

## **Faith, Secular Humanism, and Development: A Reading of Jacques Roumain's Religious Sensibility and Marxist Rhetoric**

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Jacques Roumain was one of the most influential public intellectuals and writers in twentieth-century Haiti and in the Black Atlantic world. He was a founding member of the literary and cultural movement known as Haitian *indigénisme*, which rejected the hegemony of French-Western values and culture in Haiti and reacted against the imperial culture of the American military occupation (1915-1934) in the Caribbean country. As an anti-imperialist and Marxist writer and a critic of Western colonialism and hegemonic domination in the world, Roumain strongly advocated the decolonization of the peoples and countries of the Third World and championed the liberation and human rights of the oppressed. In 1934, he founded the *Parti Communiste Haitien* (P.C.H.) (the Haitian Communist Party) and spread the gospel of Marxism and socialism through his prolific writings. In his various publications, he analyzed issues pertaining to the relationship between Haiti's oppressed underclass peasants, the working class, and the ruling elite-group minority. Informed by a Marxist social theory, Roumain wrote about religion, social development, and the role of the oppressed people in history as agents of their own liberation. He relentlessly addressed the global problem of the capitalist world and its exploitation of those living in the darker side of modernity.

This essay investigates the intersections of religion, social transformation, and Marxist social theory in the thought of Jacques Roumain. It argues that Roumain's radical perspective on religion and development, and his critiques of institutionalized Christianity, were substantially influenced by a Marxist conception of historical materialism and secular humanist approach to faith and human progress. Roumain rejects Christianity for its ineffective societal role in

fostering social change. This essay also contends that Roumain's rejection of religious supernaturalism and divine intervention in human affairs and history was shaped by his non-theistic humanism and secular worldview on faith. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates that Roumain believes that only through effective human solidarity and collaboration can serious social transformation and real human freedom take place. He downplays the potential role of religion to deal adequately with the ambiguities of life in this world. Roumain holds that man is the measure of all things and his own agent of liberation. Consequently, individuals themselves must cooperate and unite in order to alter the social order toward a fruitful life of peace, harmony, and freedom.

The essay is divided into three parts. The first explores Roumain's orientation to Marxism, socialism, and Communism as a writer and activist-intellectual. The second part studies his Marxist-inspired religious rhetoric and scientific realism, and their relationship to human progress in his well-known debates with the French Catholic priest-theologian Joseph Foisset. Finally, I conclude the essay by looking at the relationship between religion, social development, and collective liberation in Roumain's well-known novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (*Masters of the Dew*).

### **Toward a Marxist and Communist Orientation and Aesthetic**

As a creative writer and freedom fighter, Roumain's only English biographer Carolyn Fowler states that "Jacques Roumain shared a vision of the function of art as the articulation of a people's condition, as a reflection of the culture which that people develops to cope creatively and to express their hope for the fulfillment of universal human aspirations."<sup>1</sup> Roumain has exercised an enormous influence on Haitian literature, Caribbean writers, and on the young

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Fowler, "The Shared Vision of Langston Hughes and Jacques Roumain." *Black American Literature Forum* 15:3 (1981): 88.

generation of poets and intellectuals associated with the Haitian Renaissance from the time of the American occupation of Haiti to the growing post-occupation generation of Haitian writers.

He was particularly committed to the welfare of the Haitian “peasantariat” and the “universal” proletariat, and the betterment of humanity.<sup>2</sup> Roumain was interested in the religious expression and sensibility of the people as well as the function of religion in culture and society. He used his writings as political interventions for social renovation and emancipative action. He was not only deeply concerned about the everyday experience of the black masses in Haiti, and the world’s poor, but how these groups of individuals repeatedly confronted some of the most egregious evils of modern times and human-made social oppressions, abuses, and exploitations. His engagement with faith is documented in several of his works.

At the beginning of 1932, the French Marxist writer Tristan Rémy requested biographical information about Jacques Roumain for a forthcoming article. Rémy was a champion of proletarian literature in France in the 1930s and a contributor to the newly launched socialist and political review *Monde*. In his response letter, Roumain confesses to Rémy that he is a committed Marxist and revolutionary Communist and is interested in proletarian literature. As a member of the Haitian high class, Roumain, who had renounced his wealth and well-regarded

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<sup>2</sup> I am thankful to an unnamed reviewer of this present essay who made an important observation about my use of the “peasant” terminology here: “In the Western tradition of Marxism, writers like Eric Hobsbawm have called the peasant ‘prepolitical’ and ‘premodern’, unable to effectively confront capitalist modernity in the same manner as the urban, industrial proletariat. But in other, non-Western manifestations of Marxist thought, scholars have suggested that the peasant’s agency in capitalist modernity is far more potent. Still others, especially in African studies, have coined the term ‘peasantariat’ to conjure the hybrid nature of peasant and working-class consciousness in the developing world”; because of the scope of this piece, it is impossible for me to explore various schools of thought (e.g. The Subaltern Studies group) associated with these various terminologies and concepts as well as their historical contexts. The interested reader would find the following studies on these critical issues helpful: Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999 [1983]) and *Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said, eds. *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), and *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2002).

social status, divulged his anti-Haitian bourgeois sentiment and commitment to (the cause of) Haitian underclass peasants. Unapologetically, he declares:

*Je suis communiste. Non militant pour l'instant, parce que les cadres d'une lutte politique n'existent pas encore en Haïti. Je m'applique à préparer . . .*

*Fils de grands propriétaires terriens, j'ai renié mes origines bourgeoises. J'ai beaucoup vécu avec les paysans. Je connais leur vie, leur mentalité, leur religion—ce mélange étonnant de catholicisme et de vaudou.*

*Je ne considère pas le prolétariat paysan comme une valeur sentimentale. Le paysan haïtien est notre seul producteur et il ne produit que pour être exploité, de la manière la plus effroyable, par une minorité . . . politicienne qui s'intitule l'Elite. Toutes mes publications ont combattu cette prétendue élite.*

*Je travaille au renouvellement de notre littérature par l'étude de notre très riche folklore . . . . J'estime que notre littérature doit être nègre et largement prolétarienne. Je travaille également au rapprochement des écrivains nègres de tous les pays*<sup>3</sup>

[I am a Communist. Not a militant one for the moment, because the cadres of a political struggle do not yet exist in Haiti. I am applying myself to this end . . .

The son of owners of great land holdings, I have disavowed my bourgeois origins. I have lived a lot among the peasants. I know their life, mentality, religion—that surprising fusion of Catholicism and Vodou.

I do not regard the peasant proletariat as a sentimental value. The Haitian peasant is our only producer, and he only produces only to be exploited, in the most gruesome manner, by a minority . . . . politicians known as the Elite. All of my publications have fought against this so-called elite.

I am working for the renewal of our literature through the study of our rich folklore . . . . I believe that our literature must be *Negro* and largely proletarian. I am working equally for the bringing together of Negro writers of all countries.]

Roumain's idea for the country's new course in literature is a marriage of his Marxist-Communist politics and his investment in proletarian-peasant literature. Unlike many Western Marxist intellectuals at that time who had suppressed race for class, Roumain's race and class consciousness are blended as one. He writes, "I believe that our literature must be *Negro* and largely proletarian." His Pan-Africanist and transnationalist vision in the establishment of a new literary ethos in Haiti is attested in this declaration: "I am working equally for the bringing together of Negro writers of all countries." Yet, the emphasis on the "proletarianist turn" in

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Roumain, "Lettre à Tristan Rémy," in *Jacques Roumain: Œuvres Complètes*, introduced and edited by Léon-François Hoffmann (France: Signataires de l'accord archives, 2003), 639. The letter is dated 1932.

literature reveals his cross-racial, trans-cultural, and global sensibility. David Nichols remarks that Roumain seeks to associate

The interests of the Haitian masses with those of the proletariat in metropolitan countries, accepting the Soviet line on this matter . . . . The Russian revolution had created a new proletarian front throughout the world, extending from the proletarians of the West, through the Russian revolution, to the oppressed peoples of the East.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in a critical essay entitled “Analyse schématique,” which he wrote in 1934, Roumain examined the Haitian condition from a Marxist perspective. He criticizes the Haitian bourgeoisie class and the political charlatans for exploiting Haitian peasants and the working class, and for misusing their material production and resources for their own profit. He brings to surface the dilemma of social classes, the problem of color and economic oppression, and the abuse of power, which substantially accounted for Haiti’s underdevelopment and the poor living condition of the majority on the island. He declares, “*Il s’agit, on le voit, d’une oppression économique qui se traduit socialement et politiquement. Donc la base objective du problème est bien la lutte des classes*”<sup>5</sup> (“As we might observe, the phenomenon is that of economic oppression, which is translated socially and politically. Thus, the fundamental problem is indisputably of a class struggle”). In diagnosing the Haitian problem, Roumain’s basic contention is the underlying fact that the issue of class struggle and economic exploitation of the common people by the middle-class bourgeoisie and the minority elite has had significant effects and repercussions on social and political life in Haiti. Alex Dupuy insightfully points out that

The U.S. military occupation set the stage for renewed conflicts between the mulatto bourgeoisie and the black bourgeoisie and middle class to control the state after the departure of the Marines in 1934. Those struggles culminated in the victory of the nationalist black middle class in alliance with the black bourgeoisie . . . . The Duvalier regime did not seek to transform the class structure of Haiti or to eliminate the economic

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<sup>4</sup> David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996 [1979]), 173.

<sup>5</sup> Roumain, “Analyse schématique,” in *Jacques Roumain*, 778-780; also quoted in Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, 183.

dominance of the mulatto and expatriate bourgeoisie. Rather, it monopolized political power for the black middle class allied to the black bourgeoisie as a counterweight to the mulatto and expatriate bourgeoisies' economic dominance.<sup>6</sup>

Roumain proceeds to expound on the dynamics of imperialism and class oppression in the Haitian experience. In general terms, he insists that imperialism has played a decisive role in orchestrating social and economic inequality and structural oppression in Third World societies: “*De plus en plus, elle lie étroitement la notion de la lutte anti-impérialiste à celle de la lutte des classes*”<sup>7</sup> (“Increasingly, it closely binds the notion of anti-imperialist struggle to that of the class struggle”). Michel-Rolph Trouillot affirms that “instability is inherent in the social structure of peripheral capitalism.”<sup>8</sup> He also makes a critical observation that I think is noteworthy in understanding Roumain’s central argument here:

It [Instability] stems from the very dependency that characterizes these societies and ‘disarticulates’ to varying degrees the social organism. Societies on the periphery of the capitalist world economy are of necessity outward-looking, if only because they are economically dependent on capitalist centers. Yet states are inherently inward-looking: they exercise primary control over a definite territory and derive their momentum from the dynamics of coercion and consent within that space . . . . The peripheral capitalist state is often a colonial legacy, the result of a political “independence” built upon the remains of a power structure imposed from outside.<sup>9</sup>

Dupuy takes the matter back to “the concept of plantation economy in describing a particular form of dependency and underdevelopment and the internal organization and dynamics of that type of economy.”<sup>10</sup> Like Trouillot, he underscores that “the extroverted and unintegrated structures of the peripheral and dependent economies created during the colonial period, however, are necessary but not sufficient to explain why some countries like Haiti failed

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<sup>6</sup> Alex Dupuy, *Haiti in the World Economy: Class, Race, and Underdevelopment Since 1700* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 208.

<sup>7</sup> Roumain, “L’Ecroutement du mythe nationaliste,” in *Jacques Roumain*, 655.

<sup>8</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-3.

<sup>10</sup> Dupuy, *Haiti in the World Economy*, 3.

to develop both the capital and consumer goods sectors, after independence.”<sup>11</sup> Roumain knew that the theory of dependent development that explains Haiti’s underdevelopment highlighted a pressing reality: the economic struggle of the country’s working class and the underclass peasants constituted both an internal and external crisis. It is the historical fact that “Foreign capital dominates and directs this process of development, but in alliance with the national state and local capital.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, for Roumain, in order to have a self-sustaining and self-determining Haiti, it is necessary for Haitian nationalists to enter a double fight against the internal and external presence of ruthless capitalism: “*C’est combattre le Capitalisme étranger ou indigène, c’est combattre à outrance la bourgeoisie haïtienne et les politiciens bourgeois, valets de l’impérialisme, exploiters cruels des ouvriers et paysans*”<sup>13</sup> (“To fight against foreign or native Capitalism is equally to fight to the point the Haitian bourgeoisie and bourgeois politicians, the servants of imperialism and cruel exploiters of workers and peasants”). The root of the Haitian problem is both local and global, as he stresses, “*Le fait concret est celui-ci: un prolétariat noir, une petite bourgeoisie en majorité noir, est opprimé impitoyablement par une infime minorité, la bourgeoisie (mulâtre en sa majorité) et prolétarisé par la grosse industrie internationale*”<sup>14</sup> (“The concrete fact is this: a black proletariat, a petty bourgeoisie in a black majority, is ruthlessly oppressed by a tiny minority, the bourgeoisie (mulatto in its majority) and proletarianized by the international heavy industry/corporation”). Therefore, it is not enough to fight global imperialism and international capitalism; it is a clarion call to resist all forms and modalities of human oppression.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>13</sup> Roumain, “L’Ecroutement du mythe nationaliste,” 655.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 656.

Next, Roumain describes exactly the contributive role of the Haitian Communist Party in diagnosing, scrutinizing, and analyzing this national (and global) crisis scientifically and morally. He affirms that the predicament might have already psychologically aggrieved some blacks and undermined their dignity. However, the problem is beyond race, and the denigrated and exploited majority black Haitians should instead view race as the handmaid of class and economic greed. Roumain does in fact hold that the predicament of race and color in Haiti is sourced in class hierarchy, economic inequality, and the (mis-)distribution of wealth:

*Le P.C.H. pose le problème scientifiquement sans nier aucunement le bienfondé des réactions psychologiques des noirs blessés dans leur dignité . . . . Mais le devoir du P.C.H., parti d'ailleurs à 98 % noir puisque c'est un parti ouvrier, et où la question de couleur est vidée systématiquement de son contenu épidémique et placée sur le terrain de la lutte des classes, est de mettre en garde le prolétariat, la petite bourgeoisie pauvre et les travailleurs intellectuels noirs contre les politiciens bourgeois noirs qui voudraient exploiter à leur profit leurs colères justifiés.<sup>15</sup>*

[The P.C.P (Partie Communiste Haitien/Haitian Communist Party) investigates the problem scientifically, without denying the valid basis for the psychological reaction of the blacks, whose dignity had been wounded . . . . But the duty of the P.C.P—after all, it is a party composed of 98-percent Blacks, a worker's party in which the color question is systematically relieved of its epidemic content and placed on the terrain of class struggle—is to warn the proletariat, the poor, lower middle class and the black intellectual workers against the black middle-class politicians who would like to exploit for their own profit by justifying their anger.]

Almost at the end of the essay, he thunders: “*CONTRE LA SOLIDARITE BOURGEOISIE-CAPITALISE NOIRE, MULATRE ET BLANCHE: FRONT PROLETARIEN SANS DISTINCTION DE COULEUR!*”<sup>16</sup> (“AGAINST SOLIDARITY [WITH] THE BLACK BOURGEOISIE-CAPITALIST, MULATTO AND WHITE: PROLETARIAN FRONT REGARDLESS OF COLOR!”). Roumain's anti-bourgeois sentiments and his efforts to confront directly the bourgeois class in Haiti and to address publicly this crisis are restated in this declaration: “All of my publications have fought against this so-called elite.” The anti-bourgeois

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



standing can be traced to the embraced tenets of the surrealist movement, which began as an intellectual force in post-World War I Paris, inaugurated by André Breton, Paul Elouard, and Benjamin Péret. The movement was a reaction to oppressive capitalism, colonial imperialism, and Western cultural hegemony in the world. As observed, Roumain sought to bridge the gap between surrealism, Marxism, and Black radical tradition. European surrealists and Black surrealists who had drawn their inspirations from “Freud and Marx while remaining critical of Marxism . . . explicitly called for the overthrow of bourgeois culture, identified with anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia.”<sup>17</sup> “As a generalized revolt against the very foundations of Western civilization and its morality, surrealism was drawn immediately towards non-Western cultures, and issues of colonialism soon impinged upon the surrealists’ thinking.”<sup>18</sup> Surrealism provided Black radicals the critical tool for intellectual expression, the spiritual reflection to reevaluate their own Black culture, and ultimately a means to combat Black oppression and suffering. In the same line of relationship as that between Black Surrealism and Black Marxism, most of the Black intellectuals in the 1930s-1960s associated with Black Internationalism embraced the promising ideas of a Marxist-surrealist/Communist ideology. Similarly to Roumain, they maintained that these ideas could counter the oppressive weight of the Euro-American capitalist-exploitative structures mobilized against the Third World working-class people and peasants. On the other hand, as the eminent Black Marxist writer Richard Wright reminds us, “Marxism is but the starting point. No theory of life can take the place of life.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Foreword by Robin D.G. Kelley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), xii.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (New York: Verso, 1996), 3. Both Richardson and Fijalkowski comment on the widespread influence of surrealism and Marxism on Negritude and Caribbean intellectuals in the twentieth century.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 299.

Black Marxists in the twentieth century held to an anti-bourgeois ideology and believed that the doctrine (Marxism) was potentially liberative to blacks, the economically disadvantaged, and those living on the margins of society.<sup>20</sup> Cedric Robinson, who has written the most provocative text on Black Marxism, states that the notion of class solidarity was of substantial importance both practically and theoretically to Black Marxist intellectuals. “It provided a category of political activity through which the diverse social elements of the revolutionary movement—ethnics and nationalities, workers and intellectuals—could be reconciled, transcending their several particular interests.”<sup>21</sup> Valerie Klaussen asserts that Third International Communism, Black Marxism, and socialism offered Black internationalists and “West Indian intellectuals models of liberation of the colonies and neo-colonies of Africa, Asia, and the Americas as the first step toward worldwide working-class revolution.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, Black Atlantic intellectuals “saw in communism a genuine universalism that insisted that modernity make good on its philosophical premises and promises.”<sup>23</sup> Such Marxist and Communist leanings can also be detected in Roumain’s radical poem, “*Bois d’ ébène*.”<sup>24</sup> In that poem,

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<sup>20</sup> Among the more prominent Black internationalists and radical Marxists in Black Atlantic thought in the twentieth-century are Etienne Léro, René Ménil, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Jacques Stephen Alexis, and Rene Dépestre; for a recent and detailed treatment on the relationships between black international intellectuals during the interwar period, see Charles Pete Banner-Haley, *From Du Bois to Obama: African American Intellectuals in the Public Forum* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 12-31; Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in The United States, 1914-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 35-55, 129-268; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1998), 101-121, 185-194, 232-257; and Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 175-306; Robinson has written the most comprehensive study on Black Marxism and its genesis in the Black Atlantic world.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 218.

<sup>22</sup> Valerie Klaussen, *Migrant Revolutions: Haitian Literature, Globalization, and U.S. Imperialism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 102.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Other black intellectuals and postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon had explored the prospects and pitfalls of Black Marxism and its cognates; in the chapter called “On National Culture” in his famous book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon makes this insightful observation, “Negro and African-Negro culture broke up into different entities because the men who wished to incarnate these cultures realized that every culture is first and foremost national, and that the problems which kept Richard Wright or Langston Hughes on the alert were fundamentally different from those which might confront Leopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta,” 216.

Roumain calls for collective mobility and global revolution among all races and across different working-class groups:

*Garde rouge de la Chine soviétique ouvrier allemand de la  
prison de Moabit indio des Amériques  
Nous rebâtirons . . .*

*Ouvrier blanc de Detroit péon noir d'Alabama  
peuple innombrable des galères capitalistes  
le destin nous dresse épaule contre épaule  
et reniant l'antique maléfice des tabous du sang  
nous foulons les décombres de nos solitudes . . .*

*Nous briserons la mâchoire des volcans  
affirmant les cordillères  
et la plaine sera l'esplanade d'aurore  
où rassembler nos forces écartelées  
par la ruse de nos maitres  
comme la contradiction des traits.<sup>25</sup>*

[Red Guard of soviet China German worker in  
the prison of Moabite Indian of the Americas  
We will rebuild . . .

White worker of Detroit black peon of Alabama  
innumerable people of the capitalist gallery  
fate ties us up shoulder to shoulder  
dispelling the ancient evil spell of the taboos of blood  
we walk on the rubble of our solitudes

We will break the jaw of volcanoes  
affirming the cordilleras  
and the plain will be the esplanade of dawn  
where to gather our quartered forces  
by the trick of our masters  
as contradicting features]

and the international solidarity and unity of oppressed people:

*Nous proclamons l'unité de la souffrance  
et de la révolte  
de tous les peuples sur toute la surface de la terre  
  
et nous brassons le mortier des temps fraternels*

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Roumain, *Bois d'ébène, suivi de Madrid* (Montréal: Mémoire d'encrier, 2003 [1937]), 23-4.

*dans la poussière des idoles.*<sup>26</sup>

[We proclaim the unity of suffering  
and of revolt  
of all the peoples on all the surface of the earth  
and we mix the mortar of fraternal times in the dust of the  
idols.]

For Roumain, liberation of the oppressed must begin with a genuine solidarity with them by affirming their right to exist and think, to express themselves freely and act liberatively, and ultimately the right to a human life.<sup>27</sup> Roumain's vision is cross-cultural, interracial, and transnational; the mention of international laborers in China, Germany, India, North America, and the Americas more broadly is indicative of his global perspective and cosmopolitan humanism. As he affirms, the goal is to dispel "the ancient evil spell of the taboos of blood." Perceptibly in the abovementioned poetic verses, Roumain projected that proletarian revolution would engender new forms of life and facilitate the breathing of freedom's fresh air by globally oppressed humanity. He suggested that working-class individuals should be self-determining and plan their own revolution. The world's workers and underclass people are the sole creators of their destiny, the actualization of which is rooted in group effort because their "fate ties us up shoulder to shoulder." From this perspective, we can presume that collective liberation is the attempt to reorder overbearing social dynamics and end the social evils menacing the existence of the oppressed. Furthermore, mass solidarity would necessitate the genesis of new forms of social order for the future. The immediacy of collective liberation would call for radical recreation. Acting alone is not ideal; cooperative participation is urgent in the process of breaking the bonds and chains of universal dominations and oppressive structures. The oppressed have resolved to "break the jaw of volcanoes." This viewpoint also insists that the working class,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>27</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984, 90-1). Originally published as *La fuerza historica de los pobres* (Lima: 1979).

the oppressed people of the world, and the universal proletariat must divide in order to unite; demolish to rebuild. After all, they are “the protagonist [s] of their own liberation.”<sup>28</sup> Roumain upheld that all variegated aspects of orchestrated human tyranny and suffering must be eradicated for the reconstruction of the desired democratic and fair society. This is significant in grasping Roumain’s vision of history and human agency, and the correlation of literature and society.

From this same Marxist position, Roumain saw the economic problem as the determining factor in human history and the history of ideas; he believed that it is social reality that determines human consciousness, and oppressive social structures must be reversed.<sup>29</sup> History is rationally depicted in a progressive state through a series of class struggles between the exploited masses and the rich in society, and it has been moving in such a way that it has affected thought, human existence, economy, and human relations. As already noted in the previous analysis, Roumain rejected the capitalistic misuse of the poor and their resources by the wealthy and mainstream corporate institutions. José Míguez Bonino, who rejects capitalist projects of developmentalism and forms of production, remarks about its regressive and inhuman nature:

Capitalism creates in the dependent countries (perhaps not only in them) a form of human existence characterized by artificiality, selfishness, the inhuman and dehumanizing pursuit of success measured in terms of prestige and money, and the resignation of responsibility for the world and for one’s neighbor . . . . Insofar as this sham culture kills in the people even the awareness of their own condition of dependence and exploitation, it destroys the very core of their humanity: the decision to stand up and become agents of their own history, the will to conceive and realize an authentic historical project.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 307. Originally published as *Teología de la liberación* (Lima: 1971).

<sup>29</sup> Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, 175-6.

<sup>30</sup> José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007 [1975]), 31.

Robinson establishes that “The historical dialectic identified the industrial worker—the proletariat—as the negation of capitalist society; the force produced by capitalism that could finally destroy it. Capitalism pitted one class, the bourgeoisie, against another, the proletariat.”<sup>31</sup> As Ernest Mandel has consistently argued in his works, “Capitalism is a system that produces and reproduces exploitation, oppression, social injustice, inequality, poverty, hunger, violence and alienation . . . . It shows itself in the mutilation of human life, of human nature, and of the human potential for freedom, joy and solidarity.”<sup>32</sup>

Using protest literature as an activist tool and intellectual force, Jacques Roumain fought for a just social order, the economic justice and social stability of the wretched of the earth. For the militant Marxist Roumain, the Hegelian dialectics of lordship and bondage were social and ideological structures that imputed meanings to world history. In the same line of thought, he sustained that class and race were intertwined in the human dilemma; he argued that Blacks have been the victims of both racial and class injustice. This is clearly articulated in his Marxist study of the Black condition in the southern United States and his thought on cultural racism and the lynching of Blacks in America are documented in *Griefs de l’homme noir* (1939). He contends that “racial prejudice was used as a divisive tool by the Southern ruling classes to ensure that the poor whites and the Blacks did not unify and change the order of things.”<sup>33</sup> With precision, he comments on the class problem in North America and the economic exploitation of poor Blacks and whites:

The lyncher is also a victim of the lynching. The mobs that pursue the human “game” are composed of poor whites whose material condition is hardly better than that of the

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<sup>31</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 233.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Lowy, “Ernest Mandel’s Revolutionary Humanism,” in *The Legacy of Ernest Mandel*, ed. Gilbert Achcar (New York: Verso, 1999), 26.

<sup>33</sup> J. Michael Dash, “Introduction,” in *Masters of the Dew*, auth. Jacques Roumain and trans. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook (Wales: Heinemann, 1978 [1947]), 7-8. Originally published as *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (Port-au-Prince: Impr. de l’Etat, 1944).

blacks. They labour under the illusion of white superiority and think they have something in common with the ruling classes. Colour prejudice is a divisive tool among the workers of the South, whose common revolt could shake the established economic structure.<sup>34</sup>

What Roumain is articulating here is the Marxist materialist position that race is essentially unreal, and that it is a smokescreen for the material exploitation of class. Orthodox Marxism reduces race to an epiphenomenon, an ideological obfuscation. As Marxists have argued over the years, Marxism, as a critique of the capitalist world, was inevitable. Nonetheless, they would ultimately realize that it was an internal critique. The epistemological nature of historical materialism took bourgeois society on its own terms, presuming the primacy of economic forces and structures in human dynamics and histories. As it follows, the historical evolution from feudalism of the bourgeoisie as a class arguably served as an archetypal model for the rise of the proletariat as a negation of capitalist society.<sup>35</sup>

### **Roumain's Marxist Religious Rhetoric, Secular Humanism, and Scientific Reasoning**

Roumain's confrontation with the issues of class, race, and economic oppression in Haiti as well as the hard life condition of Haitian working-class people and the country's peasants are addressed elsewhere in his writings.<sup>36</sup> For example, in the well-known, controversial church-state-sponsored, anti-superstition campaign against the Vodou religion during 1941-1942,<sup>37</sup> Roumain had engaged publicly in a series of vexed debates with the French Catholic priest-

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Dash, "Introduction," 8.

<sup>35</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 233.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Roumain, *La Montagne ensorcelée (The Enchanted Mountain)*. Prefaced by Jean Price-Mars (Port-au-Prince: Impr. E. Chassaing, 1931), and *Analyse schématique (The Schematic Analysis)* (Port-au-Prince: V. Valcin, 1934).

<sup>37</sup> For a recent and brilliant work on the relationship between the Vodou faith and Haitian laws since the country's inception, see Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); other helpful works treating this subject matter in relationship to the greater Haitian culture and society are Laennec Hurbon, *le barbare imaginaire* (Port-au-Prince: Editions Henri Deschamps, 1987), and *Comprendre Haïti: Essai sur l'état, la nation, la culture* (Port-au-Prince: Editions Henri Deschamps, 1987); Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'Oncle* (Ottawa: Editions Léméac, 1973 [1928]); Elie Lescot, *Avant l'oubli: Christianisme et paganisme en Haïti et autres lieux* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie H. Deschamps, 1974); and Carl Edward Peters, *La Croix contre l'asson* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie La Phalange, 1960).

theologian, Joseph Foisset, who grounded his position in the Christian worldview and conservative theology. Foisset approved of the assault and the persecution of the adherents of the Vodou faith. The hotly contested written exchanges—a total of fourteen published articles or more—between these two engaging interlocutors appeared in the pages of the nation’s Catholic newspaper, *La Phalange*, and the widely-read newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste*. The on-going correspondence began on March 30, 1942 and continued until July 31, 1942. David Nichols observes that the Roman Catholic Church in Haiti was “largely dominated by European clergy, and was regarded as the principal weapon employed by the Francophile mulatto elite for maintaining the predominance of western culture in Haiti and for defending their own superior position.”<sup>38</sup> Roumain’s position, grounded in secular humanism and Marxism, was that the peasants should not be persecuted and their religious expression—as a philosophy of life—should not be underestimated. He posits that “Catholicism was no better for the peasants than Vaudou.”<sup>39</sup> Vodou spirituality, for Roumain, “should rather be viewed as the peasant dependence on the supernatural in order to explain his world, and consequently would only disappear when the peasant was provided with a scientific explanation of his reality. In the face of economic progress and enlightenment, the peasant would be more able to understand his world and control it.”<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, this far-reaching claim by the author, some suppose, is nothing but a radically anti-religious feeling; however, we should not conclude quickly that this assertion represents Roumain’s general characterization of the Vodou religion or his overall religious sensibility. His religious vision is more complex than what he articulated in those sentences

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<sup>38</sup> David Nichols, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, 172.

<sup>39</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 8. There are varied spellings of Vodou. Throughout this paper, I will be using the term “Vodou,” except when quoting others.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



above. His religious discourse is ambivalent at times. For example, Roumain had written a series of careful and rigorous scholarly essays on the Vodou faith and publicly presented an apologetic defense of the Vodou religion against Foisset's classification of the religion as superstitious nonsense and scandalous practice. Other Haitian nationalists and intellectuals (e.g. Jean Price-Mars, Carl Brouard, Francois Duvalier, Louis Diaquoi, Lorimer Denis, etc.) of the period and after Roumain and the cultural and nationalist movement known as *Les Griots* had represented Vodou favorably, were sympathetic toward the popular religion, and even affirmed and praised its liberating force and revolutionary potential in the time of the Haitian Revolution and subsequently in the anti-imperial struggle against the American military occupation (1915-1934). (It is unclear, however, to what extent Roumain's writings on the subject may have inspired affirmation of Vodou in revolutionary thinkers. Price-Mars's 1928 book, *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, did in fact change and directly influence Haitian intellectuals' perspective on and prejudice toward the Vodou religion and Haiti's African-derived traditions and practices.) For example, during the occupation, the guerilla army called "*les cacos*" used the power of Vodou sorcery and magic to resist the American empire and to regain national sovereignty. Roumain was particularly concerned about Vodou as a cultural symbol and signifier contributing to a better understanding of the Haitian experience and history. It is in this manner, for the most part, that he engages the religion in his creative works. Evidence that he had written about the liberating presence of the Vodou religion in achieving national independence, or the faith's emancipative aspect as a causal effect leading to Haitian freedom, is totally absent in Roumain's writings. What remains paradoxical in Roumain's thought on religion is the readily available proof that he had written both positively and negatively about the religion of Haitian peasants. Perhaps, we should

construe this particular engagement with faith as a critical reflection on religion and its role in the social fabric.

Moreover, Roumain would write cogently and fearlessly against the nationwide anti-Vodou campaign that the Catholic Church officially initiated in 1941. The goal of the struggle against the so-called “fetishism and superstition . . . aimed at pressuring Haitians to renounce Vodou.”<sup>41</sup> In the paragraph below, Roumain exposes the possible relationship between religion and terror (or violence) as related to the campaign:

*L'essentiel n'est pas d'amener un paysan à renoncer, à rejeter la croyance en Hogoun-St.-Jacques. Il s'agit avant tout de changer complètement sa conception du monde. L'élément de coercition morale qui a été mis en jeu dans la campagne antisuperstitieuse: c'est la peur. La peur du refus des sacrements de l'Eglise . . . Il faut naturellement débarrasser la masse haïtienne de ses entraves mystiques. Mais on ne triomphera pas de ses croyances par la violence ou en la menaçant de l'enfer. Ce n'est pas la hache du bourreau, la flamme du bûcher, les autodafés qui ont détruit la sorcellerie. C'est le progrès de la science, le développement continu de la culture humaine, une connaissance chaque jour plus approfondie de la structure de l'Univers.*<sup>42</sup>

[The key is not to lead a peasant to renounce and reject the belief in Hogoun-St.-Jacques [a combined name for Vodou spirits or divinities). Above all, it is a question of completely changing his conception of the world. The element of moral coercion that has been employed in the anti-superstitious campaign: It is fear. The fear of refusal of the Sacraments of the Church . . . Naturally, we must get rid of the Haitian masses of their mystical impediments. But we will not triumph over these beliefs by violence or by the threat of Hell. It is not the executioner's axe, the flame of the pyre, the auto-da-fes which destroyed sorcery. It is the progress of science, the continuous development of human culture, a growing and deeper understanding of the structure of the universe on a daily basis.]

In this analysis, Roumain bluntly condemns the campaign for its deliberate censoring of the religious freedom of Haitian peasants and for undermining the democratic vision of religious tolerance and pluralism. He rejects the psychological subordination of religion in the process of inciting fear in people and in promulgating violence through strict dogmas and dangerous ideologies. The problem here with religion and the Catholic hierarchy in particular is deeply

<sup>41</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 307.

<sup>42</sup>Jacques Roumain, “A propos de la campagne ‘anti-superstitieuse,’” in *Jacques Roumain*, 750.

rooted in a psychological and philosophical understanding and misunderstanding of the world as well as in the misapprehension of the richness of various religious traditions and spiritual practices. The Catholic Church (along with Protestant Christianity) had ferociously exercised religious xenophobia and cultural hostility against Vodou practitioners. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that bad religious practices or behaviors clearly promote and sustain social alienation and social exclusion. As historian Laurent Dubois comments on the problem:

The campaign left permanent scars on the Haitian landscape. In many communities, ancient trees were considered holy by those who practiced Vodou, understood to be a kind of home for some of the *lwa*; to eliminate such sites of worship, Catholic priests ordered these trees to be chopped down . . . . The Protestants often saw Catholicism and Vodou as twin enemies . . . one Baptist missionary declared that “The Roman Catholic Church in Haiti is a bastard production of Voodoo-ism, witchcraft, and other African heathenish cults with a gloss of Roman Catholicism.” Catholics, for their part, returned the favor, portraying the Protestants as a spiritual menace and accusing them of doing “Satan's work” in Haiti.”<sup>43</sup>

As observed above, the impossibility of tolerating competing religious traditions and divergent theological beliefs in Haitian society in the period discussed had generated substantial conflict and tension between the people. This was borne out in these truly remarkable debates. In another instance in the debates, Roumain launches an additional critique at imperial Christianity in the project of Western conquest, colonization, and the project of civilization. He speaks assiduously of the functional use of civil religion, and in particular of the hegemonic power of Christianity in land acquisition and social control. He underscores Christianity's role in (or support of) subjugating weak peoples, pacifying them, and conquering less powerful nations. He moves on to restate a point directly from Friedrich Engels:

*On ne peut se contenter de déclarer que la religion qui conquiert l'Empire romain et qui depuis 1.800 ans règne sur une importante partie du monde civilisé est une absurdité cuisinée par des imposteurs. Pour le comprendre, il est nécessaire de savoir expliquer*

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<sup>43</sup> Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*, 307.

*son origine et son développement dans ces conditions historiques où elle naquit et atteignit la domination.*<sup>44</sup>

[One cannot simply declare that the religion that had conquered the Roman empire, and, since 1800 years dominated by far the larger part of the civilized world, is fraud or just plain nonsensical. To understand it, it is necessary to know its origin and development from the historical conditions under which it arose and reached its dominating position.]<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, the undeniable power of religion in the making of Western civilization is attested; the intimate dynamic between religion and domination and the project of invasion is also affirmed. To return to our conversation about Roumain's engagement with Vodou and Catholicism, it is important to clarify here that he was not an advocate of a particular religious system such as the folk religion of Vodou or Catholic Christianity. What he articulated in the second part of the paragraph above—his comment on the Vodou religion—is standard Marxist anti-religious rhetoric and scientific orientation to faith. The only difference is that the Catholic Church is imagined to be both powerful and a promoter of ignorance, whereas the folk religion of Vodou is just superstition.<sup>46</sup> It is evident that Roumain sought to supplant both forms of religion with another system of authority, namely “scientific Marxism.”

*Ce qu'il faut mener en Haïti, ce n'est pas une campagne anti-superstitieuse, mais une campagne anti-misère. Avec l'école, l'hygiène, un standard de vie plus élevé, le paysan aura accès à cette culture et à cette vie décente qu'on ne peut lui refuser, si on ne veut*

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 765.

<sup>45</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, ed., *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Religion* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2008 [1964]), 195.

<sup>46</sup> Several writers have investigated the ambivalent role of the Vodou religion in the anti-colonial and anti-slavery struggles in the context of the Haitian Revolution; generally speaking, the Vodou faith is depicted as a form of resistance to orthodox Catholicism and to the American occupation in Haiti (1915-1934), see Michelle S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989); Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011); Laënnec Hurbon, *Dieu dans le vaudou haïtien* (Port-au-Prince: Édition Henri Deschamps, 1987); Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, eds. *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), and *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Celucien L. Joseph, “The Rhetoric of Prayer: Dutty Boukman, The Discourse of ‘Freedom from Below,’ and the Politics of God.” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2:9 (June 2011): 1-33, “Prophetic Religion, Violence and Black Freedom: Reading Makandal's Project of Black Liberation through a Fanonian Postcolonial Lens of Decolonization and Theory of Revolutionary Humanism.” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 3:4 (August 2012): 1-30, and “Memory, the Spirit of the Revolution, and Slave Religion: The Representation of the Haitian Revolution in Langston Hughes's Emperor of Haiti.” (forthcoming, *Journal of Postcolonial Theory and Theology*, 2013).

*pas que ce pays tout entier périsse, et qui lui permettront de surmonter des survivances religieuses enracinées dans sa misère, son ignorance, son exploitation séculaires . . . . Si l'on veut changer la mentalité religieuse archaïque de notre paysan, il faut l'éduquer. Et on ne peut l'éduquer sans transformer, en même temps, sa condition matérielle.*<sup>47</sup>

[What is necessary to be carried out in Haiti is not an anti-superstitious campaign, but an anti-misery campaign. With school, hygiene, a higher standard of living, the peasant will have access to that culture and that decent life which one cannot refuse him if one does not want the whole country to perish, and which will permit him to overcome religious survivals rooted in his misery, ignorance, and secular exploitation . . . . If one wants to change the archaic religious mentality of our peasants, we must educate them. And one cannot educate them unless their material conditions are transformed.]

Like all religious traditions, for one deeply shaped by Marxist frameworks, the Vodou faith is a false consciousness, and Roumain believed religion of any tradition would be ultimately replaced by scientific progress. By applying Marxist theoretical analysis to Vodou as a reflection of the material process and of the mode of production, Roumain was positing that “this ideological superstructure reacts on historical development and often even determines the form” (“*Cette superstructure idéologique rétroagit sur le développement historique et souvent même en détermine LA FORME*”<sup>48</sup>). Furthermore, Roumain’s vision of social development, sourced in secular humanism, compels him to question the nature of the social work of Catholic Christianity in Haiti. He holds that the Catholic Church must socially engage the life and experience of the Haitian people by doing acts of kindness and human liberation. In a similar vein, Roumain is also stressing the progressive meaning and persistence of religion in society. His impression of religion here is that of a social institution that should be actively participating in the social transformation of Haitian civil society by engaging responsibly and constructively in social justice issues.

With respect to the social vision of the Catholic Church in Haitian culture, Roumain believed that the Church should be (or should have been) an instrument of social change and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 751.

<sup>48</sup> Roumain, “Réplique au Révérend,” 783.

practical democracy, a catalyst of hope and human success. He also holds that the Church should never have been an initiator or a mediator of social ills and evils, but should have been engaged intentionally in solving social problems, such as the projects of educating peasants and of creating schools, hospitals, and jobs in Haiti's rural communities, which would lessen the country's poverty. For the social activist, the mark of true religion and faith in action constitutes a serious commitment to alleviating harassing social ills such as the problems of hunger, poverty, class systems, globalization, global and local economy, education, environmental justice, healthcare, human rights, etc.<sup>49</sup>

On one hand, Roumain was articulating an orthodox Marxist perspective on religion and social development; on the other hand, he was advocating the "direct and open use of the Church's human and material resources to promote social change toward some form of democratic socialism."<sup>50</sup> He also interpreted the role of religion in society functionally; that is, a belief that maintains that religion should contribute to the good and progress of society; that genuine faith should also be "an active liberation from all forms of oppression: spiritual, social, racial, cultural, economic, and political."<sup>51</sup> Roumain's articulation of the place of religion in the civic order sandwiched with his Marxist social theory is a clarion call for transforming individuals' material condition toward total freedom from exploitation, corruption, and oppression—which would also involve "a more and human dignified life, the creation of a new man, the abolition of injustice, a new society, a truly human existence, a free life, and a dynamic liberty."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For a useful book that comments on the relationship between religion and social justice issues, see Mae Elise Cannon, *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World*. Foreword by John Perkins (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009). The book is written from a Christian perspective.

<sup>50</sup> Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 51.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-2.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology*, 46.

Additionally, Roumain was suggesting that democratic socialism is the alternative to oppressive capitalism, participatory socialism-communism the alternative to poverty and social inequality and injustice. The democratic socialist vision of a cooperative democratic commonwealth defined his moral vision and understanding of the ethics of religion and the functional character of religion in society. This particular viewpoint emphasizes an ideology of centralized collectivism, and, from this perspective, “socialism meant economic nationalization . . . and the very act of collectivization [in Fabian socialism] marked progress toward the desired ‘socialist’ order of rationalized economic planning” for the good society.<sup>53</sup>

Roumain’s understanding of the intersections of faith, scientific reason, and social development deserve further reflections. As we have observed above, he rejected the instrumental use of religion to inspire terror and violence in society. He embraced a secular humanist perspective on faith and history, which will be demonstrated in subsequent paragraphs.

In response to Foisset, who unapologetically holds to a conception of life and history from a purely theistic Christian perspective in rejection of a scientific explanation of the world, Roumain contends that science cannot be a method of violence (*“La science ne peut être une méthode de violence, meme verbale . . . .”*)<sup>54</sup> as might be the case for religion. Roumain challenges Foisset’s belief system by maintaining the conviction that history, which offers a scientific explanation and method for understanding the world and human existence, has currency over (divine) revelation, and that faith and reason are incompatible. He moves on to clarify that his debate with the Catholic priest lies in two fundamentally opposing poles or two contradictory views: the collision between faith and reason, and the irreconcilability of history and revelation. Joseph Foisset, the priest-theologian, relies heavily on a metaphysical conception

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<sup>53</sup> Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 287.

<sup>54</sup> Roumain, “Réplique au Révérend Père Foisset,” 765.

of reality; whereas, Jacques Roumain, the anthropologist-scholar, depends distinctively on a scientific-philosophical outlook of the world, chiefly the theoretical concept of dialectical materialism. Further, the Haitian intellectual deploys a series of dialectics as he recapitulates for the reader what is at stake in his polemic with Foisset:

*La controverse se meut sur deux plans fondamentalement distincts qui ne se touchent que par leur contradiction: celui de la Révélation et celui de l'Histoire. D'un côté: la croyance est une vérité divine, éternelle, immuable; de l'autre: une analyse rationaliste de la naissance, de la maturité et du dépérissement d'un phénomène social. D'une part: le cadre rigide du dogme, l'effusion mystique; de l'autre: une recherche qui n'emprunte qu'aux faits et à la froide raison.*<sup>55</sup>

[The debate is driven by two basically distinct levels which are underscored only by their contradiction: that of Revelation and that of History. On one side: the belief in a divine, eternal, immutable truth; on the other: the rationalist analysis of the birth, maturity and decline of a social phenomenon. On the one hand: the rigid framework of the dogma, mystical effusion; on the other: a search that sustains only by facts and prudent reason.]

Roumain presupposes that science and religion are not complementary, and that history and revelation “use different languages and methods and ask and answer different questions.”<sup>56</sup> He is also claiming that science and theology do not interact on common ground; they are in conflict and do not integrate.<sup>57</sup> While he concurs with the reality that “*Une conception religieuse peut survivre malgré les progrès de la science*”<sup>58</sup> (“A conception of religion can survive despite scientific progress”), he reasons theoretically that “*Le sentiment religieux, tout respectable qu'il est, n'a rien de stimulant pour l'esprit scientifique . . . . L'Histoire ne connaît pas de miracle*”<sup>59</sup> (“The religious sentiment, while it is respectable, is not a stimulus for the scientific spirit . . . . History knows no miracle”). We might infer that for the author science does not need religion for its survival; religion, however, is almost absurd without the scientific life. In this vein, the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 766.

<sup>56</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science: A Philosophical Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 12.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Roumain, “Réplique Finale,” 774.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 773, 783.



scientific method draws a fine line of demarcation between science and non-science—miracles by nature violate the laws of physics—reinforcing the belief that science rules out religion by definition.<sup>60</sup> These daring declarations might incline one rightly to conclude that Jacques Roumain was anti-faith. While Roumain discusses the potentiality of religion in society to produce estrangement between people of various faith traditions, he was not anti-clerical but was practically against oppressive anticlericalism, religious authoritarianism, and any faith that deliberately promotes disharmony between individuals and divides people—as both Protestant and Catholic Christianity had generated a great divide in the Haitian nation and had alienated Haitians from each other in the period of the brutal anti-superstitious and anti-Vodou campaigns.<sup>61</sup>

Roumain was not anti-religion but rather he respected all religions, as he affirms to Foisset: “*Je respecte la religion, toutes les religions*” (“I respect religion, in fact all religions”).<sup>62</sup> He was neither anti-Catholic nor Protestant. As a self-described modest and passionate seeker of truth (to be certain, he was a religious agnostic), he was against all forms of religious repressions and hierarchies.<sup>63</sup> He confesses that he equally admires both the Bible and Friedrich Engels’s 1878 (*Anti-Dühring* or) *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, a seminal text regarding the intellectual conception, development, and theoretical articulation of the Marxist doctrine.<sup>64</sup>

Besides, Roumain confesses that he was not a Christian; he was neither an “atheist Marxist” as Jean-Pierre Makoutabut-Mboukou wrongly asserts.<sup>65</sup> He had strong affinities for

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<sup>60</sup> Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science*, 13-18.

<sup>61</sup> Roumain, “Réplique Finale,” 791.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 787.

<sup>63</sup> He writes, “*Je ne suis qu’un modeste et passionné chercheur de vérité*,” *Ibid.*, 777.

<sup>64</sup> Roumain, “Réplique au Révérend Père Foisset,” in *Jacques Roumain*, 765; he writes, “*J’ai une sorte d’admiration passionnée pour la Bible. La Bible et l’Anti-Dühring, pour des raisons différentes, sont mes livres de chevet.*”

<sup>65</sup> Jean-Pierre Makoutabut-Mboukou, *Jacques Roumain: Essai sur la signification spirituelle et religieuse de son œuvre* (Paris: Atelier, 1978), 115, 529.

Christianity and deep respect for it when the religion was used correctly and effectively to alleviate human suffering and to embolden people to resist oppression. Christianity is a good and liberating presence for Roumain, when it can be used instrumentally to animate inclusive hope and support freedom causes. He was also drawn to and inspired by the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. In response to Foisset, he expresses this conviction:

Bien que non-croyant, j'ai écrit pour mon fils et je lui ai lu *Une Vie du Christ* parce que, à l'époque, c'était le meilleur moyen de lui enseigner le respect et l'amour du peuple, la haine des exploiters, la dignité de la pauvreté, la nécessité de la fin du monde de l'oppression, de la misère, de l'ignorance.<sup>66</sup>

[Although as a non-believer, I wrote for my son and read to him a *Life of Christ*, for, at the time, it was the best means of teaching him respect and love for people, hatred of exploiters, the dignity of poverty, the necessity of ending world's oppression and misery, ignorance . . .]

Roumain's Christ is a revolutionary figure, the liberator of the oppressed.<sup>67</sup> The eminent Haitian intellectual learned much from the founder of Christianity whom he believed had called for the end of world oppression and the vindication of the exploited poor and the outcast in the world.

On the grounds of objectivity, Roumain encourages religious tolerance when he declares: "*Nous croyons à la vertu de la tolérance. Nous entendons nous maintenir dans les limites d'une sévère objectivité*"<sup>68</sup> ("We believe in the virtue of tolerance. We intend to keep within the limits of strict objectivity"). Yet, he vows that he would not substitute the liberty of expression and the dignity of conscience/thought/reason for the sake of being objective and broad-minded at the expense of scientific evidence.<sup>69</sup> Asserting the wide inconsistency between science and

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<sup>66</sup> Roumain, "Réplique Finale," 787.

<sup>67</sup> See my forthcoming article, "The 'Christ-Noir' and the Liberation of 'Les Damnés de la Terre': Perspective on Jacques Roumain's Radical Activism and Liberation Theology."

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 766. This is implied in the statement: "*Cependant la tolérance ne saurait signifier un sacrifice de la liberté et de la dignité de pensée. Chaque fois que l'évidence scientifique me forcera à dire: e pur si muove! je le ferai.*"

metaphysics when they merge, he contends that the inevitable will happen: the collapse of scientific reason (“*Quand elles se mêlent, c’est qu’il a eu un effondrement de la raison scientifique.*”<sup>70</sup> Despite his radical secular humanism and scientific realism, as ambiguous and brilliant as they may appear, Roumain did not embrace fully the totality of the scientific enterprise nor did he uncritically subscribe to so-called “scientific imperialism”<sup>71</sup> in the world of ideas. (At this point, the critical reader may be interested in finding out how Roumain’s criticism of scientific imperialism coexist with his belief that science is incapable of leading to violence. Evidently, this was a blind spot in his thinking.) In fact, he acknowledges the transitory nature of science and defines it merely as a method, a mode of inquiry, which could lead to relative truths and objective realities. Accordingly, science can also guide humanity to progressive knowledge and the understanding of human relations and interactions, and the complexity of life and the cosmos:

*La science est une méthode d’investigation et de connaissance progressive du monde. Elle a un caractère transitoire, relative, approximatif; elle va de l’ignorance à la connaissance selon une courbe ascendante d’erreurs et de vérités relatives vers une appréciation de plus en plus exacte de la réalité objective. Mais ce relativisme ne nous conduit pas au scepticisme, à l’idéalisme philosophique: chaque parcelle de vérité scientifique relative contient un élément de la vérité absolue qui est égale à la somme des vérifiés relatives en voie de développements.*<sup>72</sup>

[Science is a method of inquiry and of progressive knowledge of the world. It is transitory, relative, and approximate; it goes from ignorance to knowledge according to an ascending curve of errors and of truths relative towards an increasingly exact appreciation of objective reality. But this relativism does not lead us to skepticism or philosophical idealism; every piece of scientific truth contains an element relative to the absolute truth equal to the sum of the verified evidence, in view of scientific development.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 773.

<sup>71</sup> For studies on this topic, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012 [1962]); Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002); and Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006 [1976]).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

He restates his position or conviction in a clearer statement: “*C’est la distinction dialectique entre l’absolue et relative vérité qui donne à la science son caractère vivant et progressif*” (“It is the dialectical distinction between the absolute and relative truth which gives science its living and progressive character”). As to a theoretical definition of religion, Roumain defines religious ideas (or religion as a concept) as the representation of the world, what the Germans call a comprehensive worldview and intellectual evolution, dependent rigidly on material evolution (“*Les conceptions religieuses, cette représentation du monde que les Allemands appellent: Weltanschauung et l’évolution intellectuelle, dépendent étroitement de l’évolution matérielle*”<sup>73</sup>). Roumain’s Marxist analysis here may be taken as the absolute rejection of religious metaphysics or spiritual supernaturalism; he goes on to clarify himself further: “*La métaphysique n’est qu’une sorte d’appendicite idéologique*”<sup>74</sup> (“Metaphysics is only a kind of ideological appendix”). We might take the liberty to name this perspective on religion “radical agnosticism.” More directly, the Haitian intellectual makes the unsettled but brilliant declaration that “Religious fanaticism or anticlericalism is the frantic expression of ignorance and stupidity” (“*Le fanatisme religieux ou anticlérical est l’expression frénétique de l’ignorance et de la sottise*”).<sup>75</sup> At this point, such a claim should not surprise the reader. It is good to point out here that Roumain’s criticism targets both religious fanaticism and fanatical repression of religious institutions like the Haitian clergy. It is wrong to assume that Roumain conceives anticlericalism as a form of religious fanaticism. The reader should understand Roumain’s statement above within the Protestant-Catholic tensions of the period.

Roumain’s Marxist critiques of Foisset’s religious framework and of Christianity in particular may be summarized in this supportive statement: “The Christian negation of what is

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 760.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 774.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 765.

and the transformation of prevailing realities are impotent, incorrect, and ill-informed.”<sup>76</sup> His Marxist criticism of religion needs not be construed entirely as anti-clerical toward the institution; he seeks to improve religion as a human system and social institution. Cornel West encapsulates the view of critics such as that of Roumain:

They are impotent because they locate ultimate power in a transcendent God who seems to work most effectively beyond history rather than in history, given the historical evidence so far. They are incorrect in that the very positing of such power and such an almighty Being is intellectually unjustifiable and theoretically indefensible. They are ill-informed because they possess highly limited analytical tools and scientific understanding of power and wealth in the prevailing social realities to be negated and transformed.<sup>77</sup>

The difficulty with Roumain’s point of view is his unrelenting faith in the scientific enterprise and exclusive commitment to the world of reason, which are by-products of intellectual modernity. Roumain’s ostensible naivety about violence and scientific imperialism is a shortcoming of his understanding of the nature and workings of science and religion, and, correspondingly of the close dynamics between the two. Roumain does not explore adequately the potential use of violence in both systems. Religion and science are constructed human systems in which the possibility for good and bad are inherent in both. For example, both science and religion were used strategically in the enslavement of Africans in the New World, in the Western “civilization mission” in Africa, in Hitler’s extermination of six million Jews during the Holocaust moment, and, likewise, in the European annihilation of the native population in North America as well as in the rest of continental America.

West informs us of an intellectual shift in modern science as well as in the theoretical study of religion in modern European intellectual history. According to him, while modern political theorists and philosophers were primarily concerned about the nature of science and its

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<sup>76</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminister Press, 1982), 95.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

relationship to culture or society, modern theologians and religious scholars were gripped with the epistemic status of religious and theological beliefs. Many thinkers in the West have accentuated the philosophical origins of modernity in the West; yet, they have questioned its religious or theological foundations.<sup>78</sup> For example, West argues that religion was a response to modernity that is noticeable in the American pragmatic religious tradition of Charles Peirce and William James. The pragmatic approach to faith insists that “religious beliefs were in the same spectrum as any other beliefs—always linked to experience.”<sup>79</sup> One might try to locate the religious imagination of Jacques Roumain in this American tradition, the phenomenological view of religion. In addition, Roumain did not disregard the pivotal role of religion in the formation of the self and cultural identity in modern Western societies. Yet, like the American religious pragmatists, he interrogated the inadequacy of religion to offer a plausible response to life’s greatest challenges and to the omnipresence of the problem of evil and human suffering in the world. As in the case of Haitian Vodou, he does critique certain aspects of it, which might make it a possible problem to social development and a hindrance to human flourishing in his native country. Roumain has undermined the power and possibility of religious beliefs for critical scientific epistemology and inquiry, and elevated the prominence of science in the project of human development. He gives more credence to scientific reason and culture in the pursuit of truth; religion was only peripheral in his project of social development. Philosopher and cultural critic Cornel West reminds us that there is no ultimate triumph in the spheres of science and

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<sup>78</sup> For careful and critical studies on this important topic, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2007); Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage, 2008); and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge 1994), 121; interested readers should explore William James’s 1902 masterpiece, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

religion. He draws a practical balance between Christianity and science, faith and reason, when he writes:

Every penultimate court of appeal—every human conception of rationality, objectivity, and scientificity—is surreptitiously linked to a particular description or theory of the self, the world, and God. Therefore the spheres of science, art, and religion do not possess privileged access to ultimate truth and reality.<sup>80</sup>

Truth is not a property reserved idiosyncratically for scientific theories or scientific methods, which, for some, might yield absolute predictions and trustworthy explanations of human nature, the complexity of human existence, the absurdity of life, and human history. To embrace such a perspective is to fall prey to a narrow positivism.<sup>81</sup> It is also to disregard or refuse to acknowledge the existence of multiple competing and contradictory scientific models and conflicting religious and theological perspectives. In the same line of thought, truth should not be conceived as an attribute aligned exclusively to religious traditions and to the scientific enterprise. To embrace such a point-of-view is to deny the culturally relativistic contexts of faith and to demean the significance of religious pluralism in our postmodern culture. Therefore, there is not a transcendental standard—a theory-neutral, portrayal-independent, description-free criterion—which enables us to choose the true theory, portrayal, and description . . . for truth can not be reduced to the domains of science, art, and religion . . . we must acknowledge our finitude and fallenness as human beings and our inability to give life full meaning.<sup>82</sup>

Science and religion as cultural and intellectual resources can only lead us to various stages of knowledge toward an objective and relativistic understanding of the absolute and of reality.<sup>83</sup> We should point out that at various instances in the conversation Roumain commits the sin of self-contradiction. Yet, he would acknowledge the limits of the scientific project when he

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Roumain, “Réplique au Révérend Père Foisset,” 774.

sustains that “*La connaissance est un modeste, pénible et patient tâtonnement de l’erreur à la vérité*”<sup>84</sup> (“Knowledge is a modest, patient and painful trial/groping of error to truth”).

Nonetheless, the phrase “groping of error to truth,” signals undoubtedly Roumain’s acceptance of the theory of scientific progressivism and historical progress in the Hegelian sense. To elaborate on this point, the thoughtful Roumain comments briefly on various instances in modern Western history in which (pseudo-)scientific racism and destructive ideologies were used to support fascism and anti-Semitism, and generated wars and suffering across the nations:

*La philosophie de l’histoire raciste et mythologique du fasciste Rosenberg, la pensée apocalyptique d’Oswald Spengler . . . sont l’expression d’une agonie sociale . . . L’offensive anti-scientifique à des raisons historico-politiques que nous démontrons: l’intuitionisme bergsonien, la philosophie existentielle de Heidegger, la métaphysique du désespoir de Kierkegaard, les élucubrations de Gabriel Marcel, Gilson, etc., ont les relations les plus évidentes avec l’idéologie fasciste.*<sup>85</sup>

[The history of philosophy of racism and the myth of fascist Rosenberg, the apocalyptic thinking of Oswald Spengler . . . are expressions of social agony . . . the anti-scientific offensive to historico-political reasons that we have demonstrated: the intuitionism of Bergson, the existential philosophy of Heidegger, the metaphysics of despair of Kierkegaard, the wild imaginings of Gabriel Marcel, Gilson, etc., have relationships with the most obvious fascist ideology.]

Roumain moves on to draw a direct correlation between human nature, social existence, and social development, and the significant intersections of the intellect, the emergence of ideas, worldviews, and institutions as modes of material and intellectual productions in the history of human culture and experience:

*C’est en transformant la nature que l’homme évolue intellectuellement; son existence sociale détermine sa conscience. En dernière instance, c’est le mode de production qui modèle l’histoire. La religion, la philosophie, la morale, le droit, l’organisation politique, ne sont que le reflet de ce processus matériel. A son tour, cette superstructure idéologique rétroagit sur le développement historique et souvent même en détermine LA FORME.*<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Roumain, “Réplique Finale,” 787.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 786; Roumain, “Réplique au Révérend,” 774.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 783.



[It is by transforming the nature that man evolves intellectually; his social existence determines his conscience. Ultimately, it is the mode of production which models history. Religion, philosophy, morality, law, political organization, is only the reflection of this material process. In turn, this ideological superstructure retroacts upon the historical development and often determines the FORM.]

In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx posits that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” In the paragraph above, Roumain does not separate material forces of production and social relations as some have done. His materialist theory of history and social development sustains an intimate relationship between these two phenomena. Having been influenced by a Marxian-Hegelian view of history, society, and human nature, Roumain insists that materialism best explains social and historical change in society as well as the evolution of the individual in society. The implication of this Marxist-Hegelian framework and social constructionist outlook is that individuals must continue aggressively and purposefully striving to alter the human condition for a better and promising future world. The work of humanity never ends! Roumain concludes his long debates with the Catholic theologian-priest by reiterating his conviction and by attempting to refocus the attention of the Christian priest to “earthly” and more immediate and dire needs of humanity. Roumain was also very aware of the critically sensitive issues of life facing peoples and nations globally:

*Mais il y a des problèmes, tels que le chômage, la guerre, la lutte anti-fasciste, la liberté, la justice, le droit à une vie décente pour toute l’humanité, qui sont des problèmes TERRESTRES, que les hommes aux religions et aux philosophies les plus variées peuvent ensemble, sincèrement, essayer de résoudre . . . Si telle est aussi votre opinion, je suis heureux et je considère comme un honneur de vous tendre une main loyale.*<sup>87</sup>

[But there are problems, such as unemployment, war, the anti-fascist struggle, freedom, justice, the right to a decent life for all people, which are “EARTHLY” problems that men of the most diverse religions and philosophies can attempt together to resolve . . . If such is also your opinion, I am happy and I consider it an honor to extend a loyal hand.]

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 792.

For the Haitian intellectual, religion should give considerable attention to the everyday life experience of individuals, and that social development should take into account the various social relations and forces of production. Jacques Roumain was not particularly concerned about the abstract dimension or theories of religion but about what religion can and should do to improve the human condition and to make the world a better place.

### **Religion and Social Progress: The Rhetoric of Socialism, Marxism, Communism, and Self-Liberation in *Masters of the Dew***

In this last part of the essay, I want to draw my final reflections on Jacques Roumain's posthumous Marxist-Communist novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. In *Masters of the Dew*, Roumain constructs an inspired religious narrative that registers the religious experience of Haitian peasants as well as the survival of a peasant village in Haiti. The Vodou faith in the story serves as an emblem of cultural representation, national patrimony, and a vehicle for national solidarity within the sphere of the Haitian rural population. Through the practice of neo-African religion and spirituality, Roumain establishes that the communal interest formed the basis for cultural identity and ancestral affiliation. (Yet, his hermeneutics of suspicion of faith and feeling about the peasant religion will be quickly noted below).<sup>88</sup> In one of the scenes in the novel, Roumain recounts a peculiar moment in a Vodou ceremony, in which the adherents summoned *Legba*, the African deity of the crossroads and the God of communication. The authorial interest here seems to convey the significance of ancestral religious traditions in peasant life and culture. He goes on to make this striking observation about the communal ritual and participation in the working of ancestral spirits:

The women's voices shot up very high, cracking the thick mass of song:

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<sup>88</sup> In my forthcoming article, "A Common Faith: Religious Syncretism and Pluralism in the Thought of Jacques Roumain," I engage in detail Roumain's uneasiness with the Vodou religion.

*Legba-se! Legba!  
 Blood has been drawn!  
 Blood! Abobo!  
 Mighty Legba!  
 Seven Legba kataroulos!  
 Mighty Legba!  
 Alegba-se!  
 You and me!  
 Ago ye!<sup>89</sup>*

*Legba, show us how!  
 Alegba-se, it's you and me!  
 It's you and me, Kataroulo,  
 Mighty Legba, it's you and me!<sup>90</sup>*

The omniscient narrator openly expresses the sensorial opacity of the religious experience in peasant life:

Now the sacrifice to Legba was over. The Master of the Roads had gone back to his native Guinea by that mysterious path which *loas* [spirits] tread. Nevertheless, the fete [party] went on. The peasants forgot their troubles. Dancing and drinking anesthetized them—swept away their shipwrecked souls to drown in those regions of unreality and danger where the fierce of the African gods lay in wait.<sup>91</sup>

As one reads closely the above passage, one sees that it is probable that Roumain was articulating a similar sentiment about religion as his intellectual predecessors Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Marx declares that “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.”<sup>92</sup> Freud professes that “Religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushing superior force of nature.”<sup>93</sup> He draws an intimate connection between religious practice and the subconscious, an idea that can be seen in Roumain’s text. The illusory delight and frightened joy in the guise of religious performance are

<sup>89</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 71.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-2.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in “Karl Marx,” in *Theories of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Seth D. Kunin and Jonathan Miles-Watson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 69.

<sup>93</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Future of an Illusion*. Edited and Translated by J. Strackey (New York: Norton, 1961), 30.

notable in the aforementioned passage of the novel; religious happiness and spiritual affections fill the heart of the worshippers, or as Marx tells us “The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness.”<sup>94</sup> This is exactly what Roumain meant to convey in this thought-provoking declaration: “The peasant forgot their troubles . . . Dancing and drinking anesthetized them.”

In the well-crafted passage that has been reproduced above, Roumain seeks to suggest the idea and the possibility of religion as being an instrument of domination, and as a worldview and ideology that could be candidly adapted to human oppression. This particular position on the religious experience is further amplified in the subsequent scene in the story in which religion is described positionally and deliberately as a powerful psychic force: “When dawn came over the sleepless plain, the drums were still beating like a heart that never tires.”<sup>95</sup> Also, the narrator emphasizes paradoxically the psychological dimension of religious bliss and the religious experience of the hero of the story: “Manuel let himself go in the upsurge of the dance, but a strange sadness crept into his soul . . . He caught his mother’s eye and thought he saw tears shining there.”<sup>96</sup> There seems to be a spiritual void that suffused Manuel’s religious life with a sense of meaninglessness or, in the words of Freud, religious beliefs are depicted here as “illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind . . . our fears of the dangers of life.”<sup>97</sup> This haunting void was probably the result of a series of powerful historical events including the effects of Manuel’s former life as an exile in Cuba, the hegemony of Western capitalism on the island, the politics of globalization, economic oppression, and the aftereffects of the American military occupation in Haiti. The novel seems to indicate that these

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<sup>94</sup> Kunin and Miles-Watson, *Theories of Religion*, 69.

<sup>95</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 71-2.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 301; Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 30.

were destructive forces adding to human suffering on the island; they violently tore Manuel's soul and the peasant community at large, and this human emptiness that must be satisfied is more powerful than religion itself. The phenomenon is without meaning; in the quoted passage above, the peasant consciousness is set adrift into religious terror and the condition of being in the religious world of the peasants is alienation and confusion.<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, Roumain's complementary reflections on the lives and experiences of the Haitian working class and peasants provide substantial evidence of his radical vision of the masses and of relentless social activism. *Masters of the Dew* is a peasant-proletarian novel that portrays the spiritual and aesthetic character of Haitian peasants, their life and culture, and the importance of collaborative labor in a rural village called Fonds Rouge. The account is an exposition on the struggles, fears, dreams, communal organization, and the self-determination of a Haitian rural community near Port-au-Prince, the country's capital. Manuel, the hero of the story who had returned to his native land after a fifteen-year period of exile in Cuba working in the depressing sugarcane industry, strives to keep his native villagers from starvation during a terrific drought. Valerie Kaussen describes the novel as Roumain's attempt to rewrite "the peasantry's misery by recasting the rural classes' demands in the world-wide Marxist project of decolonization and anti-racism."<sup>99</sup> The displaced peasant (Manuel) is the agent of revolution; as a migrant laborer, he calls for a collective movement that would be pan-Caribbean, transnational, cross-cultural, and even global in its implications.<sup>100</sup>

In the narrative, Roumain inspires a new consciousness among the Haitian peasants; an example of such is communicated through an exchange between Manuel and the character Laurélien. By telling his own story, Manuel relates to the community's plight and identifies with

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>99</sup> Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions*, 102.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

the struggles of the people. Through the lips of the protagonist, Roumain emphasizes that the underprivileged and humiliated peasants are the pillars of Haitian society and the cultural and material resources of the country. He seeks to persuade them to see themselves for what they are: the Haitian peasants are the historical agents of their own freedom, and without them, the country will not go forward:

Here, we've got to struggle hard with life, and what does it get us? We don't even have enough to fill our bellies, and we've no rights at all against the crookedness of the authorities. The justice of the peace, the rural police, the surveyors, the food speculators live on us like fleas. I spent a month in prison with a bunch of thieves and assassins, just because I went in town without shoes. And where could I have gotten money to buy them, I ask you, brother? What are we, us peasants? Barefooted Negroes, scorned and maltreated.<sup>101</sup>

Manuel seeks to inspire the suffering community/villagers to think critically about their common condition, their worth, and human dignity. His objective is to foster a revolutionary consciousness in the peasants toward social change. The necessity for a new orientation in their mind and collective self-understanding becomes clearest in the paragraph below:

What are we? Since that's your question, I'm going to answer you. We're *this country*, and it wouldn't be a thing without us, nothing at all. Who does the planting? Who does the watering? Who does the harvesting? Coffee, cotton, rice, sugar cane, cacao, corn, bananas, vegetables, and all the fruits, who's going to grow them if we don't? Yet with all that, we're poor, that true. We're out of luck, that's true. We're miserable, that true. But do you know why, brother? Because of our ignorance.<sup>102</sup>

Manuel as the frontrunner of peasant emancipation wishes to mobilize the community and bring them together toward a shared purpose. Human solidarity and the active participation of every peasant are assumed in the pursuit of adequate water, which will result in collective emancipation:

If he found water, everyone's help would be needed. It wouldn't be a small matter to bring it down to the plain. They would have to organize a great *coubite* [cooperative labor] of all the peasants. Thus the water would bring them together again . . . With the

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<sup>101</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 74.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

new plants, with the fruit-and-corn-laden fields, the earth overflowing with simple fecund life, a brotherly community would be reborn.<sup>103</sup>

Without appeal to transcendence or divine providence, Manuel accentuates the paramount importance of communal collaboration and alliance, the necessity of cooperative labor and mutual interdependence, and the sense of fraternity they must together muster as a community at risk:

All peasants are equals, Manuel said. They're all one single family. That's why they call each other 'brother,' 'cousin,' 'brother-in-law.' One needs the other. One perishes without the other's help. That's the lesson of the *coumbite*. This spring that I've found needs the help of all the peasants of Fonds Rouge. Don't say no. It's life that gives order. When life commands, we've got to answer, 'Present!'<sup>104</sup>

As Kaussen observes,

In *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, The Haitian peasants' agricultural labor is a form of this productive and future-oriented interaction between humans and nature, between subject and object . . . The *coumbite* is connected to international socialism through the allegorical relationship that Roumain creates between the rural work collective and *huelga* or labor strike, in Cuba . . . In the *coumbite*, Roumain thus finds a figure for Haitian modernity and for a revolutionary consciousness that is both rural and cosmopolitanism, traditional and future oriented.<sup>105</sup>

Kaussen's observation substantially underscores an important aspect of the novel; nonetheless, she fails miserably to engage the religious ethos and dimension of the work, a critical factor that for the author (Roumain) is vital in understanding Haitian modernity and the revolutionary consciousness, which Kaussen engages more fully in her careful reading of the text. I am suggesting that Roumain's religious (Marxist agnosticism) and humanistic leanings are probably revealed on the lips of the hero of the story, Manuel. Roumain through Manuel also discloses his own tension with the role of religion in the project of social progress, and the possibility that religious life and practice might hinder scientific reasoning and social betterment.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 149-150.

<sup>105</sup> Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions*, 129-130.

This sentiment is explicit in another instance in the plot in which Manuel's anti-religious feeling is voiced during a gathering at a Vodou ceremony: "I have respect for our traditional customs but the blood of a cock or a goat cannot change the seasons."<sup>106</sup> This blunt rejection of (ancestral) religious traditions and practices presupposes the notion that the need for supernatural intervention in the existential contexts of Haitian peasants and, to a larger degree in the variegated experiences of human life and interaction, is unnecessary. For the protagonist, Vodou religion is unable to provide earthly salvation; it is up to individual men and women in the village to work collaboratively to put an end to their shared misery. While Manuel might agree about the possibility of religion in providing "the language or grammar for making sense of the world in life affirming ways,"<sup>107</sup> in this particular declaration, however, he expresses his definite trust not in religion but in the inherent human virtue and goodness to alter the course of life for better. Vodou religion for Manuel does not appear liberating in nature; it seems to me that Manuel wants us to believe "it robs adherents of valuable hopes and comforts."<sup>108</sup> Roumain like the protagonist of his novel avoids full commitment to religious conservatism and metaphysical transcendence.

The call for unity and camaraderie among the peasants is accentuated in Manuel's words, as he seeks to instill hope. The hero believes in a bright future for the community:

We don't know yet what a force we are, what a single force—all the peasants, all the Negroes of plan and hill, all united. Some day [sic], when we get wise to that, we'll rise up from one end of the country to the other. Then we'll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, a great big *coubite* of farmers, and we'll clear out poverty and plant a new life.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 78.

<sup>107</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), 184.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-5.



Through the project of *coumbite*, Haitian peasants would be able to express “self determination, freedom from plantation labor, and the liberty to pursue unalienated forms of ownership and work.”<sup>110</sup> Their openness to inquiry would easily incorporate the activism and social reform marked by persistent humanism and communism.<sup>111</sup> This particular passage reveals the impossibility of (divine) providence because the entire narrative ideologically highlights the supremacy of self-autonomy and human reason. The religious ethos of *Masters of the Dew* is the underpinning (secular) humanistic assumption that God is not working actively behind the scene. This basic supposition is also revealed in the introductory words of the novel. Délira (Manuel’s mother) complains about the severe drought in the countryside and the painful living condition of the peasants; in these powerful words, she communicates her hurt to her wistful husband Bienaimé and eventually to her son:

The drought’s overtaken us, everything’s wasting away, animals, plants, every living human. The wind doesn’t push the clouds along any more . . . Look at the swirls of dust on the savanna. From sunup to sunset, not a single bead of rain in the whole sky. Can it be that the Good Lord has forsaken us? . . . But there isn’t any mercy for the poor.<sup>112</sup>

In his response, the non-theist protagonist (Manuel) of the novel disallows the prospect of divine providence and penetration in the plot of the peasants. He dismisses or discounts the probability of the Christian God or the deities of Vodou religion to actualize the ultimate social change desperately needed in the community:

Resignation won’t get us anywhere . . . Resignation is treacherous. It’s just the same as discouragement. It breaks your arms. You keep on expecting miracles and providence, with your rosary in your hand, without doing a thing. You pray for rain, you pray for a harvest, you recite the prayers of the saints and the *loas*.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Klaussen, *Migrant Revolutions*, 130.

<sup>111</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 159.

<sup>112</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 44, 54.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

Manuel's disregard for theistic orientation to life, history, and social development should be understood as a radical declaration for what eminent religious scholar Anthony Pinn phrases "the end of God-talk." This particular posture articulates an alternate means of centering. Roumain's Marxist-humanistic enterprise rejects "the symbol of God[(s)] as a human safeguard, a mechanism for protecting signs and symbols because of the ontological burden they bear . . . we [humans] have constructed the conceptual arrangements of this world and we must alone bear responsibility for this framing of life."<sup>114</sup> Manuel continues by asserting that man is his own "Master," and it is he who gives life meaning not the Christian God or the African gods:

But providence—take my word for it—is a man's determination not to accept misfortune, to overcome the earth's bad will every day, to bend the whims of the water to your needs. Then the earth will call you, 'Dear Master.' The water will call you, 'Dear Master.' And there's no providence but hard work, no miracles but the fruit of your hands.<sup>115</sup>

The non-theistic orientation of Manuel as a robust system of life providing meaning and purpose is further enunciated below. Manuel's humanistic outlook anticipates the divine farewell or the death of God movement in the 1960s or what the German philosopher and religious critic Friedrich Nietzsche had termed "*Gott ist tot*" ("God is dead").<sup>116</sup> Pinn's discerning remark below is useful in elucidating the religious ethos and sensibility of *Masters of the Dew*:

[The] God-symbol [/religion] as an organizing framework for viewing and living life in relation to . . . has run its course, and it is no longer capable of doing the heavy lifting required for the contemporary world. God is a matter of human need and desire,

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<sup>114</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>115</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 54.

<sup>116</sup> In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999 [1883-1885]), 125, Friedrich Nietzsche announces:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

schizophrenia of theological kind . . . Death of God theology is a eulogy. It is a eulogy because the discourse involves both a passing and a call/celebration of life left behind.<sup>117</sup>

The end of the novel culminates in Manuel's sacrificial death and his presentation as a Christ figure for the salvation of the peasant community. In explaining Manuel's wishes before his death, Délira declares to the assembled peasants at the funeral:

Here's what Manuel, my boy, told me. 'You've offered sacrifices to the *loas*, you've offered the blood of chickens and young goats to make the rain fall. All that has been useless. Because what counts is the sacrifice of a man, the blood of a man . . . It's customary to sing mourning with hymns for the dead, but he, Manuel had chosen a hymn for the living—the chant of the *coumbite*, the chant of the soil, of the water, the plants, of friendship between peasants, because he wanted his death to be the beginning of life for you.<sup>118</sup>

Manuel's last words through the lips of his mother are problematic in the sense that they consciously designate that there is an experience of loss and absence—the loss and absence of African gods or spirits—sustaining the viewpoint that the religious experience is meaningless, and that religious traditions, symbols, and rituals are but rubbish avatars. In all of these things, Manuel avoids the “God-talk” rhetoric and rather focuses on human-centered dialogue and the projection of the ideal of human values. The definitive goal is to create together without the participation of the divine a flourishing future world and to cultivate a life worth living in the moment, through non-theistic existence and culture.<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, Manuel the peasant-hero in *Masters of the Dew* is a type of Christ, a messianic figure in black face<sup>120</sup>: “You've done your duty, you've fulfilled your mission, Manuel. Life's going to start all over in Fonds Rouge.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Pinn, *The End of God-Talk*, 5.

<sup>118</sup> Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 181-2.

<sup>119</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 154-185.

<sup>120</sup> For the concept of a “Christ-Noir” (“Black Christ”) and the relationship between Christ and black suffering, and the liberation of the oppressed of the world in Roumain's writings, see my forthcoming article, “The ‘Christ-Noir’ and the Liberation of ‘*Les Damnés de la Terre*’: Perspective on Jacques Roumain's Radical Activism and Liberation Theology.”

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

In conclusion, like his intellectual predecessors Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and Fredrick Nietzsche, Jacques Roumain was obsessed with the potential character of modern science and human reason to stimulate social development. For Roumain, modern science as a tool of analysis (not religion) might offer better solutions to social ills in this age of technology and scientific revolution.<sup>122</sup> Roumain was preoccupied with the social character of rationality and social theory, and especially the impact of modern science on culture and the world of ideas in his understanding of human progress and social development. He employed religion as a concept and religious discourse played a pivotal role in his conception of the good society. Religious rhetoric and vocabularies and social theory are used instrumentally as political tools in Roumain's articulation of an ethics of human solidarity and a politics of social transformation. Roumain deployed all sorts of intellectual resources and the best of human ingenuity in his efforts to communicate and affect what may be called "the permanent good of the whole people" in Haitian civil society and in other worlds. As political theorist Cornelius B. Pratt observes, "The common good, as a communication ethic, transcends the values and interests of any single group"<sup>123</sup> or social class. Roumain rejects "the notion of redemptive suffering and the idea that suffering understood as good or redemption is a dangerous idea."<sup>124</sup> In other words, the humanist Jacques Roumain and the protagonist Manuel maintain that "humanity has no choice but to continue seeking progress."<sup>125</sup> The legacy of Jacques Roumain as a committed social communist, revolutionary Marxist, freedom fighter, agnostic humanist, and

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<sup>122</sup> For a powerful analysis on the intersections of sociology, philosophy, and history and a provocative response to the notion of scientific reason and linear progress, see Thomas Kuhn's learned book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1962]).

<sup>123</sup> Cornelius B. Pratt, "Africa: A Communication Ethic for the Global Corporation," in *The Global Public Relations Handbook, Revised and Expanded Edition: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Krishnamurthy Sriramesh and Dejan Vercic (New York: Routledge, 2009), 942.

<sup>124</sup> Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, 185.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

radical writer should be celebrated and esteemed, and his works should continue to inspire and speak to us today in meaningful and liberative ways.

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