mille coeurs, comme eux' (20. 21). In

the other chapter in which he makes a direct address to the masses, 'Sermon du Temple', in which Jesus seals his own fate by the deliberately provocative act of rounding on the money-changers, he once again becomes aware of the masses and the deep chords that his socio-political message has struck with them: 'Il y avait un tel grondement d'amour du peuple vers moi qu'on n'eût rien pu faire contre moi à ce moment-là' (30. 41).

Because of the nature of the society in which Jesus lives, the question of social reform inevitably has considerable political ramifications: in first-century Palestine, under the occupation of imperial Rome, the social *is* the political. Jesus shows himself to be opposed to the established order: 'Parmi mes disciples, on ne trouvera jamais un soldat des rois et de l'ordre établi. Mais parmi mes disciples, on trouvera les soldats de la justice' (28. 98). He is radical in his opposition to the gods called Capital and War:⁵³

Mais ceux qui ne travaillent pas n'ont pas le droit de manger. [...] Et l'argent, s'il vit et enfante, est un monstre. Et dans la communauté des travailleurs, faite par eux et pour eux. Et où se dissipera la guerre et la richesse injuste, chacun sera l'égal de chacun. (30. 81-86)

Indisputably, these are the views of a proto-Communist. Although Jesus never actually refers to himself as such, he is quick to correct those who misconstrue his message, and does not reject the epithet when his mother, in despair on the eve of his Passion, urges him to mend his ways before it is too late: 'On dit, mon petit: Ce Jésus-là, c'est un sans-patrie. Il ne respecte pas assez les gens en place et les propriétaires. Il est un communiste' (32. 49). In his Temple sermon, he has already described the truth (and by extension himself) as 'une sans-patrie' (30. 71) and pointed out that the prophets have extended the Law to the whole world (30. 73). The people's real enemies are not foreign nations: 'Tes vrais ennemis, ceux que tu dois vaincre un jour, ce sont les riches, et les puissants' (30. 76).

Like Barbusse himself, Jesus is not opposed to violence as such, realizing that substantive change is unlikely to be brought about without it (30. 126-131);⁵⁴ violence is a legitimate means to an end provided the end itself is legitimate. 'La vraie paix est de l'autre côté d'une guerre, et d'un déluge' (34. 42), declares Jesus, evoking the biblical imagery at work in Barbusse's earlier depictions of the Great War. These words are uttered on the Cross, on which Jesus describes himself as 'la bête divine du sacrifice, dont le corps est un drapeau rouge' (34. 29). He has become a Communist symbol; he views his death as a sacrifice for the proletarian revolution (30. 22-26). Belief in the apocalyptic upheaval that Jesus sensed in his childhood, the reign of justice instituted by God's direct intervention at the end of the climactic struggle between Good and Evil, has long since been replaced by a belief in the need for the oppressed masses to take direct action themselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the multitudes that a society based on justice and equality will not be brought about until the people realize their own strength. 'Nous attendons la Révolution', states a militant Jew. 'Alors, vous vous attendez vous-mêmes', replies Jesus (20. 98). Of all of the main characters that Barbusse produced in his novels, Jesus of Nazareth is by far the most political and, paradoxically, the most antireligious. That said, his gospel ends with a curious command: 'mettez l'idée pure, sage, et juste, de la Révolution dans la grande âme religieuse de l'humanité' (34.50).

Despite the many positive things Barbusse had to say about the prophets and the Jewish people generally, the calls urging Jews to join the revolutionary cause went largely unheeded.⁵⁵ One may suppose that Jewish readers would have approved of Barbusse's dedivinization of Jesus. On the other hand, the portrayal of the Jewish religion as an ossified, repressive legalism imposed by the few on the many would not have been well received. Barbusse mentions the Temple tax in *Jésus* but makes little of the imperial tax

that all subject nations had to pay under Roman occupation. Jesus's opposition to war strikes the reader as contrived and again seems to focus on the Jews, for whom in the decades both before and after Jesus, war was a question of a fight for national liberation rather than class strife. Indeed, the very destruction of ancient Israel, which Jesus so perspicaciously foretells, occurred only a generation later as a result of a national uprising against Rome. Again, bizarrely, the Romans are hardly portrayed as the villains of the piece. As for collaboration with the occupying power, with the exception of the top echelons of the religious hierarchy, represented in the main by the Sadducees, it is safe to say that the whole of Palestinian Jewry was vigorously opposed to the political set-up and had been, whenever self-rule had been interrupted, for centuries. In *Jésus*, Barbusse does not distinguish clearly enough between the Jewish people and their leaders in this respect.

One can raise many such objections to the novel and a number of anomalies have been considered in this chapter. In spite of himself, Barbusse produced in *Jésus* a Jesus who, in his hostility towards the ritualistic, legalistic aspects of Judaism, his universalism, his miracles and powers of prophecy, and his strategic execution (at the hands of the Romans but brought about by the Jewish religious authorities), is identifiable with, if not identical to, the Jesus Christ of Christianity. In *Jésus contre Dieu*, Barbusse wrecks the parallelism he sees in primitive Christianity and contemporary Communism by having Jesus murdered by his own followers. While this murder 'proves' definitively that Jesus and Christ are mutually exclusive entities, it also invalidates Barbusse's claim that the first followers of Christ were well-intentioned social revolutionaries. Picciola has also pointed out that since Jesus is portrayed in the novel as a Jew addressing fellow Jews, the real internationalist whose revolutionary mission eventually brought down Rome is seen to be not Jesus but Paul.⁵⁶

Although *Jésus* met with a positive response in terms of its literary qualities, the two specific aims that Barbusse had set out to achieve did not have the desired effect.⁵⁷ According to Relinger, 'La critique catholique opposa un silence offensé'.⁵⁸ Rhys may well be right in his assertion that Barbusse had already shocked Catholics in France to such an extent that they were no longer outraged by his work.⁵⁹ To some extent also, perhaps, there may well have been a reluctance to attract attention to the novel and ensure a *succès de scandale*, the mistake the Church had made in attacking Renan's notorious study. Furthermore, much of the potential sting was taken out of the novel by the flood of demythologizing literature that had preceded it in the nineteenth century.

The Communist reaction to the novel will be considered in detail in the following chapter, along with other, non-Communist assessments. Suffice it to say for the time being that Communist readers generally did not share Barbusse's views,⁶⁰ let alone the feelings expressed in the paratextual declaration, amounting to a personal appropriation, which fronts the novel and appears also on the title page: 'J'ai vu Jésus, moi-aussi. Il s'est démontré à moi dans la beauté de la précision. Je l'aime; je le tiens contre mon cœur, et je le disputerai aux autres, s'il le faut.'⁶¹ The debate that Barbusse appears to have anticipated here was not long in raging. Barbusse made his position known in April 1927 in a letter to Simone Dumas, with whom he was to make his first visit to the Soviet Union a few months later. Rejecting the accusation of 'mysticizing' the Revolution by making a Communist of Jesus, Barbusse wrote:

Certains soi-disant marxistes incriminent la 'religiosité' de l'œuvre, ce qui est absurde et prouve qu'ils n'ont rien compris, car je donne de ce mysticisme la définition que doit lui donner tout révolutionnaire: une poussée d'ordre sentimental et passionné, qui doit venir après la compréhension, non avant.⁶²

In other words, reason preceded faith.

On the evidence of Barbusse's poetry and the first six of his seven novels, which collectively span the period from 1890 to 1927 and the three broad phases of the

writer's development, there can be no doubt that Henri Barbusse was an atheist who came to see traditional forms of religion, and Christianity in particular, as a means of keeping the masses servile and in ignorance. At the same time, because of the scope and the nature of Barbusse's critique of religion, suggestive of a quest for faith that eventually led the writer to the Communist Party, one can understand why comrade Balakov, the Bulgarian delegate at the second conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, held in Kharkov in November 1930, felt moved to state:

Barbusse n'a pu s'assimiler notre conception matérialiste, c'est un idéaliste, un chercheur déiste. Il essaye de réconcilier la révolution avec la religion. Et un doute me vient: voudra-t-il corriger ses fautes? deviendra-t-il un vrai communiste, un vrai écrivain révolutionnaire? Espérons que la pratique de la lutte révolutionnaire aidera Barbusse à corriger ses fautes.⁶³

Barbusse's identity with regard to Communism and Christianity, not open to question in his own mind, was perceived very differently by others. This discrepancy is the subject of the next, and final chapter of this thesis.

Notes

¹ The other two items are *Judas* and *Jésus contre Dieu*. A translation of the latter was published in the Soviet Union in 1971. It has never been published in the original French. I am grateful to the AAHB for making a photocopy of the text available to me.

² Barbusse states his familiarity with the relevant literature in letters to Simone Dumas dated 20 December 1926 and 3 April 1927 (private collection); ‘Henri Barbusse et les catholiques’, p. 1; and the postface to *Jésus*, in which he says that he has read and re-read ‘jour et nuit les Livres Saints, et étudié tant de travaux qu’on a écrits sur le dogme’ (see note 15). Although Barbusse was probably referring in all three instances to a specific period of typically intensive research, there can be little doubt that he had always concerned himself with christological issues.

³ Fischer, *Men and Politics*, p. 193.

⁴ Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 243.

⁵ Paraf, ‘Le Poète’, p. 1.

⁶ Paraf, ‘Henri Barbusse’, p. 3.

⁷ Paraf, ‘Jésus et Barbusse’.

⁸ Paraf, ‘*Jésus contre Dieu*. Mystère avec cinéma et musique’, p. 68.

⁹ Paraf, quoted in Guille, ‘Origines’, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹ Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 150.

¹² Barbusse declared in *Judas* (p. 278): ‘les révolutionnaires d’aujourd’hui vaincront [...] contre les chrétiens d’aujourd’hui qui sont leurs pires ennemis’.

¹³ See Fabrègues, ‘The Re-establishment of Relations between France and the Vatican in 1921’; and for a detailed account of the papal condemnation of *L’Action Française*, Brugèrette, *Le Prêtre français et la société contemporaine*, III, pp. 689-705.

¹⁴ Picciola, ‘Sur un ouvrage récent de Jean Relinger. A propos d’Henri Barbusse’, p. 48.

¹⁵ Barbusse, *Jésus* (Flammarion, 1927), p. 247. Subsequent references, given in parenthesis in the text, are to this, the only edition of the novel and will be given in chapter-verse form, in the spirit that the author intended.

¹⁶ Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 151.

¹⁷ ‘Qu’il s’agisse des pratiques, d’idées, ou de divinité, Jésus dit à chacun: ceci n’est pas en dehors de vous, mais en vous.’ Barbusse, *Judas* (pp. 126-127). The point is made also on pp. 72, and 150.

¹⁸ The tetragrammaton is the ineffable, unutterable name of God, written in the four letters YHWH, and articulated as ‘Yahweh’. The second commandment reads: ‘You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the water under the earth’, Deuteronomy 5. 8.

¹⁹ Cooper, *The Cassell Dictionary of Christianity*, p. 264.

²⁰ Another echo of the text of *Les Suppliants* (see p. 61 of this thesis). Elsewhere, in the earlier novel, Marguerite says to Maximilien, ‘Il me semble que vous consolerez les malheureux’ (p. 205). In *Jésus*, Mary Magdalen tells Jesus much the same: ‘Tu consoleras les malheureux’ (24. 76). ‘Il n’y a de l’humain que l’homme’ is a remark made by both Maximilien (p. 275) and by Jesus (to Paul, 28. 43). These and other correspondences between Jesus and Maximilien show how little Barbusse’s religious thought evolved in some respects.

²¹ In *Judas*, Barbusse suggests that ‘le Dieu intérieur proclamé par Jésus est une divinisation de l’Homme’ (p. 128). He later refers to Jesus as ‘l’homme divinement homme’ (p. 203). The concept of human divinity, a major feature of Barbusse’s work in the first phase of his career, is considerably less conspicuous in the later phases.

²² Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 169-71.

²³ Jesus’s status as a figure within the Jewish matrix out of which Christianity grew has been a bone of contention since the quest for the historical Jesus began two centuries

ago. As Allen points out, the most productive research in recent times has put Jesus of Nazareth back in the Jewish context. Allen, *The Human Christ*, p. 7. Good starting-points are Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, *The Changing Faces of Jesus*; Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*; and Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*.

²⁴ See Picciola, 'L'Affaire Jésus (suite)', p. 19.

²⁵ Like many who are unable to have children, Barbusse and his wife, Hélyonne, were very fond of animals, and kept a number of pets throughout their married life. This Jesus, like Barbusse, is constantly aware of animals, and of dogs in particular.

²⁶ According to Fredriksen, there can be no firm distinction between the religious/spiritual and the national/political in this particular cultural context. See Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, pp. 73, 122.

²⁷ Selman and Manser, *The Macmillan Dictionary of the Bible*, pp. 58, 139.

²⁸ According to Barbusse, Jesus was crucified 'pour propagande révolutionnaire par les soins de l'Eglise officielle juive et du fonctionnaire d'administration romain de la Judée.' Barbusse, 'Jésus marxiste'. See also *Judas*, pp. 178-79, 181.

²⁹ Barbusse, 'L'orthodoxie anti-religieuse', p. 9.

³⁰ The 'Messiah' is the Hebrew for 'the Anointed One'. For a more detailed consideration of the term, see Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, pp. 240-43.

³¹ See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 155-56.

³² See Peigue, 'L'auteur du *Feu* restera-t-il longtemps en enfer?', p. 162.

³³ See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 160.

³⁴ 'Aujourd'hui la vieille religion est celle qui porte le même nom du christianisme, mais n'a plus rien de commun avec ce mouvement jeune et créateur, et les Judas, ce sont les chrétiens.' Barbusse, *Judas* (p. 256).

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 92

³⁶ It is worth adding that Barbusse is far from unique in this particular respect. Within the realms of fiction, both George Moore, in *The Brook Kerith: A Syrian Story* (1916) and D.H. Lawrence, in the short story 'The Man Who Died', have Jesus cheat death on the Cross in physical, rather than metaphysical terms. Amongst serious scholars who posit the same thesis, one could mention Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, and Thiering, *Jesus the Man*.

³⁷ 'Jésus avait constitué avec ses disciples une sorte de petite société communiste [...] un modeste embryon d'Internationale'. Barbusse, *Judas* (p. 180).

³⁸ Asked in a survey whether he believed in miracle cures, Barbusse replied: 'Je ne crois pas à des interventions divines en faveur des malades parce que je ne crois en aucun cas à une intervention divine en quoi que ce soit.' He accounted for 'miracle' cures as the workings of an 'idée fixe': 'je crois que la plupart des miracles, notamment ceux qu'on attribue au Christ et à ses apôtres, n'avaient pas d'autre origine.' *Lourdes*, p. 14.

³⁹ Matthew 10. 34. See also Luke 22. 36, in which Jesus tells his disciples before sending them out two by two to sell their cloak and buy a sword if they do not possess one.

⁴⁰ Matthew 26. 52/Luke 22. 51/John 18. 11. In Luke, he even heals the High Priest's servant, whose ear has been cut off in a fracas. Barbusse avoids this rather problematic issue by omitting the scene altogether.

⁴¹ Contrast the parables of the (mustard) seed and the hidden treasure, *Jésus* 16. 15, with their biblical counterparts, in Matthew 13. 31-32/Mark 4. 30-32/Luke 13. 18-19; and Matthew 13. 44, respectively. As for pseudo-beatitudes, such as 'Heureux les débonnaires, car ils hériteront de la terre' (18. 19) and 'Heureux les malheureux qui ont beaucoup aimé' (8. 30), they are to be found in all of Barbusse's novels; and contrasted with the biblical beatitudes, the *locus classicus* for which is, of course, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, chs 3-5.

⁴² Rühle, *Literature and Revolution*, p. 328.

⁴³ Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 372.

⁴⁴ See Rhys's introduction to the Everyman translation of *Le Feu*, p. x.

⁴⁵ Rieder, who published the Barbusse-Kurella edited *Lettres de Lénine à sa famille* (1936), also have *Jésus* categorized as a 'roman'.

⁴⁶ Vidal quotes Barbusse as saying so himself: 'J'ai beaucoup réfléchi, beaucoup hésité; mais ma décision est prise. Je vais écrire un livre sur Jésus, une évocation de la figure du prophète, sous forme d'Évangile'. Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 150. Interestingly, here, as elsewhere, Barbusse refers to Jesus as a prophet. See also 'Jésus d'Henri Barbusse', and the letter to Dumas dated 20 December 1926, in which Jesus is described as 'un prophète d'athéisme' (private collection).

⁴⁷ AAV, 45.109.

⁴⁸ AAV, 32.67.

⁴⁹ Barbusse, 'Jésus marxiste'.

⁵⁰ Barbusse, 'A propos de Jésus marxiste'. Barbusse made the same contention in a letter to Dumas dated 20 December 1926 (private collection).

⁵¹ The narrative contains a number of references to the fact that Jesus is a working man from a working-class background. See, for example, 10. 93ff.

⁵² It is in this sense that Barbusse understood Jesus to have been a revolutionary. It was Jesus's determination to be the instrument of the 'rectification de la grande loi séculaire qui règle les rapports des pauvres et des riches' that made him such a threat to the established order. *Judas* (pp. 178-79).

⁵³ In the case of the latter, somewhat incongruously, perhaps, given that war between peoples and classes is nowhere depicted in the narrative.

⁵⁴ For a detailed analysis of Barbusse's famous dispute with Rolland on the legitimacy of revolutionary violence, see Fisher, 'The Rolland-Barbusse Debate'. See also 'Le

devoir socialiste', in which Barbusse wrote: 'Toute révolution impose une constitution par force. [...] Il faudrait être en proie à un mysticisme dangereux pour croire à l'unique beauté de la raison' (p. 1).

⁵⁵ See Barbusse, 'Peut-on être juif sans être révolutionnaire?'; and 'Lettre inédite d'Henri Barbusse à un groupe d'écrivains yidich de Paris'. On the lack of response, see Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 163-64.

⁵⁶ Picciola, 'L'Affaire Jésus (suite)', p. 21.

⁵⁷ In letters to Dumas (10 March and 3 April 1927), Barbusse commented on the favourable reception of the novel with regard to its artistic and literary qualities (private collection). See also Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 154-55.

⁵⁸ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 163.

⁵⁹ See note 44.

⁶⁰ According to Duclos and Fréville, *Jésus and Judas* 'furent, à juste titre, mal accueillis par la critique marxiste'. *Henri Barbusse*, p. 35. Correctly, for reasons that will become clear in the next chapter, Relinger distinguishes between the reaction of Marxist hard-liners and the leadership of the PCF, although the latter generally did not subscribe to Barbusse's views, either. See 'Le Rôle et l'oeuvre d'Henri Barbusse', pp. 536, 540.

⁶¹ It is difficult not to see in these lines a personal identification with Jesus on the part of the author. In one review, a contemporary of Barbusse wrote: 'On ne saurait compter tous ceux qui se réclamèrent du Christ. Henri Barbusse est allé plus loin: il a voulu être le Christ lui-même.' Noussane, 'Le Cité des livres. Henri Barbusse: *Jésus*'. Baudorre takes the same view: 'Jésus, le prophète d'hier, c'est aussi Barbusse, le prophète d'aujourd'hui qui rêve, depuis toujours, de consacrer sa vie à la même mission: éclairer et sauver les hommes.' *Barbusse* (p. 261). Weems makes the point even more emphatically: 'Barbusse sacrificed his health, his bourgeois ease, his friends, perhaps even his marriage, to the cause in which he believed [...] he preached to the multitudes,

accepted isolation and misunderstanding, refused to waver. For Barbusse, Jesus was a model and an inspiration.' Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse' (p. 511).

⁶² Letter to Dumas of 10 April 1927 (private collection). In an earlier letter (10 March 1927), he had complained about the same lack of discernment in the reviews of Souday and Ernest-Charles (see section 2.5 of the bibliography).

⁶³ Quoted in *Littérature de la Révolution mondiale*, p. 181.

PART FOUR

CHAPTER EIGHT HENRI BARBUSSE: COMRADE OR CHRISTIAN?

In Parts one to three of this thesis, analysis of Henri Barbusse's novels has shown that the author attempted to sanctify the secular in his quest for faith. In the early part of his career, Barbusse sought to divinize the human. During and immediately after the First World War, he advocated a pseudo-religious cult of the basic principles of socialist republicanism, as exemplified by the American President, Woodrow Wilson. Once he had joined the PCF in 1923, he began to insist upon a parallelism between primitive Christianity and the contemporary Communist movement, a parallelism that revolved around the all-important figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

In this part of the thesis, it is necessary to step outside the general frame of reference hitherto, the novels, and examine works of non-fiction and other documents, in order to consider fully the ramifications and implications of what would appear to be Barbusse's attempt to contrive a synthesis between Christianity and Communism. Given the official Communist line that Jesus was no less a myth than was the Christ of Christian theology,¹ and the militant atheism that characterized the Communist attitude towards organized religion, it is hardly surprising that Barbusse's outspoken views on both alienated many a fellow member of the Party in the final phase of his career and intellectual development.² As will be seen, comrade Balakov's assertion that Barbusse was a 'chercheur déiste' trying to reconcile religion and revolution was by no means unique. Equally, numerous non-Communist contemporaries saw in Barbusse a Christian soul of sorts — a view which has since been echoed by various scholars.

In the absence of universally accepted definitions, the aim in this chapter is not to answer the question which heads this part of the thesis, so much as to make the case for its pertinence. This will be far from straightforward. Before proceeding to a thorough analysis of reactions to the religious content of, and dimensions to Barbusse's work generally and, in particular, to his writings from 1920 onwards, a close examination of

his use of religious language and imagery in these writings will be required. Because it is not possible to separate the one from the other, it will be necessary at the same time to consider the parallelism between Communism and primitive Christianity that Barbusse began to identify after *Clarté*, an endeavour which is complicated by the tension arising from Barbusse's self-confessed love for Jesus and his admiration for the first generations of his followers, on the one hand, and his contempt for the Church, 'Les Judas de Jésus', on the other. Furthermore, whilst to a large extent anticipating by more than a decade 'la main tendue' policy of the Communists in the mid-1930s, as will be seen, Barbusse insisted that Communism and Christianity were incompatible systems, the one founded on the scientific laws of Marxist-Leninist theory; the other, on faith — the unhesitating spiritual acceptance of that which one cannot intellectually prove. This gave rise in Barbusse's work of the period to an oft-referred to dichotomy between reason and faith. As will be seen, it is not at all certain that this dichotomy operated in the way that Barbusse supposed, or indeed that it is even appropriate to distinguish so conveniently between Christianity and Communism.

With regard to his trilogy of works on Jesus and the numerous newspaper articles to which the trilogy gave rise, Barbusse was accused of 'mysticizing' revolutionary politics. Analysis of the literature from Barbusse's pre-Communist days and reader-response thereto has shown that in his quest for faith, the writer began 'mysticizing' secular phenomena long before the 1920s got underway. Indeed, a reasonably attentive reader of Barbusse's work prior to the decade would have expected such a development and it is thus somewhat surprising that it took Pierre Naville and other self-styled Marxist purists so long to be irked by what they saw as Barbusse's religiosity. Perhaps they were not interested in Barbusse's pre-Party works of non-fiction. It is here, however, that this putative religiosity looms largest, and gives the lie somewhat to Barbusse's contention, expressed in a letter to the German poet Jean Muller, that 'l'individu n'a plus besoin d'un

Dieu pour vivre sa vie profonde, que la société n'a besoin d'une religion pour remplir sa destinée collective.'³

In the address with which he opened the inaugural congress of the IAC held in Geneva in the spring of 1920, Barbusse expatiated on a 'révolte' he described as 'réfléchie, calculée et scientifique. C'est par cela', he continued, 'que nous différons de tels révolutionnaires d'autrefois à qui la générosité et l'élan tenaient lieu souvent de religion intégrale.'⁴ Interestingly, however, he then talked about the decisions made by the congress, 'que nous aurons ensuite à défendre religieusement [...]'.⁵ Car nous avons foi dans le parti socialiste, et je veux dès le début proclamer envers lui notre fidélité et notre fraternité' (*Paroles*, p. 227). He ended by declaring that those who subscribed to justice and internationalism in place of injustice and nationalism were 'les vrais sauveurs du genre humain' (*Paroles*, p. 234). In *Lueur*, Barbusse called upon those interested in the Clarté movement to believe in this movement because it was 'true', having urged the readers of his most recent novel, *Clarté*, to reject religion because this was *not* 'true':

Croyez à cette croyance pour qu'elle vive un jour. Il faut d'abord croire à la vérité, s'élever jusqu'à elle parmi les préjugés, les traditions, les légendes, dont les oppresseurs des hommes ont formidablement enveloppé et consolidé leur oppression, à travers ce blocus de la pensée dans tous les cercles nationaux par le capitalisme empereur.⁶

It is worth noting that in stark contrast to the position he was to adopt throughout the 1920s, Barbusse was asking his readers to put faith before reason ('Il faut d'abord croire à la vérité'); and that as far as supporters were concerned, he was simply preaching to the converted.

The list of words one would expect to find in a religious context that appear in a book which was written as a political manifesto for the Clarté movement is long but would have come as a surprise only to those unfamiliar with Barbusse's lexical proclivities. The reader is not so much spoiled for choice as overwhelmed by it. Contemporary revolutionaries are likened to 'les sombres prophètes et les premiers

apôtres' (*Lueur*, p. 5). Science is 'miraculeuse' (*Lueur*, p. 10); the names of Rolland, Liebknecht and E.D. Morel, 'sacrés' (*Lueur*, p. 20); the victims of Russian tsarism 'martyrs d'une cause admirable' (*Lueur*, p. 44). Reconstruction of all that has been destroyed is the immediate aim: 'Accomplissez des prodiges, des miracles de travail' (*Lueur*, p. 60). It is 'la révolte sacrée qui s'impose avant tout' (*Lueur*, p. 65). 'Les réquisitoires qu'on dirige contre la sainte loi d'égalité se dissipent dans la grandeur de sa sérénité', he states, in connection with the need to eradicate the social stratifications caused by class (*Lueur*, p. 83).

Many such words appear in the text of *Paroles* also. In his analysis in this book of the Bolshevik revolution, Barbusse discusses the invasion of Russia by the Allied powers after the war and states that it is 'le principe même du socialisme qui est en jeu; et il est encore plus sacré pour les opprimés et les prolétaires' (*Paroles*, p. 167). He states his faith in the Russian people by quoting Tolstoy: ' "Le peuple russe sera le rédempteur de tous les peuples" ' (*Paroles*, p. 174). In another address, this one to the ARAC, he called for 'LA GRÈVE GÉNÉRALE! [...] grève sacrée (*Paroles*, p. 181; author's capitals). In an appeal to former combatants of all nationalities, Barbusse sought their contribution, 'pour aider à la délivrance de la partie universelle des pauvres' (*Paroles*, p. 218). If a truly egalitarian post-war society was to be built, the past must not be forgotten: 'L'oubli est sacrilège' (*Paroles*, p. 229). In *Lueur*, Barbusse denounces liberalism as a political ideology, and also its advocates, 'ces faux prophètes qui montrent aux hommes la Terre Promise, et non les chemins qui y mèneraient' (*Lueur*, p. 118). By contrast, in the letter which he sent to *L'Humanité* to explain publicly his decision to join the PCF, Barbusse celebrated Communist doctrine as 'l'évangile des croyances et d'actes — le but et les moyens — qu'il est nécessaire que chaque exploité incarne pour que soit redressé la réalité des choses.'⁷

In both *Paroles* and *Lueur*, Barbusse hints at common ground between the contemporary Communist movement and Christianity in its incipient, revolutionary phase. In *Paroles*, as quoted above, Barbusse implies a certain commonality of purpose in stating that it is only in the *nature* of their ‘révolte’, described as ‘réfléchie, calculée et scientifique’, that the Communists differ from ‘de tels révolutionnaires d’autrefois à qui la générosité et l’élan tenaient lieu souvent de religion intégrale’ (*Paroles*, p. 224). The first part of *Lueur*, entitled ‘La fin d’un monde’, begins with the statement that contemporary society is experiencing an end-phase similar to those that preceded the fall of Babylon and the Roman empire, ‘contre qui criaient les sombres prophètes et les premiers apôtres’ (*Lueur*, p. 5). In the section entitled ‘La Raison, non la croyance’ (*Lueur*, pp. 68-71), Barbusse remarks that ‘Les révolutionnaires farouches et purs ressemblent par plus d’un point aux premiers chrétiens’ (*Lueur*, p. 69). Having flagged religion ‘la croyance’ and political science, ‘la raison’, as paths divergent, Barbusse rejects the idea of collaboration between Christian and Communist:

Nous ne fondrons pas notre effort avec le vôtre, nous ne ferons pas œuvre commune, parce que nous ne voulons pas introduire dans l’harmonie des idées rationnelles le principe religieux — qui est à la fois trop personnel et trop souverain. [...] Il y a antagonisme entre la foi et la raison, elles se détruisent l’une l’autre, même lorsqu’elles sont d’accord. [...] D’ailleurs, nous voyons le désordre que cette force terrible et mystérieuse a apporté dans l’histoire des foules, le trop facile abus qu’ont fait les hommes d’une puissance spirituelle qui n’a point de contrôle fixe ni de critérium sensible, et qui ne ressortit, en définitive, que de quelques décisions individuelles; nous voyons le contraste si dramatique qui sépare aujourd’hui les églises sorties jadis innocemment de l’Evangile avec l’Evangile lui-même, le secours formidable accordé sans cesse et partout, en bloc, par l’Eglise catholique ou protestante à l’action conservatrice. (*Lueur*, pp. 69-70)

Curiously, however, no sooner does Barbusse rule out joint action by Christian (Catholic or Protestant) and Communist on the basis of the incompatibility of faith and reason, and the Church’s formidable conservatism, than he allows for the possibility of collaboration, on the proviso that the Christian make an important concession: ‘que leur croyance demeure strictement personnelle et n’intervienne jamais à aucun titre dans la construction

objective de la règle commune' (*Lueur*, p. 70). Despite the obvious tensions, it is to such statements that 'la main tendue' and the portrayal of Jesus and Etienne as proto-Communists in Barbusse's two novels of the 1920s must be traced back.

The same thematics — the faith-reason dichotomy constructed in order to illustrate the primacy of the secular over the religious; the condemnation and rejection of the Church as a reactionary institution; the implicit appeal to individual Christians to recognize their revolutionary heritage and act accordingly — are all in evidence in Barbusse's next book publication, a pro-Bolshevik manifesto published in 1921. In it, the author bids good riddance to the age when 'les sciences physiques et naturelles étaient embarrassées de métaphysique et de religion'.⁸ He points out that the applied sciences did not begin to yield any meaningful results until they were restricted to the observation of empirical phenomena, 'en éliminant tout mysticisme et en plaçant la pathétique et vertigineuse recherche des causes premières et de l'essence de l'être, sur un autre plan de recherches' (*Couteau*, pp. 7-8). At the beginning of what are lengthy statements that endorse the putative scientific approach of Communist theory to contemporary society's ills, Barbusse states that the social sciences must take their lead from the applied sciences, emphatically divesting them of any suggestion of a quasi-religious status: 'Il ne s'agit pas de paradis terrestre, ni de rien de magique ou de surnaturel' (*Couteau*, p. 8).

Where in an earlier version of the tract Barbusse had contented himself with the concise and somewhat terse observation that 'il faut rompre avec les socialistes chrétiens ou néo-chrétiens qui apportent un remède qui est une autre maladie',⁹ in *Couteau* he states:

Il ne faut pas admettre la médication surnaturelle des communistes chrétiens. Ces hommes qui méritent notre hommage par leur courageuse pureté, se doivent d'adhérer à notre conception révolutionnaire rationnelle, parce que celle-ci constitue une sorte de corps de doctrine minimum expressément contenu dans le leur. Mais la réciproque n'est pas vraie. Ils affirment tout ce que nous affirmons quant à la structure collective idéale, mais nous n'affirmons pas tout ce qu'ils affirment. C'est pourquoi l'adhésion ne peut, non plus, être réciproque ni la fusion intime. Nous ne saurions, sans perdre tout le secret de notre force, collaborer à l'intrusion dans le mouvement

social, de principes directeurs dépendant du commandement de la foi et dont l'expérience nous oblige à dénoncer les méfaits sociaux et, partant, le danger social futur. L'Eglise chrétienne est devenue un long cachot. Comment les vaillants reconSTRUCTEURS de la beauté religieuse espèreraient-ils imprimer celle-ci dans les âmes mieux que l'a fait Jésus-Christ? (*Couteau*, pp. 62-63)

Not for the first time, the point that Barbusse is making is that while the ideal social structure that both Communists and Christians strive to create is the same, namely the classless society, the means to this end are irreconcilably different. This being the case, the term 'communiste chrétien' appears to be something of an oxymoron, the modern Christian, by Barbusse's definition, being perforce a conservative or a conservative by extension. For Barbusse the first Christians and Jesus were revolutionaries. In denouncing Russian, German, French, English and American militarism, Barbusse states that Jesus, if he were to appear in the modern age, would declare: 'Il faut faire cesser l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme' (*Lueur*, pp. 41-42).

Applied to Jesus and the first Christians, then, the term 'communiste chrétien' is not an oxymoron so much as a tautological juxtaposition of synonyms. In the above block quotation, however, Barbusse is referring not to Jesus and the first generations of his followers but to contemporaries, 'qui méritent notre hommage', and 'se doivent d'adhérer à notre conception révolutionnaire rationnelle'. If this is contradictory, it seems all the more contradictory, and revealing, when one considers that in the earlier version of *Couteau*, Barbusse alludes to '*socialistes chrétiens ou néo-chrétiens*' (my italics). Furthermore, where he had earlier categorically ruled out any suggestion of collaboration he now once again indirectly invites Christians to align themselves with the Communists, despite the fundamental differences between faith and reason and the Church's history as 'un long cachot'. What Barbusse appears to be arguing is that a Christian can become a Communist, or relate sufficiently to Marxist doctrine to be able to join forces with the Communists in the interests of social transformation; but the converse is not the case. There is a lack of consistency and clarity in Barbusse's thoughts on this matter.

An examination of the faith-reason dichotomy as it emerges in Barbusse's fictional and non-fictional writings from *Les Suppliants* to *Lueur* reveals a complex, ambiguous attitude on the part of the author that is richly ironic. The conflict between religious faith, and reason, a conflict that is so prominent a feature of Barbusse's writings from 1920 onwards, has its roots in Barbusse's youth. In his novels, it is to be found in the exchanges between Maximilien Desanzac and the abbé Ursleur in *Les Suppliants* and, more particularly, in the Camusian non-dialogue between the Roman Catholic priest and the dying man Philippe, in *L'Enfer*. To the religious faith of Christianity represented by these two men of the cloth, Barbusse opposes a secular, humanist faith espoused by Desanzac and the unnamed narrator of *L'Enfer*, a humanist faith which, as has been demonstrated, is given a conspicuous religious patina. In *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, the tenets of socialist republicanism form the basis of a political, and pseudo-religious credo that is presented as the reason-able alternative to the unreason-able religious faith of Christianity.

Having rejected God and identified man as the source of his own salvation, Barbusse's idea of salvation evolved gradually, from *Les Suppliants* onwards, from faith in an individual, secular, humanist and largely apolitical response to the challenges of the human condition, to one that was secular, humanist and increasingly political. Politically, he moved from a broad left-wing stance, through socialist republicanism, to Bolshevism and, ultimately, Communism. By 1920 faith, as the *sine qua non* of religious belief, had stood still, while reason had come to be represented by the ideology of Marxist-Leninism. Paradoxically, it was because Barbusse was convinced that this ideology was based on reason rather than faith that Barbusse had faith in it. Yet the reader scours Barbusse's work in vain for conclusive proof that reason was the *cause* and faith the *effect* with regard to the writer's commitment to Communism. As seen above in the analysis of Barbusse's use of religious language in *Lueur*, he exhorts his reader to believe

in so nebulous a concept as the ‘truth’, to aspire to it ‘parmi les préjugés, les légendes, dont les oppresseurs des hommes ont formidablement enveloppé et consolidé leur oppression, à travers ce blocus de la pensée resserrée dans tous les cercles nationaux *par le capitalisme empereur*’ (*Lueur*, p. 124; my italics).

Although there is, implicit in this exhortation, a rejection of the articles of faith of the Right in general, Barbusse supplies his own article of faith in ascribing humankind’s woes to ‘le capitalisme empereur’. It, and others, are to be found time and again in his writings at this stage of his literary career: ‘La vraie cause de la guerre — ils l’avouent eux-mêmes — est une cause économique’, he says, referring to the warring nations of the First World War (*Paroles*, p. 223). Likewise, he claims in *Lueur*: ‘De même que les maux de guerre sont imputables avant tout à l’état de guerre lui-même, le malheur universel provient du capitalisme universel, voilà la vérité unique’ (p. 60). Not only does Barbusse not provide any scientific evidence to support these declarations, the ‘evidence’ itself, Marxist-Leninist writings about the causes of war — with which Barbusse appears to have been singularly unfamiliar, anyway — is authoritative only if one chooses to accept as authorities the minds that produced it.¹⁰ In the words of Conquest, the value of Marxist-Leninist and other doctrinal works ‘lies in purporting to provide serious and scholarly backing to a simple idea’, one which is ‘true’ only if one believes it to be so.¹¹ There is, thus, a strong sense in which Barbusse dismissed a religious faith, because non-empirical, only to adopt a pseudo-scientific political faith that is no less non-empirical — a state of affairs which is all the more heavily ironic given that Barbusse never engaged with economic and political science to anything like the same degree that he engaged with religion.

Suffice it to say for the time being that for Barbusse, the core of religion was faith whereas that of left-wing political creeds in general and of Communism in particular was reason and science. With regard to religion, faith preceded reason; with regard to

Communism, reason determined faith. However, it could be argued — and Barbusse's own experience strongly suggests — that faith and reason do not occupy independent spheres but spheres that intersect, and far more intimately than Barbusse's mechanistic model allows for, since those who believe will always be able to justify their belief by appealing to reason.

In an article written to defend the Clarté movement from the attacks of a counter-movement calling itself 'Le Parti de l'intelligence', which had labelled Barbusse and his associates 'bolchéviks asservis à l'Allemagne',¹² Barbusse set the tone for much of his work of the 1920s. Having identified the 'vérités révélées de la religion catholique, la "tradition" française et le nationalisme' as the essence of the 'le parti dit de l'Intelligence', Barbusse went on to drive a wedge between faith and reason:

A qui fera-t-on croire que la foi religieuse a partie liée avec la raison? Elle la méprise, au contraire, expressément. Ce qui est article de foi s'impose à l'esprit du croyant sans examen, sans discussion. Le *credo quia absurdum* n'est pas une boutade, c'est une règle absolue qui domine toutes les autres dans une mentalité catholique: tous les théologiens sont d'accord sur ce point.¹³ Pour croire il faut "s'abêtir", a dit notre grand Pascal, écrivain qui sera peu suspect à nos contradicteurs, et il nous semble que le parti religieux de l'Intelligence pourrait s'intituler, avec beaucoup plus de justesse — je n'attache pas à cette expression de sens outrageant — le parti de l'abêtissement.¹⁴

Replying in the pages of *L'Action Française* in an article ironically entitled 'M. Barbusse théologien', Navard de la Montagne gave Barbusse a lesson in the precise nature of the relationship between faith and reason within the religious context, drawing his opponent's attention to the Vatican Council that condemned fideists and traditionalists 'qui professaient que "la raison ne peut acquérir une vraie et pleine certitude des motifs de crédibilité" '.¹⁵ He pointed out that Bonnety¹⁶ was obliged in 1855 to subscribe to the proposition that ' "L'emploi de la raison précède l'acte de foi et conduit à la foi avec l'aide de la révélation et de la grâce" '; and that Lammenais¹⁷ was put on the Index for contending the contrary. Faced with Barbusse's simplistic faith-reason dichotomy, Montagne wondered what one was to make of 'l'action vigoureuse

du grand Pape Pie X contre l'anti-intellectualisme de la philosophie moderniste?' 'Bref', he concluded, 'l'Eglise catholique n'a jamais cessé de prendre le "parti de l'intelligence" et de lui faire sa part dans l'acquisition des plus hautes vérités; elle a toujours réprouvé les doctrines qui diminuaient la valeur et l'autorité de la raison.'

Although Montagne did not put the question to Barbusse in his riposte, one is entitled to ask why, having dismissed religion because devoid of, and even antithetical to, reason, Barbusse had ended his article in a prophetic mode that calls to mind his portrayal both of Maximilien Desanzac in *Les Suppliants* and Jesus in *Jésus*:

Lorsque ignorance et les préjugés ineptes se seront atténués dans la masse vivante, et ce jour approche, la discipline consciente, l'organisation méthodique et l'équilibre naturel remplaceront le bon plaisir impérial, royal, bourgeois et capitaliste; ce qui est trop haut sera abaissé, ce qui est trop bas sera élevé, la société se retrouvera totalement, et ce sera enfin le monde à l'endroit.¹⁸

Barbusse himself saw nothing conflictual or contradictory in couching his discourse on Socialism-Bolshevism-Communism in religious terms, all the less so, one would imagine, once the parallelism he perceived between primitive Christianity and socialist revolutionaries began to impinge on his consciousness.

When he was accused by the Trotskyist Pierre Naville of producing 'œuvres mystiques' about Jesus and thus of striving to 'breathe' faith into the revolutionary ideal, Barbusse availed himself of the opportunity, in the spring of 1927, to make his position clear. In an article entitled 'Mysticisme?', he spelt out his militant atheism and condemned religious mysticism, only, in the words of Relinger, to deliver 'une apologie fouguese du mysticisme athée'.¹⁹ Referring to 'l'admirable exaltation qui a donné et conservé la vie au grand peuple et libéré et libérateur de Russie', Barbusse defended his view that religious mysticism, deriving from faith, was for believers in the supernatural only, whereas an atheist mysticism based on, and seeking to elevate the science underpinning Communism, was another matter altogether:

Foi, passion, sacrifice, martyre: on emploie malgré soi pour qualifier la puissance palpitante qui a permis aux révolutionnaires russes de franchir *pendant si longtemps* l'abîme qui sépare le vieux monde du nouveau, les termes qui s'appliquaient jadis aux élévations religieuses.²⁰

Here Barbusse self-consciously admitted to applying to the Communist project terms previously used in the sphere of devotional experience. He appeared to be taking the view, however, that this was perfectly legitimate, mysticism being inadmissible only when the object of worship is of a religious nature. Since Communism was an atheist belief-system and the believer in question was also a convinced atheist, the question of religious belief simply did not arise.

The question evidently exercised Barbusse's mind a good deal in the mid to late 1920s, for he made the above point often. In *Judas*, he confesses to feelings of admiration for 'l'éclat des grands mystiques et les dimensions folles de leur prière', but adds that 'le mysticisme humain a des profondeurs qu'il faut se garder de donner à tous les objets auxquels il s'attache' (p. 8).²¹ At the end of the same work, he acknowledges mysticism, 'puisque c'est une force humaine [...] mais seulement dans ses caractères dynamiques: fureur d'évidence, exaltation amoureuse pour une certitude utile' (*Judas*, pp. 273-74). In an interview with Lefèvre in 1925, Barbusse dismissed suggestions that he was 'un sectaire': 'Je suis surtout un croyant et un mystique de la logique.'²² Vidal quotes Barbusse describing himself in exactly the same terms²³ and she also reproduces a useful self-analysis of mysticism in the Jesus trilogy as the author saw it: 'je pense que si l'on peut dire qu'il y a là du mysticisme, ce n'est qu'un mysticisme de la logique et de la lucidité qui ne peut que servir une conviction ferme, acquise par le seul sens des réalités.'²⁴

Towards the end of the decade, Barbusse repeated, even more bullishly, the line that he had taken at the time of the *Jésus* controversy, still mindful, perhaps, of the furore it had caused:

Dire que la soviétisation a changé la religion traditionnelle en une autre religion qui n'en diffère que par les étiquettes, c'est une cuisine de littérateur, un aspect superficiel, un à peu près sur lequel on exécute des variations verbales. En réalité, le changement est intégral: on a remplacé des superstitions par quelques principes rationnels et solides de solidarité et d'action et parce qu'ils sont utilitaires et bienfaisants, on a pour eux de l'attachement, de l'enthousiasme et de la ferveur. De ce que la ferveur, ressort éternel de l'homme existe dans les deux cas, on ne peut pas conclure à la symétrie des deux objets de croyance. Alors le savant qui croit à la vérité scientifique est comparable à tout autre croyant?²⁵

In other words, the fact that a writer such as himself used language with religious connotations with regard to a secular phenomenon should not be misconstrued: Barbusse considered himself to be a 'croyant', but one who believed in 'la vérité scientifique', as opposed to the superstitions that underlie religion.

Barbusse returned to the matter one final time, shortly before his death, in *Lettres de Lénine à sa famille*, which he co-edited and presented in collaboration with the German Communist Alfred Kurella. In the introduction, Barbusse takes to task those who, because of the sacrifices Communists were prepared to make in the interests of the cause, compared the Communist Party to a religious order and Marxist-Leninist doctrine to a religion — more than a little ironic given the accusations made against Barbusse at the time of the 'Jesus affair' and thereafter. After pointing out Lenin's attitude towards the likes of Gorki and Lunatcharsky, who had taken it upon themselves prior to the Revolution to deify Socialism, Barbusse strikes a familiar note:

Que le communisme donne à ses partisans autant de fermeté, leur inspire une foi aussi réconfortante que les anciens dogmes en ont procuré à leurs adeptes — sans aucun doute. Mais cette foi aussi forte — beaucoup plus forte même parce que raisonnable — ce n'est pas une foi dans des êtres surnaturels et spectraux maniés par les puissants de la terre, mais la confiance saine et vigoureuse de l'homme en soi-même, la foi de l'individu dans la force invincible du collectif devenu conscient et maître de son destin. Il ne s'agit ici que de science, d'organisation sage et de bouleversant labeur.²⁶

In other words, faith deriving from reason legitimizes Communism; faith relating to the supernatural invalidates religion.

None of this is to say that Barbusse denied the existence of a religious impulse in human beings; on the contrary, he acknowledged it, and sought to channel it in other directions. After an apolitical humanism and socialist republicanism, he sought to channel the human religious impulse in the direction of Communism, on the understanding that reason preceded faith. This is made clear at the end of *Judas*: ‘Séparons l’erreur religieuse de l’élan religieux qui l’entraîne comme un torrent; que la ferveur soit à sa place dans l’édifice de l’esprit, que le battement du cœur soit réglé par la raison.’ In other words: ‘Ne pas aimer avant de comprendre’ (p. 274).²⁷ For Barbusse, it was a question of utilizing humanity’s ‘facultés créatrices infinies et “l’âme religieuse” qu’elle dilapida — pour bâtir économiquement la société normale’ (*Judas*, p. 275).

Throughout the remaining years of his life, Barbusse continued as he had begun, drawing heavily on religious language, symbols and imagery in his vocation as writer and self-styled secular prophet. The parallel-drawing between primitive Christianity and the contemporary Communist movement; the implicit call to Christians to recognize the parallel; the explicit rejection of religious faith as an adequate *primum mobile* in human affairs; the identification of institutional Christianity as the number one ideological enemy; and Barbusse’s ‘mysticizing’ of revolutionary politics are all in evidence in the final part of *Judas*, entitled ‘Dieu ou la Révolution’, which concludes with the prediction, or rather prophecy, that the Communist revolutionaries of the day will triumph, ‘sous le signe de la faucille et du marteau, et contre les chrétiens d’aujourd’hui qui sont leurs pires ennemis —, pour les mêmes grandes raisons qui ont donné la victoire aux chrétiens d’hier sous le signe de la croix’ (*Judas*, p. 278). Barbusse will have further offended both Catholic and Communist sensibilities in his article on Louise Michel, ‘la Vierge Rouge’, who devoted her life to the cause, ‘comme les saints et les rédempteurs’.²⁸ In *Russie*, published in 1930, Barbusse’s description of the German revolutionary Clara Zetkin is typical of Barbusse the revolutionary mystic. He refers to her ‘teint rose, sa figure pleine,

l'auréole célèbre de ses cheveux blancs, et sa voix pathétique. La physionomie de la grande apôtre de la Révolution — on peut employer ce vieux mot d'apôtre lorsqu'on le vivifie d'un sens nouveau — est bien connue de la multitude ouvrière de l'Europe et de l'URSS.²⁹ There could be no 'apostles' without 'disciples', and so in the book Barbusse completed shortly before his death in Moscow in 1935, a eulogistic biography of Stalin, the biographee is described as the 'disciple de Lénine' and Barbusse has him declare ' "Je ne suis qu'un disciple de Lénine, et toute mon ambition est d'être un fidèle disciple" '.³⁰ In *Lueur*, Barbusse had already provided what in his scheme of things was the logical corollary of his propensity to see a proto-Communist in the Messiah, describing the archetypal Communist revolutionary Lenin as 'une espèce de Messie' (*Lueur*, p. 43).

In *Staline*, the author talks in messianic terms about not one but *three* leading Communist figures. He begins by evoking Red Square and the mausoleum in which Lenin sleeps 'comme ressuscité' (p. 5). In an apparent allusion to Jesus, Barbusse likens Stalin's speaking style to 'tel grand prédicateur antique' (*Staline*, p. 201), later referring to the leader of the German Communist Party, Ernst Thälmann, as 'le puissant Thaelmann crucifié sur la Croix Gammée' (*Staline*, p. 267). At the end of the book, Barbusse dismisses the notion of life after death, as befits a good Communist, and states that it is only by means of social reform in the here and now that social evils will be conquered.³¹ Yet he goes on to close the text as he had opened it, 'resurrecting' the dead man Lenin, and contriving a presentation of that other 'saviour' of the world, his biographee, in terms which, *mutatis mutandis*, might easily be applied to Jesus Christ:

Quand on passe, pendant la nuit, sur la Place Rouge [...] il vous semble que celui qui est allongé dans le tombeau central de la place nocturne et déserte, soit le seul qui ne dorme pas au monde, et qu'il veille sur ce qui rayonne tout autour de lui, de villes et de campagnes. C'est le vrai guide [...] c'est le frère paternel qui s'est réellement penché sur tous. Vous qui ne le connaissiez pas, il vous connaissait d'avance, et s'occupait de vous. Qui que vous soyez, la meilleure partie de votre destinée, elle est dans les mains de cet autre homme, qui veille aussi sur tous, et qui travaille — l'homme à la tête de savant, à la figure d'ouvrier, et à l'habit de simple soldat. (*Staline*, pp. 319-20)³²

As demonstrated in the foregoing and in the chapter analysing *Jésus* in particular, Barbusse's appropriation of Jesus for the Communist cause, however questionable, was far from unpredictable. However, nobody on the far left of the political spectrum appears to have seen it coming and it proved to be a considerable source of embarrassment to Communists who, unlike the Church authorities and those on the Right more generally, were not in a position to ignore it.³³ For various political opponents from within the same ranks, his Jesus trilogy constituted conclusive proof that Henri Barbusse was a Communist only in the superficial sense that he was a member of the PCF.

It was little wonder that the Soviet leadership decided initially not to allow, on its territory, either the production or the publication of Barbusse's multi-genre work, *Jésus contre Dieu*. In the preface to it, Barbusse describes Jesus as 'le Père de la Révolution'; in its finale, Jesus is allied with Lenin, and Communism takes the place of Christianity.³⁴ Although Barbusse is careful here, as he was elsewhere, to target the Church as the Communists' main adversary in the fight to win the hearts and minds of the masses, the associations that he was making were not the kind of thing that officials in Moscow wanted from their leading writer amongst the French membership. Writing in 1933 about the obstacles placed in the path of *Jésus contre Dieu*, Anatoly Lunatcharsky, successful playwright and former People's Commissar for Public Instruction, echoed this view, dismissing parallels between Communism and primitive Christianity:

Notre parti est inflexible [...] sur ce point. La pièce était pleine de talent, mais c'était un méli-mélo. Bien que le Christ n'ait jamais existé, son ombre légendaire est justement suspecte chez nous, et toute sympathie envers elle peut être compromettante.³⁵

In a letter sent several years earlier to Victor Serge, *L'Humanité's* then correspondent in Moscow, Lunatcharsky said that he personally was prepared to countenance the publication of a Russian translation of Barbusse's latest novel (*Jésus*), unlike Glavlit, the Soviet body responsible for the translation into, and the publication of foreign books in Russian.³⁶

Regardless of the message sent out by what was tantamount to the partial gagging of its leading French writer, Glavlit initially decided not to authorize the translation of any of Barbusse's works on Jesus. Although his transgressions otherwise went unpunished by the Party in Moscow and the Communist International, the Agitprop section of the latter had already roundly condemned Barbusse's pre-*Jésus* article 'Jésus marxiste', in a letter (signed Bernard Kurella) to Maurice Thorez, the then General Secretary of the PCF:

Nous voulons déjà attirer votre attention sur une chose: l'article de Barbusse, 'Jésus marxiste', est un véritable scandale. La diffusion de telles idées absolument anti-marxistes est d'autant plus dangereuse, qu'elle se fait sous une couverture 'scientifique' et parce que c'est Barbusse qui le fait! Vous devez trouver les moyens appropriés, pour éviter que de telles choses se répètent.³⁷

'De telles choses' were, of course, only just beginning. At national level, misgivings about Barbusse's ideas on religious matters were equally serious but he was similarly indulged. At the meeting of the 'Bureau politique' of the PCF on 4 November 1926, Jacques Doriot criticized 'La Vie littéraire', the literary section of *L'Humanité*, edited by Barbusse, 'où passent des articles n'ayant rien de communiste, par exemple [...] l'article de Barbusse sur "Jésus marxiste".' The leadership decided only to exercise 'un contrôle renforcé sur "La Vie littéraire".'³⁸

A concerted attack in the pages of *Clarté* had seemed likely for much of 1926 and *Jésus* provided the ideal opportunity. Given the prestige that Barbusse brought to the PCF, as well as the increasingly Trotskyist line adopted by *Clarté*'s editors following their tactical decision to collaborate with various surrealist authors including Aragon and Breton, the 'Bureau politique' was not prepared to leave Barbusse undefended, however great its reluctance to get drawn into a polemic over *Jésus*. The suggestion was made at the meeting on 11 February 1927, shortly after *Jésus* had gone on sale to the general public, that the Comintern be asked to review the novel, 'par les littérateurs qui ne manquent pas dans l'Union soviétique. Mais si cela ne peut être bon, car Barbusse a ses

défauts de littérateur, il joue un rôle trop particulier pour que nous le laissions brutalement attaquer.’ The decision was taken, therefore, to allow Barbusse to defend himself against the attack that *Clarté* was likely to mount, ‘en évitant toutefois d’employer un ton polémique.’³⁹ Furthermore, the publication of *Jésus* was quickly followed in the pages of the French party organ by glowing praise for the novel in the form of a review entitled ‘Jésus et la vie’ by Bazalgette, friend and collaborator of Barbusse.⁴⁰

Undaunted, *Clarté* duly mounted its attack, which was prolonged, systematic and damning about Barbusse’s familiarity with the basic tenets of Marxist-Leninist thinking in relation to religion.⁴¹ The first salvo, signed ‘La Rédaction’, appeared on 15 March 1927, under the title ‘Les Partis Ouvriers devant la Religion. Pourquoi nous combattons *Jésus* de Barbusse’. The novel in question was immediately dismissed as ‘encens rouge’;⁴² the ‘inspiration’ that had produced it as ‘mystique “déiste” ’ (p. 216) of the kind that Lenin had had to prevent the likes of Bogdanov, Gorki and Lunatcharsky from introducing into revolutionary politics in the first decade of the twentieth century. It was clear to the authors of this article that Barbusse could not be considered a genuine Marxist. That Barbusse had written *Jésus* was worrying enough; that many others who also liked to think of themselves as revolutionaries had taken something positive from the novel was more disconcerting still:

Nous savons bien que beaucoup de faux révolutionnaires se sont plu à cette lecture; mais nous savons aussi que les véritables défenseurs du léninisme, les meilleurs révolutionnaires, tous ceux qui n’ont pas lu *en vain Marx et Lénine*, ont manifesté leur répugnance malgré les extraits de presse qu’on leur a mis complaisamment sous les yeux à droite et à gauche, y compris *L’Humanité*. (ibid.; authors’ italics.)

With so much at stake, there was only one option available to the genuine keepers of the faith when faced with the mysticism of a work such as *Jésus*: ‘Il faut le démasquer là où elle est’ (ibid.; authors’ italics). This the authors set out to do, in the first instance, by inviting the reader to contrast the ideas contained in *Jésus* ‘et les commentaires

journalistiques dont Barbusse a entouré cette misérable production' with 'La position de Lénine', as set out in a translation of an article written in 1909 and reproduced *in extenso* in *Clarté*.

Intriguingly, the reader who is not hopelessly prejudiced against Barbusse and who is familiar with the writer's pronouncements on religious matters will see a certain likeness of mind between Barbusse and Lenin with regard to the most effective means of combating religion. In a long footnote in *Voici*, Barbusse confidently predicts what might be called the 'withering away' of religion in the modern, scientific era:

Le bon sens lumineux de l'organisation collective nouvelle — qui est [...] recherche de vérité — pénètre irrésistiblement les foules de cette évidence que leur 'salut' est de ce monde, et aussi qu'il est entre leurs propres mains. [...] La superstition jette son dernier feu, comme l'impérialisme. (*Voici*, pp. 93-94)

Writing some twenty years earlier, Lenin had made much the same point, namely that instead of hitting the religious nail very hard, thereby ensuring only that it became even more deeply embedded, the antireligious militant should strive to bring about the socio-political structure which, by its very nature, would end the alienation of human beings and thus automatically destroy the religious impulse. 'L'anarchiste, qui prêche la guerre à Dieu à tout prix', he warned, 'aidera en réalité les prêtres et la bourgeoisie' (p. 219). The Marxist, on the other hand:

doit être un matérialiste [...] mais un matérialiste dialectique, c'est-à-dire un homme qui engage la lutte contre la religion non au moyen d'abstractions, sur une base purement idéologique, en prêchant, mais sur la base de la lutte de classe, qui atteint pratiquement son but, et instruit les masses le plus directement et le plus sûrement. (*ibid.*)

Not unlike Barbusse with regard to 'communistes chrétiens', Lenin, far from advocating hostility towards 'ouvriers qui conservent une petite croyance en Dieu', was keen to allow them into the Party, 'et même tout faire pour les y attirer' (*ibid.*). It was his desire to win them over to the Communist cause, 'en les instruisant selon l'esprit de notre programme et non en les combattant ouvertement' (*ibid.*). Lenin went on to condone the

use of religious language and imagery by ‘un agitateur ou un orateur qui s’exprime devant la foule [...], pour être mieux compris, pour donner de l’attrait à son sujet, pour s’exprimer d’une manière plus imagée ou plus accessible aux masses inéduquées’ (p. 220). However, ‘*lorsqu’un écrivain commence à propager une théorie mystique-constructive, un socialisme mystico-constructiviste* (par exemple selon l’esprit de notre Lounatcharsky et de ses associés[]) — c’est une autre chose’ (ibid.; italics in the original). The former approach should be treated with tolerance; the latter with the Party’s censure. Clearly, the editors of *Clarté* thought that Barbusse had adopted the latter approach, for in a footnote they added that his novel, *Jésus*, ‘propage très exactement cette “théorie mystique-constructive” et ce “socialisme mystico-constructiviste” contre lesquels s’élève Lénine’ (ibid.). Lenin had stated that ‘“le socialisme est ma religion” ’ was a transitional formula denoting a movement from religion towards socialism; but, ‘elle peut bien l’être *d’une transition dans l’autre sens — du socialisme vers la religion*’ (ibid.; italics in the original).

Clarté’s initial attack on Barbusse — the introductory paragraphs to the article by Lenin had hinted at more to come — was discussed by the PCF’s ‘Bureau politique’ at its meeting on 31 March 1927 as the second item on the agenda. The minutes reveal that Marcel Fourrier, the chief editor of *Clarté*, had sought the PCF’s permission for a denunciation of *Jésus*, a request which had been met with the reply that since *Clarté* was not under the Party’s control, Fourrier and his associates could do as they pleased, on the understanding that Barbusse would be given the right to reply. It was brought to the attention of those present that Barbusse had complained in writing about his treatment in the pages of *Clarté* and was seeking redress. Interestingly, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, long-time associate and supposedly good friend of Barbusse, was somewhat conciliatory towards Fourrier, ‘qui rend des services à *L’Humanité*’, and obviously he had his own,

serious concerns about the implications of *Jésus*: ‘On peut discuter certain état d’esprit de notre camarade.’⁴³

However he, like others present, took the view that if forced to choose between *Clarté* and Barbusse, the Party would have to opt for the latter. Thus the decision was taken to summon Fourrier to the Secretariat for further talks. Furthermore, Barbusse was to be pacified in a private letter and a resolution expressing the Party’s full support for the writer was to be inserted into the columns of *L’Humanité*. The latter appeared the following day. In it, the point was made, quite emphatically, that *Clarté* was not under the control of the Party. Nevertheless, the ‘Bureau politique’ called upon *Clarté* to refrain from making ‘expressions grossières et injurieuses qui n’ajoutent rien à leur critique, et constituent une “PUBLICITÉ” de mauvais aloi.’ The resolution went on to lend its unequivocal support to Barbusse, careful nonetheless not to lend any weight to his religious views:

Le camarade Barbusse, qui est l’objet de ces attaques, est directeur de la rubrique littéraire de L’HUMANITÉ, et, à ce titre, le BP N’A QU’À SE FÉLICITER DE SA COLLABORATION. LE BP DÉCLARE QUE SON DÉVOUEMENT, SON ACTIVITÉ ET SES ÉCRITS SERVENT LA CAUSE DU PROLÉTARIAT.⁴⁴

Finally, readers were reminded that whilst *Clarté* was not under the control of the Party, Communist comrades who collaborated with it were; whatever steps needed to be taken to put a stop to personal attacks of this kind *would* be taken.

If this was a case of the PCF’s leadership throwing down the gauntlet, Naville was only too pleased to pick it up. In the first of a series of three articles appearing in consecutive issues of *Clarté*,⁴⁵ Naville reproached Barbusse, with evident relish, for ‘mysticizing’ the Revolution, as indicated earlier in this chapter. The aim of this first article was in keeping with that of its predecessor, namely to expose what Naville called Barbusse’s ‘démagogie spirituelle’ (p. 242): ‘il faut dire tout haut ce que tant de camarades savent ou sentent déjà: il faut empêcher cette équivoque de se prolonger. Car

Barbusse entretient l'«équivoque» (ibid.). He then dismissed *Jésus* as politically irrelevant and mocked Barbusse for the personal appropriation of Jesus on both the title and cover pages of the book:

Mais qu'est-ce que le marxisme, le léninisme, auquel Barbusse prétend avoir adhéré, ont à faire de cette nouvelle tentative saugrenue qui, par contre, fera bien l'affaire des bourgeois en mal de divinités? [...] Sans doute Barbusse nous prévient-il qu'il *disputera* Jésus à ses ennemis; eh bien, *disputez-vous*, mais le prolétariat lutte et n'a que faire de telles évocations, toute la réussite de Barbusse est d'avoir plaqué un vocabulaire pseudo-marxiste, pseudo-idéalités [*sic*], sur son évocation réaliste et petite-bourgeoise. (ibid.; author's italics)⁴⁶

In his examination of the postface of *Jésus*, in which Barbusse points up the similarities between primitive Christianity and contemporary Communism in terms of the economic, social and political factors that conspired to produce the two phenomena, Naville stated that he could not imagine a 'plus belle négation du sens marxiste de l'histoire', then posed an apposite question: 'Barbusse, a-t-il jamais réfléchi sérieusement au marxisme? a-t-il lu Marx?' (p. 243)⁴⁷ It was patently obvious to Naville that these were rhetorical questions; that Barbusse was not a Marxist and thus not a *bona fide* Communist. Naville added that the faith that sustained Barbusse was fundamentally religious in nature: 'ne lui en déplaise, la foi qu'il entretiendra sera toujours une foi *religieuse*, trompeuse, dérivée d'un intellectualisme superficiel, paresseux, traditionnaliste et peureux' (ibid.; author's italics).

Referring to Lenin's stance, as set out in the previous, editorial attack on Barbusse, Naville classed the latter with all the other 'propagateurs d'une foi mystique en la révolution, qui n'ont pas l'excuse d'être des ouvriers ou des paysans arriérés, subissant encore l'influence de leur curé de village' (ibid.). Barbusse, like the Jesus of his imagination, was 'ATHÉE, MAIS CROIT EN UN CERTAIN DIEU' (ibid.; author's italics) — the immanentist God Barbusse had Jesus proclaim in his pseudo-gospel. Naville could scarcely contain his contempt: 'Les marxistes, qui s'appuient sur le matérialisme dialectique de Marx, n'ont rien à faire avec cette philosophie ridicule, qui

fait si bon effet dans la presse bourgeoise' (ibid.). The use of a non-restrictive clause here implies that there is no such thing as Marxists 'qui [ne] s'appuient [pas] sur le matérialisme de Marx'; and since Barbusse evidently knew nothing of dialectical materialism, he was neither a Marxist nor a Communist.⁴⁸

The rest of the article was devoted to an exposition of the work of those nineteenth-century French socialists who, like Barbusse, had insisted on the similarities regarding the origins of both Christianity and Communism (Cabet, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Dolléans). Naville concluded that their assertions were 'erronnées quant à l'aspect économique, et contiennent une part de vérité quant à l'aspect mystique: cet aspect mystique, bonté, justice, vérité, etc. ..., c'est justement celui qui vient de Jésus' (p. 246). Looking ahead to *En suivant Jésus le Juste* (*Les Judas de Jésus* as it became), the theoretical companion to *Jésus*, Naville reduced its likely 'findings' to a single sentence: 'Jésus le Nazaréen et le Christ de l'Eglise catholique font deux, et rien de plus, sinon cette affirmation gratuite que le Christ fut un révolutionnaire' (ibid.). Further engagement with the figure of Jesus would be of use to the proletariat only insofar as Barbusse's next book could be linked to 'l'ensemble de la théorie idéaliste anti-marxiste que Barbusse ne cesse de développer au sens de l'idéologie communiste' (ibid.).

As Naville's next two articles in the series add nothing new of substance to the debate, there is little to be gained from a detailed examination of them. Suffice it to say that one can understand Naville's concern: 'Dans une société où les ouvrages de Lénine se vendent à mille exemplaires, et ceux de Barbusse à cinquante mille, nous avons quelques raisons de vouloir dénoncer des contrefaçons qui sont si libéralement répandues' (p. 279).⁴⁹ On the other hand, one can also understand the Party's general policy of indulging its most energetic 'rassembleur', the man who was also its leading writer, the world-famous author of *Le Feu*. Curiously, however, the leadership of the PCF made no further public defence of Barbusse following *Clarté*'s second attack;

presumably, it was either unable or unwilling to rein in Naville and Fourrier, whose conclusions were thought, perhaps, to be ideological rather than personal, and not altogether unwarranted.

Whatever the case may be, Barbusse was left to mount his own defence in 'Mysticisme?' As stated earlier, Barbusse availed himself of this opportunity to justify an atheist mysticism promoting the Communist cause. It is no doubt significant, also, that Barbusse made no attempt to refute the charge that he knew nothing at all about Marxist-Leninist theory. Elsewhere in his work, Barbusse gave the reader to understand that he had read Marx and Lenin,⁵⁰ but he never actually made the claim as such and, as has already been stated, evidence of detailed knowledge of the Marxist-Leninist canon is virtually non-existent.

To return to Communist reactions to the Jesus trilogy, the brouhaha surrounding the first book, *Jésus*, was not repeated following the publication of *Judas*. This socio-historical study was not mentioned at the meetings of the PCF's 'Bureau politique' and even Naville limited his review to a single, dismissive paragraph in *Clarté*'s October issue for 1927. In response to an advertisement in *L'Humanité* describing *Judas* as 'un livre clair, et prenant qui substitue à l'anti-cléricalisme indigent et négatif des bourgeois LA DOCTRINE COMMUNISTE — logique, complète, généreuse', Naville asked the same question he had posed in his assessment of *Jésus*: 'Où donc, dans ce livre, se trouve exposée la "doctrine communiste"? A-t-on jamais remarqué que H. Barbusse fût capable d'exposer sérieusement un aspect quelconque du marxisme? quant au "communisme", il ne sait évidemment pas de quoi il parle.' *Judas* was not to be taken seriously, the work of Henri Barbusse, 'le prophète à la noix.'⁵¹

That it did not attract greater criticism⁵² can be ascribed, arguably, to *Clarté*'s precarious position with regard to the power-struggle between Trotsky and Stalin, a struggle for control of the Party which the latter was evidently winning. The PCF

leadership may well also have ensured, behind the scenes, that Barbusse's second book on Jesus was met with something approaching silence rather than derision from within its own ranks. Recalling the period in question, Jean Bruhat has stated:

Barbusse représentait ce que nous haïssions le plus. A part *Le Feu*, ses livres ne valaient rien, c'était n'importe quoi, à la fois mystique et confus. Nous étions très convaincus qu'il fallait le sabrer, il n'aurait pas fallu nous pousser beaucoup. Mais nous savions aussi que le Parti ne pourrait pas se permettre de le liquider.⁵³

It would seem likely that the threat of retribution by the Party prevented many a denunciation of Barbusse and his books, 'à la fois mystique et confus.' Suffice it to say that Glavlit's initial decision not to translate the Jesus trilogy into Russian seems both ideological and tactical, ensuring as it did that Barbusse would be starved of the oxygen of publicity; and that hostile criticism would also be kept to a minimum.⁵⁴ Furthermore, *Jésus contre Dieu* was not only never performed in the USSR or published in translation until 1971, it has never been performed, or published anywhere in the original French. Thus, Barbusse's ultra-provocative claim that Jesus was the 'Père de la Révolution' remains largely unknown to this day.⁵⁵

As well as the above reasons for the limited impact of *Judas* and *Jésus contre Dieu* by comparison with *Jésus*, it should be added that Barbusse was not long in giving the Party what seemed a much bigger dilemma in the shape of *Monde*, the politico-literary journal he founded in 1928 and kept going until his death in 1935. It lies outside the scope of this thesis to analyse Communist reactions to *Monde* but for many critics within the Party, Barbusse's obdurate stance on *Monde* constituted even more compelling evidence than did his apparent religiosity and his ignorance of the work of Marx and Lenin that Barbusse was a Communist in name only.⁵⁶ It was mainly in relation to *Monde* that the heirs apparent to Barbusse's throne, Aragon and Nizan, attacked Barbusse,⁵⁷ and virtually all of the considerable Communist criticism levelled at the writer between 1928 and 1930 concerned Barbusse's typically paradoxical, eclectic

attempt to produce a non-sectarian, pro-Communist journal covering every aspect of the contemporary political and cultural scenes, when what the Soviet authorities really wanted was an outlet for France's aspiring proletarian writers.

This criticism reached its highest point at Kharkov in November 1930, at the Second Conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers. Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on Barbusse's unorthodox position on proletarian literature and the editorial line of *Monde* more generally, various delegates expressed their dissatisfaction with Barbusse regarding religious matters. As has already been mentioned, comrade Balakov had serious doubts about Barbusse's Communist credentials because of his preoccupation with religion. Shortly before Balakov's intervention, comrade Kouzmitch had expressed the hope that *Monde* would not repeat 'les erreurs passées, n'insère pas des articles sur les blasons de l'Uruguay et autres Madones et petits *Jésus*, et s'occupe plus de la littérature prolétarienne'.⁵⁸ Similarly, the ten-point conference resolution on *Monde* included criticism of the religious content of various articles and of Christian collaborators.⁵⁹ Point five mentioned articles by the Italian journalist Donati, 'journaliste chrétien, apologiste de la renaissance de l'Eglise' (p. 107) and expressed indignation that, with regard to the growing problem of Spanish fascism, '*Monde* ne s'occupait que pour publier les appels de Don Miguel de Unamuno, adressés aux pères espagnols "au nom du Seigneur" ' (p. 108). The final point concerned Barbusse more specifically. Here it was pointed out that high hopes had been placed in *Monde*, which was to have been a proletarian organ in the fight against the bourgeoisie:

Par malheur, le manque de netteté idéologique qui caractérisait dès auparavant le camarade Barbusse et qui a trouvé son expression dans plusieurs de ses œuvres: *Jésus*, *Les Judas de Jésus*, ne lui a permis de faire face à cette tâche difficile. Au lieu d'engager les intellectuels petits-bourgeois radicaux à se mettre au service du prolétariat, le camarade Barbusse est devenu, sans s'en rendre compte, un instrument entre les mains de la bourgeoisie qui s'est servi de lui en le compromettant. (pp. 110-11)

This last point is unintentionally ironic given the pragmatic, self-interested way in which Barbusse was indulged both at the national level and at the highest level possible in the Soviet Union. Stalin himself nullified the Kharkov resolution on *Monde* and he was not best pleased when he learned of the attempts being made by certain elements to oust Barbusse from the Party. ‘ “What fools” ’, he is alleged to have said. ‘ “Barbusse is political capital and they’re squandering it.” ’⁶⁰

In his long, far from complimentary critique of Barbusse in February 1930, Maurice Parijanine was no doubt accurate in his assessment that Barbusse was used : ‘Le prestige d’un nom fameux n’est pas négligeable et l’on permet à l’homme célèbre de dire ou de faire bien des bêtises pourvu qu’il remplisse sa fonction. M. Barbusse la remplit admirablement.’⁶¹ No doubt he was accurate also in his judgement that Barbusse was held in very low esteem by ‘les vrais marxistes, [...] les vrais et sérieux révolutionnaires’ (p. 10). In the light of Barbusse’s lifelong fascination with Jesus and the striking similarities between *Les Suppliants* and *Jésus* despite the thirty years that separate the *incipit* of the one from the *finis* of the other, Parijanine’s contention that Barbusse brought out his books on Jesus simply to cash in on the topicality of the subject at that time is altogether more contentious (p. 9). More contentious still is his claim that Barbusse, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, was a crypto-Christian living in self-denial: ‘Il faut espérer que M. Barbusse, âme féminine, se confessera avant de mourir’ (p. 10).

It is easy to make light of this statement and of the similar statement made by that other disaffected, excommunicated Trotskyist, Pierre Naville, but they take on a different complexion when set against the opinions of Stalinist Communists such as Balakov. Furthermore, however hard Barbusse tried to dissociate Jesus from the Church, however great his insistence that he and Jesus were atheists, his self-proclaimed love for the preacher from Nazareth, whilst inevitably alienating fellow Party-members, also

encouraged certain Christians to see in Barbusse something of a kindred spirit. In his memoirs, Lunatcharsky reports father Vvedensky, a charismatic figure in the post-revolutionary pressure group known as the 'Living Church',⁶² as remarking:

Bien sûr, Henri Barbusse, communiste, matérialiste, ne peut pas voir de ses yeux frappés de cécité la véritable gloire de Dieu; mais il cherche aussi un refuge auprès du Christ, et dans son cœur égaré et endurci vit le désir de se jeter à genoux devant quelqu'un de grand et de bienveillant, et d'arroser de ses larmes une sainte main!⁶³

Lunatcharsky was quick to point out to Vvedensky 'les coups sanglants qu'il [Barbusse] portait à toutes les églises' but his Christian interlocutor was not to be persuaded that Barbusse would not one day see the light, if indeed he had not already. Lunatcharsky added that 'les affirmations de Vviédenski sur un amour instinctif du Christ chez Barbusse laissaient un certain arrière-goût.' In these affirmations, the priest was simply echoing views that various readers and critics of Barbusse's work, both Christian and non-Christian, had been expressing since the turn of the century.

Analysis of critical reaction to Barbusse's poetry and earlier novels has shown that for all the author's declarations of atheism, many still felt that a 'sentiment' or an 'impulse' best described as religious had inspired Barbusse. It will be remembered that the Catholic poet Francis Jammes, writing to Barbusse on the subject of *L'Enfer*, went a step further, and stated, quite baldly: 'L'homme qui a écrit ce livre ira chercher un jour la paix dans l'ombre de la plus humble Eglise' (see p. 104).⁶⁴ In the summer of 1917, increasingly famous/notorious as a result of the runaway success of *Le Feu*, Barbusse received a newspaper entitled *Le Chrétien libre* and an accompanying letter. This appears not to have survived, although one can guess at its content from a letter to his wife in which Barbusse refers to the newspaper in question:

Le journal est rédigé par des "prêtres démissionnaires" qui voudraient ramener le christianisme à sa pureté originelle. Ils auront fort à faire les pauvres! En attendant, ils font état de ce que je dis sur la religion dans 'Pourquoi te bats-tu?'

He added that he had taken the time to replace the word ‘sacrifice’ with the word ‘dévouement’ in a passage in the above-mentioned article. He had been happy to carry out the request, because ‘le soin avec lequel le bonhomme m’avait lu m’a touché.’⁶⁵ Given the turn that events were to take in the 1920s, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that the ‘prêtres démissionnaires’, having adduced reasons for encouragement in Barbusse’s post-*Feu* articles and in the novel itself, wrote to him in the hope that he would endorse their newspaper or align himself with their movement in some other way. If this was the case, quite obviously the former priests were convinced that Barbusse’s hostility towards the Church did not mean a rejection of its supposed founder — a theme that Barbusse was to explore explicitly in his next novel, *Clarté*, and at great length thereafter.

Waldemar George appears to have been in no doubt that Barbusse *was* a Christian of sorts. In his review of Magdeleine Marx’s paper at a conference on Henri Barbusse held on 14 May 1919 at Paris’s Renée-Maubel theatre, George drew his own conclusions:

Devant la sainte souffrance de l’homme, devant sa peine de tous les jours, devant son ignorance, devant ses errements, devant l’excès de son martyr et devant l’amour qui le grandit, Henri Barbusse s’incline. Ce chrétien mystique croit en la mission humaine et en la force rédemptrice de la douleur. Régénérés à la ferveur de la guerre, les humbles héros du *Feu* et de *Clarté* deviennent (mais au prix de quels sacrifices!) les artisans d’un monde et d’un avenir meilleurs.⁶⁶

Quite what George had meant earlier in his review in his description of Barbusse as ‘un humanitaire et un apôtre de la vie’ is debatable but the term ‘chrétien mystique’ or variations on it, as illustrated above, were to be applied to Barbusse time and again as a result of the ‘Jesus affair’.

Naturally, it was due to the publication of *Jésus*, *Judas* and the numerous newspaper commentaries on both that Barbusse convinced most non-Communist readers that he was a Christian rather than a Communist. In his review of *Jésus*, Sully-André

Peyre, though less explicit, reached much the same conclusion at which Vvedensky arrived, namely that Barbusse's Communism was an ersatz religion and that he would one day see the light. Referring to the disparaging description of Paul as a 'bâtitseur', Peyre asked the rhetorical question: 'Tous les bâtisseurs ne sont-ils pas les mêmes, de Paul à Loyola, de Pierre-le Grand à Lénine?' Sooner or later, he predicted, Barbusse would come up against what he called 'ce mur [...] au bout de sa voie', by which he appears to have meant the limitations of all belief-systems based in the physical world. Then he would realize the full implications of a saying of Jesus, 'que Barbusse ne reconnaît point: "Mon royaume n'est pas de ce monde."' This, for Peyre, was the appealing thing about *Jésus* — the quest for faith as it emerges in the novel, and indeed, in all of Barbusse's previous novels: 'La vérité, quoi que Barbusse en ait dit, c'est qu'une fois de plus il n'a pu sortir de lui-même, et que ce Jésus qu'il nous montre, c'est lui. C'est pour cela que ce livre est si poignant. L'aventure de Barbusse continue.'⁶⁷ Souday was altogether more direct in his assessment: 'Barbusse adore et prie dévotement. Ce communiste et ce bolchéviste est une âme profondément religieuse [...]. M. Barbusse nous apparaît non comme un sociologue positif, ni un homme moderne, mais comme un Nabî d'Israël.'⁶⁸

In August 1927, Barbusse sent the abbé Émile Hutin, 'prêtre-curé' of the parish of Culey in Loisey-Meuse, a complimentary copy of *Judas*. In his reply, the priest applauded Barbusse for his dissection of Scripture 'pour établir la Vérité' and suggested that the author, despite his protestations of atheism, was closer to God than he might imagine. Hutin went on to remark that he himself had carried out similar studies to those of Barbusse, and had eventually reached the conclusion that the Church Jesus had created and served was not 'L'Eglise romaine, ou protestant, ou israélite ou tout autre, mais la réunion de toutes les langues et qui s'accordent tous sur le bien à faire et le mal à éviter.' No doubt striking a deep chord in Barbusse, Hutin added that he had no time for

the Pope and bishops who manipulated the faith for their own ends and who, day after day, ‘vendent le Christ, la Sainte Vierge et les saints le plus cher possible.’ To this ‘mercantilisme religieux’ he preferred, ‘de beaucoup[,] la prière humble, silencieuse, accompagnant le geste charitable par lequel on aide son prochain, à quelque nation, à quelque parti qu’il appartienne’. Despite the ‘hardiesse’ of his ideas, Hutin considered himself to be a believer who said Mass ‘avec toute la piété possible’.⁶⁹ It was on this final point — the major difference between them — that dialogue between Hutin and Barbusse would have foundered.

Be this as it may, the letter is fascinating for what it contributes to the highly complex question of the precise nature of the relationship between faith and reason, indicating, as it does, that one can reject much of what Christianity had come to represent for Barbusse, yet remain a Christian. Belief in Jesus was the key. Although Barbusse could not have been more categorical in his oft-repeated insistence that Jesus was a man, not a man-god, who died on the cross, and was not resurrected, his belief, or faith in Jesus was as solid as was his faith in Communism. Barbusse repeatedly stated from *Lueur* onwards that there could be no common ground between Communism and Christianity because of the irreconcilable ideological differences deriving from a dichotomy between reason and faith. In *Judas*, he went so far as to declare: ‘il ne peut pas plus y avoir de socialisme chrétien que de philosophie chrétienne. Un chrétien est antisocialiste. Un socialiste est antichrétien’ (p. 266). At the same time, he contrived opportunity after opportunity in his writing to establish common ground between Communism and Christianity in its incipient, ‘revolutionary’ phase. As Relinger has pointed out, by praising to the heavens ‘Jésus, pour tous associé au christianisme’ and denigrating ‘une religion officielle contraire à ses principes originels’, Barbusse was begging an obvious question, and one which, for ‘orthodox’ Christians and Communists alike, was better not asked at all: What if the Church went back to its roots?⁷⁰ To judge

by the contents of his letter, the abbé Hutin *had* gone back to those roots, although, unlike the former priests who had written to Barbusse ten years earlier, he had not felt the need to leave the priesthood. Had Barbusse been able to make the leap of faith required to accommodate Christianity's central doctrines, namely Jesus's divinity and belief in the Resurrection, a happy vicar in the Hutin mould, rather than a Communist, he might very well have become.

Much the same implications suggest themselves in the exchange of letters between Barbusse and André Siegfried in 1932. The latter had read *Jésus* on a boat journey from South America back to France the previous autumn. Since then he had re-read it several times:

Si vous me permettez de le dire, vous avez eu, je crois, le sentiment profond, intime, de l'esprit chrétien, sous sa forme évangélique initiale, authentique, si complètement différente de la forme prise ensuite quand le christianisme est devenu une église. En vous lisant, il m'a semblé être constamment guidé par une main sûre, me ramenant toujours à ce qui est l'axe de la pensée du christianisme: l'esprit refusant de se laisser divertir vers les buts humains de l'origine, du pouvoir ou de la richesse. [...] Dès qu'une religion devient Eglise, quels dangers pour cette religion!

For Siegfried, it went without saying that Christianity 'ne peut confirmer ni même reconnaître une société humaine basée sur la richesse (le Christ, conservateur des privilèges matériels, est une conception hypocrite et lamentable)'. And yet Christ, as Barbusse had depicted him, had been transformed into a 'leader social pour assurer aux prolétaires d'hier ces mêmes richesses'. 'Problème délicat', ventured Siegfried.⁷¹

That Barbusse was impressed with these observations is clear from the haste with which he replied, his letter being dated only five days later than Siegfried's. Besides, Barbusse began by telling him so: 'j'attache un grand prix à l'appréciation d'une personnalité comme la vôtre'.⁷² He then identified the central issue, namely 'celle de l'attitude sociale et de la part dans le mouvement et l'action solide — et, la conséquence logique et pratique — politique des personnes qui prétendent représenter l'esprit.' Certain human needs and preoccupations, he went on to say, were 'd'ordre individuel, et

les autres d'ordre collectif.' The former, insofar as they were not contingent upon 'les formes et les exigences de la société [...] constituent des espèces d'absolus sur lesquels l'individu ne peut avoir de prise que dans les limites de la croyance et du sentiment intime.' The latter, human needs and preoccupations of a collective nature, related to 'un ensemble de choses plus ou moins artificielles, c'est-à-dire plus ou moins modifiables par les hommes.' Thus, 'la morale vraie', as opposed, one would imagine, to the morality imposed on humanity by Paul the 'bâtitteur' and all the rest of 'Les Judas de Jésus', seemed to Barbusse to relate to 'ce qui est transformable et perfectionnable, c'est-à-dire moins dans les racines individuelles, qu'en tant qu'institution influant sur la destinée de l'humanité.' In other words, religion was justifiable only insofar as it acted as a socio-political force whose aim was to improve the lot of humanity as a whole. This Christianity had been in its revolutionary beginnings; but was no longer and had not been for centuries. Quite the contrary, it had ignored Jesus's true teaching and become the very bulwark of conservatism.

It is worth recalling that this was precisely the point that Barbusse had made fifteen years earlier in the second of his letters to the abbé Sirech in their dispute over *Le Feu*. If he was waging war on the Church, Barbusse had argued, it was a just war, for his reasons were 'basées sur la véritable idéale morale', from which, in his view, 'le parti religieux s'écarte par son attitude dans la question sociale' (see p. 142). Implicit in these and the above remarks is the conviction that Communism was completing the task that Jesus and the first generations of his followers had commenced the best part of two millennia previously; that there was in essence no difference between primitive Christianity and the contemporary Communist movement; that Christianity, stripped of its doctrinal framework and a theological superstructure which Jesus of Nazareth would have completely disavowed would, perhaps, have been an irresistible proposition for Henri Barbusse.

But what, one wonders, if Jesus and those who had not betrayed him were *not* proto-Communists? Where is the evidence to support Barbusse's claim that Jesus glorified 'l'égalité, lui qui a dit, comme s'il entrevoyait Lénine: Que le plus grand d'entre vous soit votre serviteur'? (*Faits divers*, p. 263)⁷³ That Barbusse studied intensely both the canonical and non-canonical books of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the work of dozens of exegetes and contemporary scholars is beyond doubt. Indeed, his knowledge of the origins of Christianity was so impressive that the New Testament specialist Paul-Louis Couchoud, editor-in-chief of the series *Christianisme*, approached him in the mid-1920s in the hope of tempting him to produce a book to be taken from a very wide range of possibilities.⁷⁴ Another specialist, Elie Faure, wrote to Barbusse after the publication of *Judas* and congratulated him, particularly on 'toute la partie négative de votre œuvre', which he found 'absolument irréfutable'. Incidentally, he added, Couchoud had also approached him in connection with said series: 'Vous avez sur bien des points, devancé mes conclusions'.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, Barbusse's study was based on the work of scholars and his own readings of the relevant literature; and this he rejected as unreliable, not to say deliberately tendentious.⁷⁶ Indeed, the *only* indisputable facts about Jesus as far as Barbusse was concerned were that somebody of that name existed in first-century Palestine and was put to death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans.⁷⁷ How, then, was Barbusse to account for Jesus's atheism as he saw it? Where was Barbusse's hard evidence that Jesus 'eut la haine rayonnante des riches et des prêtres' (*Faits divers*, p. 262)? How could Barbusse know that Jesus 's'est mêlé aux pauvres gens, aux esclaves, aux femmes asservies, aux exploités, aux opprimés' (ibid.)? If yet another New Testament specialist, Alfred Loisy, rejected Barbusse's portrayal of Jesus as a Communist 'avant la lettre',⁷⁸ it was no doubt because the evidence, such as it is, is open to interpretation, and Barbusse interpreted it in such a way as to produce the kind of

Jesus that he wanted to produce, no less than did those who produced a Jesus that Barbusse could not accept.

To put this another way, if the Bible contains compelling evidence that Jesus *was* Lenin's forerunner, it also contains compelling evidence that he was the Son of God, who was put to death by Pontius Pilate and rose on the third day. Naturally, Barbusse rejected the notion that Jesus was the Messiah. In *Jésus*, Jesus is executed not for making any such claim or for being hailed as the Messiah, which he emphatically opposes in 'Israël seul', but for the revolutionary content of his 'Sermon du Temple'. Yet, it could be argued, that if Jesus did not make the claim that he was the Messiah, or allow others to make the claim on his behalf, the details of his humiliation — the crown of thorns, the mock robe and sceptre, and the *titullus* — about which the four gospels cohere as with no other episode in their account of Jesus's life, make no sense.⁷⁹ If one dismisses all of this as embroidery on historical facts that cannot be ascertained, there is no logical reason why one should accept even the crucifixion of Jesus as an historical fact; or indeed that Jesus himself ever existed, neither of which Barbusse ever doubted.

In short, faith and reason are not as easily distinguished between, in either political or religious matters, as Barbusse liked to believe. Paradoxically, his faith in Jesus, which was based on a lifetime's reflection and a familiarity with Christianity that the average Christian could not even begin to contemplate, appears to have been lacking somewhat in reason; and the more he insisted upon it, the more dubious his commitment to Communism seemed to some contemporaries. *Comœdia's* literary critic taunted Barbusse about what he saw as the writer's 'religious crisis':

Je sais, mon cher Voisin, que vous êtes en flirt épistolaire et philosophique avec mon gendre, le docteur Chastel. C'est un apôtre comme vous. Seulement, il est encore sur la terre, et vous, contrairement à ce que vous pensez, d'ailleurs, vous êtes depuis longtemps déjà dans le ciel et fort 'au-dessus de la mêlée.' [...] Ah! le beau papier que je ferai avec délices sur votre *Judas* et votre crise religieuse. Oui, mon cher Voisin, votre crise! Vous ne vous en apercevez pas, mais vous en tenez, et vous avez beau vous débattre: le mystère vous hante. Il serait facile de prouver que le Galiléen peut vous

dire, comme à tant d'autres: 'Tu ne me chercherais pas, si tu ne m'avais déjà trouvé ... tu ne me renierais pas, si tu ne me sentais présent.'⁸⁰

Noussane's critique of Barbusse's 'ouvrages de piété subversive', appears to have amounted only to a review of *Jésus*.⁸¹ Still, both this and the letter demonstrate how Barbusse's preoccupation with religion in general and with Christianity in particular convinced some readers that the writer was not the Communist that he liked to think of himself as but a Christian, however vociferously he might deny it.

Scholars, both in Barbusse's day and since, have been alive to the implications of the preponderance of religion in Barbusse's work generally and of his faith in Jesus in particular. As has already been pointed out, Loisy found Barbusse's depiction of Jesus as a proto-Communist untenable. Intriguingly, however, his immediate impression on reading *Jésus* was that he was faced with 'une édition nouvelle, mais complètement refondue [...] de *Paroles d'un croyant*'⁸² by the Catholic priest Lammenais, whose beliefs were unimpeachable theologically; but whose conviction that Church and State should be separated brought him into conflict with the Roman Catholic authorities. The success of *Paroles* led to his condemnation and excommunication from the Church, whereafter he became active in republican circles until the *coup d'état* mounted by Napoleon III. It is more than a little revealing that a religious historian with whose work Barbusse was very familiar should have compared Barbusse to a priest who was, by virtue of his 'fougue inlassable, son honnêteté intellectuelle, la force de ses idées [...], aux yeux des générations romantiques, le symbole des tentatives de conciliation entre tradition catholique et souci de progrès social.'⁸³

Of the scholars who have studied Barbusse's life and work since his death in 1935, some have had little doubt that Barbusse was a Christian. The pro-Stalin South American José Mancisidor describes Barbusse as a 'profoundly Christian' man and suggests that anybody doubting his 'Christian spirit' should read *Jésus* and *Judas* with all due care and attention. He also draws on the recollections of Eugenio Labarca, a Chilean

exile who acted as Barbusse's Spanish teacher for an unspecified period in the 1920s. According to Labarca, the need to prevent war was Barbusse's overwhelming preoccupation at the time that he knew him: 'Faced with human suffering and evil past and present, his Christian soul welled up with love and righteousness.'⁸⁴ Years later when somebody reproached Labarca for including in his newspaper articles by Barbusse, a non-believer, Labarca replied: ' "Barbusse believed in God, no more and no less than you do, since he strove every day not to betray Him." ' ⁸⁵

Caute has described Barbusse as 'the semi-mystical apostle of Jesus Christ'⁸⁶ and *Jésus* and *Judas* as 'literature impregnated with mysticism.'⁸⁷ For Caute, Barbusse, one of the 'senior friends of French Communism', could be called a Marxist only 'by an extremely elastic extension of the term',⁸⁸ the implication being that a somewhat less elastic extension of the term 'Christian' would be required in application to Barbusse. Bonnaud-Lamotte retains the Christian element but provides a slightly different formula in her assessment:

Précurseur des contradictions qui allaient déchirer toutes les générations d'intellectuels de ce siècle, Barbusse, révolutionnaire resté chrétien, comme Péguy, chrétien resté révolutionnaire, nous intéresse passionnément par la complexité de sa démarche et sa fraternelle intervention à poursuivre la recherche d'une réponse à ses propres questionnements.⁸⁹

Courtois and Lazer, in their history of the PCF, describe Barbusse, together with Vaillant-Couturier and Raymond Lefebvre, as being 'imprégnés d'une culture chrétienne, touchant parfois au mysticisme'.⁹⁰ France's three leading Barbussians, Relinger, Baudorre and Picciola all avoid the term 'Christian' in reference to Barbusse, preferring to point up the importance of his Protestant culture in the formation of Barbusse's world-view and his intellectual development. It is no doubt significant also, however, that all three do not consider Barbusse to have been much of a Communist, either.

Henri Barbusse: Comrade or Christian? In the absence of universally agreed criteria making for indisputable definitions, there can be no clear-cut answer to this question.

However, the case for its pertinence is a strong one. Barbusse died a member of the PCF having been openly pro-Bolshevik from the beginning of the 1920s. Although the writer's personal commitment appears never to have wavered, his faith in Communism was considerably stronger than was the Communists' faith in him.⁹¹ His Trotskyist critics were surely right in their contention that Barbusse would have been expelled from the Party but for the prestige that he conferred upon it as the world-famous author of *Le Feu*, not to mention his indefatigable exertions as propagandist and rallying point, as well as his good personal relations with his one living biographee, Stalin. As Parijanine pointed out, a high-profile personality such as Barbusse would be forgiven many a 'bêtise', and the Jesus trilogy and the Communist-Christian parallel that Barbusse contrived and constantly drew attention to throughout the period when his political sympathies lay unshakeably with the Bolsheviks/Communists was considered by many fellow Party-members to be a 'bêtise' writ large. Had he been less of a luminary, this alone would have guaranteed his expulsion from the Party long before he antagonized both the leaders and the rank-and-file with his policies regarding *Monde*, his unorthodox views on proletarian literature, his non-sectarian approach to politics in an age when the watchword in the PCF was 'classe contre classe', and so on.⁹²

This thesis has shown that Barbusse's pseudo-religious cult of Communism was anticipated by his pseudo-religious cult of other secular phenomena at earlier stages of his literary career. When challenged to explain this cult by fellow advocates of a militantly atheist movement, Barbusse resorted to a faith-reason dichotomy, which he felt fully vindicated his position. In the case of Christianity, faith preceded reason; in the case of Communism, reason preceded faith. The relationship between faith and reason as Barbusse saw it was encapsulated in his dictum 'Comprendre d'abord, aimer ensuite.' Yet analysis of Barbusse's attitude towards Jesus within the faith-reason dichotomy suggests a certain amount of sophistry in his reasoning. On the cover and title pages of

Jésus, the reader finds a remarkable declaration on the part of the author: 'J'ai vu Jésus, moi aussi. Il s'est démontré à moi dans la beauté de la précision. Je l'aime; je le tiens contre mon cœur, et je le disputerai aux autres, s'il le faut.' Fascinated by the figure of Jesus throughout his career, Barbusse had grown to love him and portray him as a socio-political revolutionary, no doubt because he had become such a revolutionary himself; and the only way to reconcile his faith in Jesus with his faith in Communism was to transform the Messiah into a proto-Communist, and the Communists into Messianic figures.⁹³ Naturally, Barbusse did not see his depiction of Jesus in such terms; he pointed to his own, considerable research and to that of many others to support his thesis. Yet this research was based on biblical sources, whose validity he himself did not accept. With regard to Jesus and the proto-Communist revolutionary nature that Barbusse attributed to primitive Christianity, faith appears to have preceded reason.

The same could be said of Barbusse's commitment to Communism. Those who were familiar with Marxist-Leninist theory knew that Barbusse would have hopelessly failed an examination in the subject and nobody who has studied the writer's life and work has ever argued otherwise. This is hugely ironic, given Barbusse's insistence that Communism derived its legitimacy from 'knowable' scientific laws. In other words, ignorant of these laws, Barbusse was able to make the leap of faith that he was never able to make throughout his lifelong engagement with religion in general and Christianity in particular. In his defence, it could be argued that there was an empirical dimension to Barbusse's faith in Communism, which, by its very nature, Christianity could not provide. There can be no doubt that Barbusse witnessed considerable progress in many areas of Soviet life during the numerous, and often extended visits he made to the USSR between 1927 and 1935. He wrote about them at length, in *Russie* in particular. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that he never met Lenin, the man he hailed as

the New Messiah in 1920; and that he had been trumpeting the Soviet Union as the New Jerusalem for some seven years before he first set foot in it.

Barbusse's first-hand experience of the USSR can be usefully compared and contrasted with that of two other famous writers, namely André Gide and Arthur Koestler. Gide and Barbusse belonged to the same generation, shared the same Protestant heritage and they both travelled to the east brimming with enthusiasm for the Soviet Revolution. Gide returned disabused of his optimism after a relatively brief visit and wrote two critical studies about his experiences.⁹⁴ According to Vyvyan Holland, son of Oscar Wilde, Barbusse was one of only a handful of foreigners to be issued with a 'Red pass', which entitled him to travel anywhere on Soviet territory, unaccompanied.⁹⁵ Even though he covered huge swathes of territory on protracted tours, he failed to see what was so obvious to Gide, and recorded his approval in pro-Soviet books such as *Voici and Russie*. In the former study, Barbusse praised the Soviet authorities, and Stalin in particular, for the rational, humane way in which they had 'solved' the nationalities dilemma in the Caucasus.⁹⁶

Although Koestler was there at a slightly later date, his recollections are well worth recording:

I saw the ravages of the famine of 1932-1933 in the Ukraine: hordes of families in rags begging at the railway stations, the women lifting up to the compartment window their starving brats which, with drumstick limbs, big cadaverous heads and puffed bellies, looked like embryos out of alcohol bottles; the old men with frost-bitten toes sticking out of torn slippers. I was told that these were kulaks who had resisted the collectivization of the land and I accepted the explanation; they were enemies of the people who preferred begging to work. The maid in the Hotel Regina in Kharkov fainted from hunger while doing my room: the manager explained that she was fresh from the countryside and through a technical hitch had not yet been issued with her ration cards; I accepted the technical hitch.⁹⁷

There can be no certainty that Barbusse saw such atrocities. If he did and chose to turn a blind eye to these and other failings of the Soviet regime, as Margarete Buber-Neumann has claimed in her memoirs,⁹⁸ it may well have been because his faith in Communism, like

that of Koestler, was so great that there was nothing that his conscience could not absorb and his mind explain away. Such is the mysterious nature of faith.

Towards the end of his life, in the company of a guest who was thinking aloud about leaving the Party, Barbusse made his position clear:

Je ne pourrai jamais quitter le Parti communiste. Où aller? Y-a-t-il un endroit où nous puissions aller? Même si le Parti était temporairement en complet désaccord avec moi, même s'il me condamnait, même si je pensais qu'il me condamne injustement, je continuerais de penser que notre parti est infiniment supérieur à tous les autres partis, et bien au-dessus de n'importe quel isolement orgueilleux, individualiste. Non, il vaut mieux tout supporter! Et peut-on douter que si tu es constamment en désaccord avec le parti, ce n'est pas le parti qui a besoin d'être corrigé, mais toi qui dois te changer de fond en comble? En vérité, il faut avant tout être communiste, avant tout et plus fort que tout. C'est le plus important à notre époque. Avoir trouvé cette voie et la quitter, voir la lumière et la perdre, c'est le plus grand malheur qui puisse nous arriver.⁹⁹

This is a statement containing more faith than reason; it is the statement of a man who has found a spiritual home and would be loth to be removed from it. It contains references to the way, the truth and the light, all three of which — and the lattermost in particular — permeate Barbusse's work. In his diary, in 1895, he expressed his hope one day to be able to shed some light on the darkness of the world.¹⁰⁰ Chapter fourteen of the book that enabled him to do so ends with the narrator marvelling at the past and future accomplishments of his comrades-in-arms and he dreams of 'je ne sais quelle grande lumière.' It is no coincidence that Barbusse entitled his first pro-Bolshevik publication, also a manifesto for the 'Clarté' movement (borrowed from the title of Barbusse's novel), *La Lueur dans l'Abîme*.

One cannot say with any certainty that Barbusse eventually joined the Communist Party because he found in Communism a spiritual sustenance not provided by Christianity. Nor is it possible to label Barbusse a Communist or a Christian in the way that many commentators have.¹⁰¹ Barbusse held many unorthodox views as a member of the Party, not least with regard to religion, and his unfamiliarity with Marxist-Leninist theory went

before him. On the other hand, he campaigned tirelessly for the Communist cause for the last fifteen years of his life, to the detriment of his health, wealth, marriage and, arguably, literature; and, unlike Gide, Nizan, Koestler, Silone, Wright and many another, his faith appears never to have wavered. As far as Christianity is concerned, Barbusse could not forgive the Church its blood-stained history — hugely ironic given the number of victims Stalinist Communism was to claim — and his rigid atheism prevented him from accepting the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, without which Christianity would not be Christianity. That said, he had a faith in Jesus that was so great that he publicly declared his love for the man of Nazareth and thus braved the opprobrium of the Communist world. Furthermore, his knowledge of the Bible and of the origins of Christianity was almost on a par with that of specialists in the field, way in advance of the knowledge of the average Christian believer.

By way of conclusion to this chapter and in an attempt to provide some sort of answer to the question of Barbusse's political and religious identity, let it be said that this complex, paradoxical and highly enigmatic man was both more, and less of a Communist than many a Communist; and more, and less of a Christian than many a Christian.

Notes

¹ According to Richardson, the thesis posited by the German philosopher Drews in *The Christ Myth* was still part of official Marxist dogma at the time of writing his study. See *The Political Christ*, p. 113. Barbusse was familiar with the christological work of Drews, and with that of numerous other, so-called ‘mythologues’.

² As Picciola has pointed out, the PCF at the time when Barbusse was a member was ‘un parti qui considère [...] la lutte contre la religion comme un aspect indispensable de la lutte révolutionnaire.’ Picciola, ‘L’Affaire Jésus: Le témoin Henri Barbusse à la barre’ (p. 10).

³ Barbusse, ‘Une lettre inédite d’Henri Barbusse, au poète Jean Muller’, p. 59.

⁴ Barbusse, *Paroles*, p. 224. Hereafter referred to in parenthesis in the text together with the appropriate page number. It is worth noting that Barbusse had described the previous year’s ARAC congress as ending ‘au milieu d’une émotion religieuse’ (*Paroles*, p. 142).

⁵ The use of the adverb ‘religieusement’ is particularly interesting. In ‘Mensaje a los intelectuales y estudiantes de la América Latina’ (p. 225), Anatole France and Barbusse wrote: ‘We have founded Clarté with the aim of spreading, like an experimental religion, love for doctrines which highlight past evils and demonstrate which of the principles of justice, truth and beauty inspire us to remedy them.’ (My translation.)

⁶ Barbusse, *Lueur*, p. 214. Hereafter referred to in parenthesis in the text together with the appropriate page number.

⁷ Barbusse, ‘La ligne droite’.

⁸ Barbusse, *Couteau*, p. 7. Hereafter referred to in parenthesis in the text together with the appropriate page number.

⁹ Barbusse, *Lettre aux intellectuels*, p. 80. This work and *Couteau* are identical but for a number of minor rearrangements, changes in punctuation, and several addenda, quite a few of which have an important religious content.

¹⁰ As A.J.P. Taylor has pointed out, it is all too easy to attribute the outbreak of the First World War to a general theory of this kind; ‘proving’ it is another matter. See *Europe: Grandeur and Decline*, p. 184.

¹¹ Conquest, *Lenin*, p. 78.

¹² Quoted in Brett, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 175.

¹³ Barbusse returned to Tertullian’s famous *credo quia absurdum* in *Judas* (p. 11): ‘le terrible et caricatural *credo quia absurdum* n’est pas une expression figurée. C’est bien en effet l’absurdité qui prend valeur d’argument dans la démonstration religieuse.’ Hereafter referred to in parenthesis in the text together with the appropriate page number.

¹⁴ Barbusse, ‘La clarté de la raison’, p. 1.

¹⁵ Navard de la Montagne, ‘M. Barbusse théologien’, for this and all subsequent quotations.

¹⁶ Augustin Bonnetty (1798-1879) was a French publicist who in 1830 founded the monthly journal *Les Annales de la philosophie chrétienne*. See *Le Grand Larousse encyclopédique*, II, p. 233.

¹⁷ Robert de Lammenais (1782-1854), author of, most notably, *Paroles d’un croyant* (1834). See notes 78 and 82.

¹⁸ This and other inversions relative to the kingdom of God are proclaimed by Maximilien in *Les Suppliants* (p. 278). In *Jésus*, Jesus states: ‘Qui s’élève sera abaissé, qui s’abaisse sera élevé’ (30. 87). At the ARAC congress alluded to in note 4, Barbusse declared to the multitudes at the end of his address that ‘ce qui est en haut doit être abaissé, ce qui est en bas doit être élevé’ (*Paroles*, p. 139).

¹⁹ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 168. As far as Relinger is concerned, Barbusse’s was ‘le premier essai français pour laïciser la mystique et la mettre au service de la révolution.’ Relinger, ‘Le Rôle et l’œuvre d’Henri Barbusse’ (p. 566).

²⁰ Barbusse, ‘Mysticisme?’; author’s italics.

²¹ As the illustration reproduced at the start of this thesis suggests, Barbusse would appear to have had a penchant for Saint Theresa of Avila in particular.

²² Barbusse, quoted in Lefèvre, *Une heure avec Frédéric Lefèvre*, p. 189.

²³ See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 128-129.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156. In a letter to *Le Drapeau rouge*, the organ of the Belgian Communist Party, in April 1927, Barbusse ‘développa une fois de plus ses idées sur les dangers du mysticisme religieux et défendit un mysticisme appliqué à la rénovation sociale.’ Relinger, ‘Le Rôle et l’œuvre d’Henri Barbusse’ (p. 538).

²⁵ Although she provides neither the source nor a precise time location (1919-1929), Vidal includes the quotation in her chapter on Barbusse, the USSR and the socio-political studies *Voici* (hereafter referred to in parenthesis in the text together with the appropriate page number) and *Russie*. See Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 191.

²⁶ Barbusse (ed.), *Lettres de Lénine à sa famille*, p. 48.

²⁷ See also ‘Mysticisme?’ and the letter to Dumas referred to in the last chapter (p. 260).

²⁸ Barbusse, ‘Louise Michel’. This article was reproduced in *Faits divers*, entitled ‘La Vierge Rouge’ (pp. 251-60). Hereafter referred to in parenthesis in the text together with the appropriate page number.

²⁹ Barbusse, *Russie*, p. 214.

³⁰ Barbusse, *Staline*, pp. 46, 316. Hereafter referred to in parenthesis in the text together with the appropriate page number. Baudorre has described *Staline* as ‘le livre d’un croyant et non celui d’un historien.’ *Barbusse* (p. 384). A contemporary of Barbusse, the American political scientist Sydney Hook, was scathing in his review: ‘what we have here is neither history nor biography but liturgical rhapsody. By some fantastic transference of the Messianic nimbus from the carpenter of Galilee to the young

seminarist of Georgia, Barbusse has written a work in which fact and fancy are hopelessly blurred in a hazy and shoddy religious mysticism.' Hook, 'Saint Stalin'.

³¹ In the letter referred to in note 3, Barbusse wrote: 'Le cœur qui souffre sur terre demande une réponse terrestre'.

³² Having called Barbusse a prophet who had chosen to 'hang his discourse' on Stalin, an anonymous reviewer noted that the 'book ends with a sort of mystical invocation of the tomb of Lenin.' *The Christian Science Monitor*, 'Barbusse's Stalin'.

³³ See the previous chapter (pp. 260-61).

³⁴ Barbusse, *Jésus contre Dieu*. I refer the reader to the typescript version which was very kindly provided by the AAHB. See pp. 3, 67. See note 55 also. The lack of progress made with the Soviet authorities can be followed in the author's correspondence with Simone Dumas (see letters by Barbusse dated 3 and 27 February 1928), and Dumas' *Mémoires* (p. 285) (private collection).

³⁵ Lounatcharski, *Silhouettes*, p. 309.

³⁶ See Baudorre, *Barbusse*, p. 267. Serge's personal opinion is given in his memoirs: 'Barbusse écrivait à ce moment ses livres mystiques, *Jésus*, *Les Judas de Jésus*, invité à Moscou par d'autres Judas.' Serge, *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire 1901-1941*, p. 258.

³⁷ Quoted in Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 165.

³⁸ PCFRA, mfilm 151 (bobine 22).

³⁹ PCFRA, mfilm 209 (bobine 31).

⁴⁰ Bazalgette, 'Jésus et la vie'. It should be noted that Relinger is incorrect in dating Vaillant-Couturier's supportive article 'Le dernier livre de Barbusse, *Jésus*, le prophète de Galilée', 8 February 1927 (see *Henri Barbusse*, p. 167). This article appeared on p. 2 of *L'Humanité* on 8 October 1926, some three months before the novel was published. If Vaillant-Couturier was at pains to praise the author for his 'excellent instrument de déblaiement dans la lutte antireligieuse' and for drawing attention to the parallelism

between two great periods of crisis in human history, he did so for strategic reasons and with serious reservations. See note 43.

⁴¹ For various items relating to Marxist-Leninist thinking with regard to religion, see the section 3.2 of the bibliography.

⁴² ‘Les Partis Ouvriers devant la Religion. Pourquoi nous combattons *Jésus* de Barbusse’, p. 216. Subsequent references to this article are indicated in the text, with the appropriate page number given in parenthesis.

⁴³ See PCFRA, mfilm 209 (bobine 31). According to Parijanine, at that time Barbusse’s secretary at *L’Humanité*, Vaillant-Couturier was furious with him for not having the good sense to bin Barbusse’s article ‘*Jésus marxiste*’ rather than deliver it to the typesetters. See Parijanine, ‘Pour la destruction d’une légende’, p. 15.

⁴⁴ The text is given in full in the minutes of the meeting (see previous note) and was published in *L’Humanité*, under the title ‘Au sujet de *Clarté*. Une résolution du bureau politique’; capitals in the original.

⁴⁵ Naville, ‘Pourquoi nous combattons *Jésus*. 1.- Une nouvelle mystique: H. Barbusse’, ‘2.- Une nouvelle religion: H. Barbusse’, ‘3.- Un nouvel idéaliste: H. Barbusse’. Subsequent references are indicated in the text, with the appropriate page number given in parenthesis.

⁴⁶ Basing his comments on the observations of Loukachévitch, ‘spécialiste de l’histoire des religions et membre éminent du mouvement prolétarien athéiste international’, in ‘*Jésus — Henri Barbusse*’, Oursynovitch made much the same point, albeit altogether more deferentially, in 1930: ‘Toutes les tentatives de moderniser le Christ sont vaines et sans utilité. Le christ [*sic*] n’est intéressant que pour les historiens, il faut le considérer comme un mythe et rechercher les causes sociologiques de son apparition.’ Oursynovitch, ‘Ce que les athées marxistes de Russie pensent du *Jésus* de Henri

Barbusse' (p. 1222). Since the BnF contains no periodical entitled *L'Athée* in its catalogue, this may well be the French translation of a Russian periodical.

⁴⁷ Since French translations of the works of Marx and Engels did not become readily available until the mid-1930s and Barbusse could not read German or Russian (unlike Naville and Parijanine), Barbusse can partly be forgiven this failing.

⁴⁸ 'La doctrine communiste, pense-t-il, est irréfutable, tout lecteur de bonne foi, en confrontant les diverses doctrines, deviendra un marxiste révolutionnaire. Toutes les erreurs politiques et littéraires de Barbusse viennent de là: au lieu de partir d'une analyse exacte des classes en présence, il proclame la toute-puissance de l'idéologie qui transforme à son gré.' Fréville, 'Réponse à un manifeste'.

⁴⁹ Barbusse's influence and the resultant need to combat what Naville saw as Barbusse's potential to spread 'heresy' was underlined by Parijanine: 'Ce qu'il y a d'amusant dans cette lamentable histoire, c'est qu'au moment où paraissaient les pieux versets de M. Barbusse, je reçus des lettres enthousiastes de bonnes âmes qui s'écriaient: "Enfin, on peut rester catholique quand on devient communiste!"' Parijanine, 'Pour la destruction d'une légende' (p. 10). Barbusse *had* intimated as much in his reference to 'communistes chrétiens' in *Couteau* and he also stated that these people would be tolerated provided they kept their religious beliefs to themselves.

⁵⁰ See for example *Couteau*, pp. 55-56/*Lettre aux intellectuels*, pp. 71-73; *Manifeste aux intellectuels*, pp. 18, 22-23; *Zola*, pp. 77, 287; *Staline*, pp. 15, 149. With regard to *Lettres de Lénine à sa famille*, see note 26.

⁵¹ Naville, 'Propagande'; capitals in the original.

⁵² Chauvelon's generous review was no more the idea of the PCF's leadership than was Bazalgette's review of *Jésus*. See 'Les Judas de Jésus. Un nouveau livre d'Henri Barbusse'. Like Bazalgette, Chauvelon was both a friend and collaborator of Barbusse.

⁵³ Quoted in Cohen-Solal, *Paul Nizan, communiste impossible*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ According to Parijanine, *Jésus* was eventually translated and published, only after a highly significant concession on Barbusse's part: '*les démarches personnelles de l'écrivain firent lever cette interdiction. Le bouquin parut en russe ... avec une préface dans laquelle on met le lecteur en garde contre les idées pseudo-chrétiennes et anti-marxistes, du poète communiste. M. Barbusse accepta bien volontiers cette formule.*' Parijanine, 'Pour la destruction d'une légende' (p. 16); italics in original. Was this a case, as Parijanine suggests, of money-grubbing on Barbusse's part, or rather his faith in Jesus outweighing his Communist scruples? It is not known whether the same disclaimer was produced for *Judas*, which was also translated and published in the USSR. See Barbusse, 'L'orthodoxie anti-religieuse', *Monde*, p. 9. That said, in 1935, the *Soviet Encyclopedia* described *Judas* as lacking a 'sufficiently convinced Marxist ideology.' Quoted in Weems, 'The Intellectual Odyssey of Henri Barbusse', p. 521.

⁵⁵ The FHB contains a dossier with numerous items of correspondence sent by and to Barbusse with the aim of bringing the play to the European stage. See *Naf* 16497, *passim*.

⁵⁶ For further information on *Monde*, see, in particular, Normand, 'Henri Barbusse, *Monde* and the Dimensions of Commitment'. Other items of relevance are to be found in section 2.7 of the bibliography.

⁵⁷ In his reflections on Barbusse's work, Aragon expressed his distaste for everything that followed *Le Feu*. See *Pour expliquer ce que j'étais*, p. 43.

⁵⁸ *Littérature de la Révolution mondiale*, p. 181. Subsequent references are indicated in the text, with the appropriate page number given in parenthesis.

⁵⁹ Breton had likewise noticed, and drawn his own conclusions from Barbusse's collaboration with the likes of Claudel and Cocteau. See *Légitime Défense*, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Radzinsky, *Stalin*, p. 262.

⁶¹ Parijanine, 'Pour la destruction d'une légende', p. 16. Subsequent references are indicated in the text, with the appropriate page number given in parenthesis.

⁶² For further information on Vvedensky and the Living Church, see Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union*, pp. 231-32.

⁶³ Quoted in Lounatcharsky, *Silhouettes*, p. 309.

⁶⁴ In a letter to Barbusse to acknowledge receipt of a complimentary copy of *Jésus* twenty years later, Jammes wrote: 'Je ne sais pourquoi, mais dans les épouvantables abîmes de votre sacrilège, je discerne je ne sais quelle lueur diffuse qui ne sort pas directement de cet enfer que vous m'envoyâtes voici quelques vingt ans. [...] Si vous saviez comme je prie sur cette lettre!' FHB, *Naf* 16534, f. 183.

⁶⁵ *Naf* 16532, f. 248. The letter is dated 10 July 1917. The word 'sacrifice', which Barbusse altered ahead of the publication of the article 'en plaquette', was reinstated in *Paroles* (p. 14). The section that would have been of interest to the former priests is on pp. 14-16, where Barbusse makes the point that all religions have become 'instruments d'une propagande sociale très déterminée', however pure they may have been originally, and thus have to be opposed.

⁶⁶ George, 'Aux lueurs de *La Forge*', pp. 493-94. Marx's study, 'Le Rayonnement de l'amour dans l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', was published in *Les Cahiers idéalistes français*.

⁶⁷ Peyre, 'Henri Barbusse', p. 366, for this and all the preceding quotations.

⁶⁸ Souday, 'Les livres [*Jésus*]'

⁶⁹ *Naf* 16524, f. 243, for this and all other quotations.

⁷⁰ Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 176. After all the accusations levelled at him, Barbusse was not unaware of the way in which certain readers might interpret *Jésus* etc. In 'L'Orthodoxie anti-religieuse' (p. 9), Barbusse stated that if his novel should be used 'pour l'actualisation moderne de la religion', he could not be held responsible. In all

probability, Barbusse would have welcomed a religious revival if, in modernizing itself, the Church had moved forward by moving backwards to its origins.

⁷¹ *Naf* 16524, ff. 275-76.

⁷² For all quotations relating to Barbusse's reply, see f. 277 of the dossier indicated in the previous note.

⁷³ The article from which this quotation is taken, 'L'Exploité' (pp. 261-73), is yet another useful summary of Barbusse's ideas regarding Jesus in 1927-1928.

⁷⁴ FHB, *Naf* 16533, f. 329. The letter is dated 18 July 1925 and is reproduced in *CHB* nos 19-20, 1996, 56-57.

⁷⁵ AAV, 45.108; author's italics.

⁷⁶ See 'Jésus-Christ a-t-il existé?', 'Jésus marxiste', 'L'exploitation de Jésus', and Part one of *Judas*, 'Les origines', pp. 7-113, *passim*.

⁷⁷ In addition to the items mentioned in the previous note, see the section of *Judas* entitled 'Quelqu'un a passé', pp. 68-74 (p. 68 in particular); and *Faits divers*, pp. 269-70.

⁷⁸ *Naf* 16545, f. 429. This draft letter is dated 12 February 1927.

⁷⁹ In *Judas*, Barbusse writes that Jesus was implicated in 'une affaire d'ordre courant de messianisme anti-romain' (p. 179). Many scholars disagree.

⁸⁰ 16524, ff. 255-56. All that remains of the 'flirt épistolaire' to which Noussane refers is a single letter from Chastel to Barbusse dated 22 July 1927, concerning a passage on p. 215 of *Judas* to which Chastel objected. See 16533, ff. 280-82.

⁸¹ Noussane, 'La cité des livres. Henri Barbusse: *Jésus*'.

⁸² See note 78.

⁸³ *Dictionnaire Bordas de littérature française*, p. 476.

⁸⁴ Mancisidor, *Henri Barbusse*, pp. 96, 98; my translations.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁸⁶ Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, p. 321.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁸⁹ Bonnaud-Lamotte, 'Jean Relinger: *Henri Barbusse, écrivain combattant*', p. 414.

⁹⁰ Courtois and Lazer, *Histoire du PCF*, p. 35. See also p. 53.

⁹¹ The occasional misgivings about the extent and rate of progress in the USSR post-Revolution which the reader will find in socio-political works such as *Russie* (see, for example, pp. 37-39, 63, 187) are invariably tempered by the firm conviction that Soviet success will ultimately be achieved. Nevertheless, in her memoirs, Louise Weiss reports that Barbusse's widow, Hélyonne, was offered a pension by the Soviet authorities, on the condition that modifications be made to the texts of *Voici* and *Staline* in particular. The latter contains references to 'un-persons', while the former is strewn with minor criticisms (see, for example, pp. 16, 54, 83-84, 139, 141, 163, 175, 177-78, 198-99, 296-97, 301-302). See *Mémoires d'une Européenne*, p. 268.

⁹² In reply to an open letter to Barbusse sent in 1930 by the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature, the central question of which was 'Êtes-vous avec nous ou contre nous?', Barbusse asked for a list of the errors he was supposed to have made. Wrote Bella Illes in his report on the activities of the Bureau's secretariat: 'La chose n'est pas facile à faire. Avec les erreurs politiques de Barbusse, on remplirait un volume.' *Littérature de la révolution mondiale*, p. 18.

⁹³ Picciola hesitantly advances the same suggestion with regard to Barbusse's thinking on Jesus and Marx: 'il affirme leur filiation, peut-être parce qu'il a besoin de cette parenté.' Picciola, 'Les débuts littéraires d'Henri Barbusse' (p. 29).

⁹⁴ Gide, *Retour de l'URSS, Retouches à mon Retour de l'URSS*.

⁹⁵ See Holland, *Time Remembered*, p. 128.

⁹⁶ In 1929, Barbusse wrote that ‘la façon dont l’Etat soviétique résout la question des nationalités permet à toutes les races diverses qui peuplent l’ancienne Russie des tsars, une coopération aussi précieuse pour l’art que bienfaisante pour la vie sociale.’ Barbusse, ‘Lettre inédite d’Henri Barbusse à un groupe d’écrivains yidich à Paris’ (p. 5).

⁹⁷ *The God That Failed*, p. 68. Any reader wondering how highly intelligent men could come to accept monstrosities of this kind would do well to read Koestler’s contribution to this important book (pp. 25-82).

⁹⁸ Buber-Neumann, *Von Potsdam Nach Moskau*, p. 326.

⁹⁹ Barbusse, quoted in Lunacharsky, *Silhouettes*, p. 306.

¹⁰⁰ See Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 23.

¹⁰¹ Lang labelled him neither but could not refrain from describing his interviewee in religious terms. Having noted the ‘statuette de la Vierge au-dessus de la cheminée’ in Barbusse’s villa in Aumont, Lang added: ‘J’ignore de quelle manière il est parvenu à cet état de grâce révolutionnaire, et quand la paralysie de son sens critique fut acquis, mais sa conviction est aujourd’hui de même ordre que la foi des vrais croyants.’ Lang, ‘Henri Barbusse’ (pp. 403, 404).

CONCLUSION

A premature death in Moscow in 1935, at the age of sixty-two, prevented Henri Barbusse from producing a long work of prose fiction that would have been entitled 'Morceaux du monde'. Chapter one of four would have featured the 'éternel pivot d'Adam et Eve'; chapter two would have provided yet another critique of the 'évasions offertes aux hommes, et en premier lieu, les religions'.¹ In terms of the thematics at least, had he lived but a few years longer, Barbusse's work as a creative writer would have ended very much as it had begun.

The general aim of this thesis is to point up the centrality of religion in Barbusse's work as it stands. Close analysis of selected texts, from the poetry Barbusse produced as a pupil at the Collège Rollin in the early 1890s, through the pseudo-gospel *Jésus*, published in 1927, to the hagiographic biography of Stalin, which proved to be the writer's last, and least felicitous contribution to the world of letters, has shown that religion represented a major, if not *the* major preoccupation of Henri Barbusse.

The particular aim of this thesis is to show that there is both continuity, and development in Barbusse's treatment of religion as he himself developed under the impact of external events. The above analysis of the texts has demonstrated that Barbusse was an atheist who throughout his career was hostile towards traditional, institutionalized forms of religion in general and Christianity in its Roman Catholic form in particular; but that the perspective from which he mounted his attack evolved. In his poetry and his first two novels, *Les Suppliants* and *L'Enfer*, Barbusse undermined Christianity from a largely apolitical and metaphysical perspective. Although his immanentist philosophy is still clearly visible in his later works, the nature of Barbusse's critique of Christianity became altogether more political in *Le Feu* and *Clarté*, the two novels that emerged as a direct response to the events of 1914-1918. In the third and final phase of his career, as represented by *Les Enchaînements* and *Jésus*, Barbusse

attacked Christianity on ideological grounds. This is not to say that Barbusse went into battle with religion armed to the teeth with Marxist-Leninist theory (with which the writer was thoroughly unfamiliar); but rather that as a member of the PCF, Barbusse identified the Church as the Communists' main ideological adversary in the fight for the hearts and minds of the masses.

Thus, there is continuity and development with regard to Barbusse's anticlericalism. It is a constant feature of his work but finds expression in different ways over the course of his career. Initially, Barbusse's anticlericalism is largely implicit in his writing, a logical extension of his negative depiction of traditional religious beliefs and practices. It becomes explicit in the war context, in which the clerics are portrayed as a major component of the 'Union sacrée'; and Barbusse contributes to the version of the 'rumeur infâme' which held that the clergy preached the merits of waging this particular war whilst leaving the actual fighting to others. In Barbusse's work after 1919, the Church is shown to be a major factor in conflict after conflict throughout the last two millennia, as well as the bulwark of the political status quo more generally. Curiously, however, Barbusse treats the individual cleric with a notable degree of sympathy. Ursleur in *Les Suppliants* and Piot in *Clarté* are portrayed as nothing more than misguided; the considerably less pliable, more doctrinaire Roman Catholic priest in *L'Enfer* and the 'sergent-infirmier' in *Le Feu* earn the narrator's respect in both narratives. Yet the cleric is afforded progressively less coverage in Barbusse's novels. After Maximilien Desanzac, Ursleur is the main character in *Les Suppliants* and their two lengthy dialogues constitute the novel's dramatic interest, such as it is. In *Les Enchaînements* and *Jésus*, the emphasis is very much on the ecclesiastical authorities as a whole, the Church at an institutional level.

There is continuity and development also in Barbusse's fascination with Jesus. He too is a recurrent feature, both direct and indirect, of Barbusse's poetry and novels. The

narrators of *L'Enfer*, *Clarté* and *Les Enchaînements* are all identified to varying degrees with Jesus, as are individual 'poilus' in *Le Feu* and *Clarté*; the narrator of *L'Enfer*, and Maximilien Desanzac in *Les Suppliants* in particular, can even be described as messianic figures. Jesus tells his own story in *Jésus*, the novel in Barbusse's Jesus triptych, which put the leaders of the PCF in such a difficult position. Unlike trained exegetes such as Paul-Louis Couchoud, whose work he knew well, Barbusse argued that Jesus *had* existed and had preached an atheist, proto-Communist gospel of social and political revolution. Well-read though Barbusse was on the origins of Christianity, it is hard not to see his interpretation as a case of eisegesis rather than exegesis, a 'reading into' the sources as opposed to a 'reading out' of them. There are a considerable number of minor, but collectively important points of detail on which Barbusse's argument could be challenged. Suffice it to say that Barbusse's Jesus lacks credibility because he undergoes precisely the same transformation that Barbusse himself underwent. In the early work, as reflected in the messianic narrators and the crucified Christ that Maximilien contemplates, Jesus is an apolitical figure. In *Clarté*, Jesus appears to Simon Paulin, 'De Profundis', and speaks through him to the world, instructing humanity not to rebuild the churches destroyed in the war. In adopting this stance, Jesus is dissociated from the Church and placed on the Left in Barbusse's Manichean world-view, a development which anticipates Jesus's portrayal as a proto-Communist revolutionary in the final phase of Barbusse's career. Mindful of the sacrifices he made during and after the war, Barbusse was also inclined to talk about himself in messianic terms,² which suggests a personal identification with Jesus on the part of the writer.

Although Jesus is by far the most important individual component, he is only one element in the religious figures, language and imagery that are such a striking feature of Barbusse's work throughout his career. Adam and Eve, the 'De profundis' motif, the apocalyptic markers to be found in all of his novels from *Le Feu* onwards, the Great

Flood of the Book of Genesis, the Tower of Babel and the ‘Ce qui fut sera’ syntagma have all been analysed at some length in this thesis. Likewise, independent of them, the abundant use of language that one would normally expect to find in a religious context. This thesis has shown that Barbusse employed the above with the dual purpose, broadly speaking, of subverting Christianity and sanctifying secular phenomena in the quest for an alternative form of faith.

When accused in the 1920s of attempting to ‘mysticize’ revolutionary politics, Barbusse defended himself robustly, postulating a faith-reason dichotomy encapsulated by the dictum ‘Comprendre d’abord, aimer ensuite.’ He took the view that his faith was based on reason, not the converse — the *sine qua non* of religious belief — which he condemned utterly as an abdication of human intelligence. Like Marx and Lenin, he stated that the advent of the classless society would bring about what might be described as the ‘withering away’ of the religious impulse (see p. 288). Elsewhere, however, and somewhat contradictorily, Barbusse contended that the human need to believe derived not from a feeling of alienation understood in socio-economic terms, but from ‘des ressorts intérieurs: un besoin de croire aveugle et intense [...]. Le sentiment de la faiblesse de l’être humain, et de sa petitesse dans l’univers, la terreur des forces naturelles et surtout la terreur de la mort.’³ Barbusse was of the opinion, in other words, that the religious impulse at work in human beings — himself included, no doubt — was an innate, deeply visceral response to the human condition, a response which, presumably, would remain, regardless of the socio-economic system in place.

Given this essentialist view of religion and Barbusse’s prediction — quite right in this particular instance — that any direct, ‘frontal assault’ on religious beliefs and practices would prove to be counter-productive, he sought as a writer to channel the religious impulse in other, secular directions. Hence his reference, in *Couteau*, to ‘la beauté religieuse’ (see p. 276) and the injunction with which the pseudo-gospel *Jésus*

ends: ‘mettez l’idée pure, sage, et juste, de la Révolution dans la grande âme religieuse de l’humanité. Ainsi soit-il’ (see p. 258). Hence also the call to revolutionaries, in the final section of *Judas*, to separate ‘l’erreur religieuse de l’élan religieux qui l’entraîne comme un torrent’ (see p. 283). Barbusse rejected the charge that he was a religious mystic; but he was quite content to label himself ‘un croyant et un mystique de la logique’ (see p. 281).

His self-acknowledged pseudo-mysticism was not, however, a phenomenon that came to the fore, unheralded, in the 1920s, only after Barbusse had detected a perceived parallelism between primitive Christianity and the contemporary Communist movement. This thesis has shown that Barbusse attempted, quite consciously, in his poetry and early novels, to divinize the human. His spokesman, the atheist Maximilien Desanzac, expresses his admiration for religion, describes himself — somewhat surprisingly — as a religious being (see p. 64), and proposes a pseudo-religious cult of his fellow man. At the head of the Clarté movement after the war, Barbusse and Anatole France declared that they had founded the movement with the aim of spreading, ‘like an experimental religion’, a combination of political doctrines and the eternal poetical verities of justice, truth and beauty (see p. 312). Elsewhere, Barbusse referred to his ‘conception de la religion sociale’, which in *Le Feu*, and in *Clarté* in particular, takes the form of a pseudo-religious cult of a socialist republicanism informed by Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Long before Barbusse’s syncretization of primitive Christianity and contemporary Communism in the characters of Etienne in *Les Enchaînements* and Jesus in *Jésus*, the writer had already compared the pronouncements of President Wilson, the ‘logicien splendide’ of the immediate post-war era, with the precepts of the first Christians (see p. 187).

If Barbusse thought that he was providing his readers, and, increasingly after 1917, his mass audiences, with a means of filling a spiritual void, there can be little doubt

that the message he imparted and his role as spokesman for a certain constituency within his generation satisfied great personal needs of his own.⁴ He stated several times in his youth his desire to speak to the world in the capacity of poet-prophet, a spiritual guide for the masses in the Victor Hugo mould. As a result of the staggering success of *Le Feu*, Barbusse became something of the sort; the crowd that followed his funeral cortège to Père Lachaise in September 1935, estimated at 300,000, is said to have been the largest such Parisian gathering since the death of Hugo himself.⁵ Once again, however, there is development as well as continuity with regard to the prophetic, for the various pseudo-prophets to be found in Barbusse's poetry and all of his novels promote a cause which varies in accordance with Barbusse's political evolution, which need not be restated. Suffice it to say that when this cause acquired an overtly political dimension and was therefore no longer concerned with simply combating traditional forms of religion, the prophets did not necessarily lose the religious patina which had characterized their earlier incarnations. Thus, not only is Simon Paulin's apostolic mission connoted by the obvious allusion in his name both to Simon Peter and Saint Paul, it is also 'endorsed', if not completely determined, by the prophet from Galilee himself. While none of Barbusse's prophets, Jesus included, believe in God, there is something distinctly religious about all of them.

There was something distinctly religious about Barbusse also. His profoundly religious culture, his public declaration of love for Jesus, the ambivalence of his attitude towards religion and of the literary techniques he used all contributed to a widely perceived religiosity, which declarations of atheism alone, however sincere, could not dispel. It would be hard to take issue with Picciola's view that although Barbusse was never a churchgoer, 'son âme était religieuse'.⁶ Analysis of reader-response to Barbusse's early fiction and the attempt to answer the question 'Henri Barbusse: Comrade or Christian?' in Part four of this thesis have shown that Picciola's contention

has been shared by many of those who have pondered Henri Barbusse's engagement with religion.

There is no small amount of irony in this, given that Henri Barbusse is now generally remembered as a Communist and the author of *Le Feu*, if remembered at all. And here there is a further irony, in that Barbusse ascribed his faith in Communism to the power of reason and the scientific laws of Marx and subsequent theoreticians. Yet his work suggests that Barbusse himself had no conception whatsoever of these laws or of dialectical materialism generally. While he can be forgiven this failing, since he read neither German nor Russian, and French translations of the works of Marx and Engels did not become commonly available in France until around the time of the writer's own death, one is left wondering how Barbusse could make such bold claims for ratiocination when the opportunity for this was so conspicuously lacking in his own case. It might be argued that Barbusse's faith was empirical, rather than logical; but Barbusse hailed Lenin as the New Messiah, and the Soviet Union as the Promised Land long before he first set foot in it, and having done so, he failed to see, after numerous, extended and often unsupervised stays, what was so obvious to Gide after one relatively brief visit. Barbusse never used the term 'conversion' in reference to his adoption of Communism but there is no more apposite a word to describe it.

This thesis has charted Henri Barbusse's quest for faith as reflected in his work. The titles of his novels alone suggest a spiritual odyssey, beginning with *Les Suppliants* and ending in *Élévation*, via *L'Enfer*, *Le Feu*, *Clarté* and *Jésus*. The unwavering faith that Barbusse showed in Communism in the last fifteen years of his life and work — political in appearance, religious in nature — marked the end of a process begun much earlier, a process whose trajectory can be followed in the writer's treatment of religion in his poetry, novels, and works of non-fiction. With the benefit of hindsight, it would be all too easy to condemn Barbusse for his simultaneous criticism of the Church's

bloodstained history and his support for a dictator whose record was no less reprehensible. When Barbusse died, however, the executions that Stalin ordered could still be passed off as necessary, if 'regrettable' self-protective measures, and the horrors of the forced collectivization of the Soviet Union's peasantry could still be dismissed as exaggerations and anti-Soviet propaganda. Furthermore, having spent a considerable amount of time in the trenches of the Western Front and watched with dismay the bankruptcy of liberalism after the Armistice, Barbusse saw the world very differently from the way in which we see it. For Barbusse, Communism represented the only hope for the human race and, after initial hesitation, he placed his complete faith in it. It is hardly surprising, then, that he did not see what Gide and others saw, for faith can not only move mountains, but blind a man to their very existence.

Notes

¹ Barbusse, quoted in Vidal, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 361.

² See p. 141 of this thesis, as well as *J'Accuse*, in which Barbusse declared that he belonged to a group of men 'qui sont prêts à donner leur sang et leur vie pour la cause de l'émancipation définitive des masses humaines exploitées et opprimées par d'autres hommes' (p. 4).

³ Barbusse, *Judas*, p. 12. See also Barbusse's preface to Lorulot, *L'Eglise et la guerre*, p. 10.

⁴ 'Le souvenir de l'accueil qui m'a été fait dans certaines circonstances, à Paris, à Lyon, à Berlin, à Hambourg, à Vienne, où j'ai été porté en triomphe par des foules de dix mille et de vingt mille personnes, restera la joie et l'honneur de ma vie.' Barbusse, quoted in Lefèvre, *Une heure avec Frédéric Lefèvre* (pp. 76-77). For the views of two contemporaries, see Bernard, 'Barbusse prophète'; and Pohl, 'Ein moralisches Gesetz', pp. 425-26.

⁵ See Duclos and Fréville, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 27.

⁶ Picciola, 'Le rôle et l'œuvre d'Henri Barbusse', p. 41. See also Relinger, *Henri Barbusse*, p. 285.

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16491 '*Les Enchaînements*'

16497 '*Jésus contre Dieu. Mystère avec cinéma et musique*'

16499 'Fragments d'œuvres diverses parues ou inédites'

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16507 'Notes intimes 6-31 juillet 1896'

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- 16517 'Registre contenant des brouillons des *Suppliants*'
- 16520 'Notes pour *Les Suppliants*'
- 16523 'Brouillons de notes d'œuvres diverses parues ou inédites'
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- 16530 'Lettres de Barbusse à Hélyonne Mendès/Barbusse et les réponses de celle-ci'
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32.66 'Biographies Henri Barbusse'

32.67 'Interviews Henri Barbusse'

42.103b 'Lettres sur *L'Enfer*'

43.105 'Articles sur *Le Feu*'

43.105b 'Lettres sur *Le Feu*'

44.105 'Articles sur *Le Feu*'

45.108 'Articles/Lettres sur *Les Judas de Jésus*'

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