

Henriette Roland Holst-van der Schalk and the Hunchback of Theology: Reconciling the Unreconcilable¹

The life of Henriette Roland Holst-van der Schalk (1869-1952) contained many controversial and, at first glance, discordant aspects. She was born and raised in an influential and wealthy family but became one of the most outspoken and active advocates of the working class, women's rights, and the rights of the poverty-stricken. She was a committed socialist and communist, who in 1915 founded her own political party, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, that in 1918 merged with Herman Gorter's Social Democratic party to form the Communist Party of Holland. But in 1927, under the influence of the Swiss socialist Leonhard Ragaz, she left the party and became a proponent of religious socialism. This article focuses on how Roland Holst attempted to reconcile, in poetry and prose, her religious faith with her faith in communism and her well-to-do social status with her support of socialism.

Walter Benjamin, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," provides a metaphor of the manner in which theology and historical materialism relate:

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to be kept out of sight (1968: 255).

Roland Holst approaches religion, theological interpretations of history, and socialism in a manner

similar to the one described here by Benjamin. Critics maintain that Benjamin's theses on history were exercises in coming to terms with the Hitler-Stalin pact and real existing socialism in the Soviet Union (Jennings 1987: 63). Roland Holst also recognized that the realization of socialism with a humanistic face was a long way off and would probably not be achieved in the emerging Soviet Union. She described her visit to Moscow as early as 1921, as a "great disappointment" (1949: 214).² This perceived Soviet failure became a deciding factor in her conversion to Christian values in the guise of a social revolution, and brought her to a theological interpretation of socialism and social amelioration.

Initially in her political career, Roland Holst assisted in organizing strikes and demonstrations, and in supporting violent revolution and other forms of resistance to the status quo as a means of change. She played a key role in the organization of the great railroad strike of 1902. Her stance toward socialism and communism was positive and her optimism that these concepts would be realized rested on their merit alone. One thinks here of her poem "Hymne aan het kommunisme" in *De nieuwe geboort* (1902:44-45) and the poetic cycle "Triomf van het socialisme" in *Opwaartsche wegen* (1907: 121-151). But even these early examples of her enthusiasm for socialist ideals portray it, in the former work, as having always lain dormant in our midst where it has only recently been rediscovered, or in the latter work, a socialism that will ride in on the wind, apparently on its own without human assistance. Thus her implementation of Marxist thought possesses messianic impulses as early as 1902, where she intimates a swift and immediate end to human suffering that will be achieved not only by human activity. Here theological aspects of her belief in socialist ideals sit behind a curtain of leftist and revolutionary language like Benjamin's hunchback.

In 1927 her book-length poem *Heldensage* appeared, where she writes: "De revolutie is een vreeselijke ziekte,/ een crisis op leven en dood/ in't lichaam van de maatschappij" (1927: 31).³ She

rejects here a basic principle of Marxist thought, the revolution of the proletariat as the only means of overthrowing its oppressors. In rejecting revolution she has undergone a significant change in her view of history and the manner in which the salvation of humankind will take place. She more explicitly embraces a Christian conception of a returning paradise, a chiliastic notion of the future. For Roland Holst, salvation from our present misery does not arrive so much in material and spiritual processes but in the messianic appearance of a new order. Where she had been an advocate of action and the values of a socialist brotherhood, she comes to downplay subversive activity in favor of a more passive stance of perseverance and anticipation of great change to come. This impending change will come about outside her own activity and that of sympathizers and colleagues in the party.

Messianic impulses, then, can be seen in her poetry: she calls for revolutionary change in the way we exist but does not foresee this change coming from human activity. The change arrives from outside what one considers human history with its political strategies, wars, revolutions, demonstrations, uprisings, laws, and government policies and their enforcement. Divine intervention from far away, beyond human comprehension, outside of human action, and without human knowledge, constitutes messianic intervention in human affairs. For example, the idea of a new beginning that awaits us far off in the distance is such an impulse in Roland Holst's poetry: "Ergens, in het nachtgebied,/ begint licht te sproeien,/ water bloeien,/ in een verte oopenen zich poorten: de nieuwe geboorte/ geschiedt-geschiedt:" (1947: 69)⁴ Roland Holst's messianic beliefs are also intimated in her suggestion that salvation has always been at hand since the teachings of Christianity have been known. In a poem dedicated to the idea of socialism she writes: "Broederschap glansde in de webbe uwer zede,/ zilveren draad; in haar werd iets ontvouwd/ van Christus' geest" (1949: 91).⁵ This message is similar to the one contained in "Hymne aan het kommunisme" of 1902, except that now she claims that brotherly love promoted by communism actually has its roots in Christian belief. Roland Holst harbors the idea that a savior could intervene in history at any given point. This is the message in her poem "De afgezant" where an envoy has been sent forth to prepare the way for a coming *Meester*. The name of

this master cannot be spoken, but the envoy explains what must be done to prepare for his arrival: "Zuiver uw huis van alle ijdelheden;/ wat ijdel is kan voor hem niet bestaan;/ laat een hooge wind door uw kam'ren gaan/ en ge zult hem zien naderen in vrede" (1927: 36-37).⁶ In other words, after 1927 the 'hunchback of theology' comes into view.

After her conversion, a basic message in Roland Holst's work is that communism and Christianity cannot exist without each other; indeed, they see each other's ideals through to true fruition. If communism and/or Christianity are to bring about a true amelioration in society, they must instil spiritual values of brotherhood, solidarity, selflessness, and communal spirit. She did not trade the state for the church or politics for religion, i.e. one dogma for another. The religious or theological impulses reflected in her work have nothing to do with religious organizations or church-related activities. Essentially, the religious or theological content of Roland Holst's work is concurrently its political, personal, social, aesthetic, and wish-filled content, and vice versa. She does not view Christian and Marxist beliefs as contradictory. They approach the same subject from different standpoints; when conjoined, they augment each other and in a sense complete and enhance each other. Roland Holst's use of religion mixed with socialism (or vice versa) universalizes her notion of socialism, advancing it beyond its international scope, while it concretizes religious feeling in social, political and economic terms. Hence, Christian spirit and communism dialectically complete each other. Marxism provides the socio-scientific information on the development of society and the materialistic background to the situation of human conflict and struggle, while Christianity provides the spiritual and value-centered aspects of impassioned and desired change.

These are central themes in her essays *Der Umschwung in der geistigen Lage und die neuen Aufgaben des Sozialismus* (1930), *De strijd om de jeugd* (1931), and *De crisis der westersche kultuur* (1933). In *Umschwung* she devotes pages to the idea that cooperation between the two ideals is appropriate and even necessary.⁷ This is how she can address the sacred and the profane, the empirical and the spiritual in the same poem or essay. Roland Holst claims nowhere more clearly that Christianity and communism are linked than in the following lines,

written toward the end of her life in 1949: "En toch had door den tijd een klank geklonken,/ die was geboren, Christus, uit uw geest:/ het Communisme had uit u gedronken/ zijn idealen, 't was uw kind geweest" (1949: 97).⁸ However, elsewhere she argues that both religious and socialist values, judging by their materialization, have failed (1931: 12). There will be no failure if an individual, or more importantly a society, truly believes in the two ideas and works for their materialization in an undogmatic fashion.

Translating positive affects and social values into economic and political terms is the most difficult item on her agenda: "De zwakste kant bij dit alles blijft de moeilijkheid, om op economisch en politiek gebied over de kloof heen te komen, die den ouden, verbruikten, van den nieuwen levensvorm scheidt" (1933: 48).⁹ The crisis in which we presently find ourselves stems from the fact that we worship the false gods "Mammon en Moloch" or money and subservience. Thus, religious feeling has not been driven out of us but our devotion is falsely directed to profane and mundane concerns, away from the general and universal values of humanity (1933: 18). Christian values coupled with the scientific, economic, and sociological theories of socialism are the key to saving a world that, from her perspective, had been abandoned by the better nature of humankind to the likes of Hitler, Stalin and the *Grosskapitalisten*. It is in the power of Christian values untainted by self-serving economic and political concerns, that our salvation from the status quo lies. She views these values as capable of bringing salvation immediately because they remain dormant in society, despite the apparent permanent victory of negative values promoted by the powers that be. Hence, no matter how insignificant or how perversely practiced positive values may appear in history, the hope for a utopian society is inherent in them. This is why she refers to a "crisis" in western culture and not a total catastrophe: "Trouwens, in het feit reeds, dat we van krisis, en niet van verval en verwording spreken, ligt ons geloof besloten, dat tegenover de negatieve, levens-vijandige factoren, positieve, het levenvernieuwende en verderdragende krachten staan" (1933: 37).¹⁰

The teachings of Jesus Christ and the ideals of socialism combine to form a utopian society possible only by destroying the negative values that support

capitalism and enslave people. In other words, Roland Holst does not fall into the Expressionist notion summed up in Hermann Hesse's *Demian*: "The World wants to renew itself. It smells like death. Nothing new comes without death" (1958: 247). For her, novelty in us will not arrive by the destruction of the world and its population; rather our present debased value structure must be dismantled in order to allow another one to flourish in our hearts. Humankind must aid the transformation of society by embracing the values and affects that will invite it or recognize it, and promote a true brotherhood that does not advocate class antagonism and change based on the desire for material advancement. Each individual must undergo his/her own inner revolution. As she explains in *De krisis der westerse kultuur*, the only absolute truth is service and dedication to one's neighbor and to the welfare of humankind, devoid of all selfish interests (1933: 18-19). This dedication to improving the welfare of others is the common feature of socialism and the teachings of Christ.

Her major critique of Marx, then, was that he neglected the values upon which a socialist society must be built. Marxism appeals solely to the negative side of human character and therefore destroys the "formative, creative powers" (1930: 34) in the individual. These powers are, of course, necessary to build a new society after the old one disappears. Similarly, conquering old systems with their own tactics merely results in perpetuating them in different form. Instead the form that her style of revolution must take intimates the types of values and affects that will denote our salvation: "Men kan ze [die stelsels] enkel overwinnen door onwankelbaar vertrouwen in den geest, in de machten van rede en liefde, van goeden wil en broederlijkheid, en door rustelooze, in dat vertrouwen gegrondveste activiteit" (1932: 21-22).¹¹ Love, not class antagonism and the desire to possess the material wealth that the rich enjoy, should be the affect that drives the desire for socialism. Her poetic jeremiads therefore do not lament so much the physical or material condition of humankind but rather the selfishness and greed, lack of feeling, lack of brotherhood and good will in a society that has been, as Marx pointed out, based on a system of exchange values. Brotherhood is a central theme and a positive social value that Roland Holst advances in all her poetic and prose works. It is the goodwill of brotherhood, this basic feature of Christian, socialist, and (considering the French and

American revolutions) of middle-class ideals that she desires to see as the central and guiding factor of human action.

Roland Holst reconciles the contradiction inherent in her support of communism and her upper-middle class background by including that class in her message of salvation for the community. She advocates this mixture of apparently opposed beliefs (communism and Christianity) and economic-political systems (socialist dictatorship of the proletariat and capitalist democracy) because, in a Christian guise, communism must transcend class interest as it transcends national interest. For her, division in society between the classes is automatically a form of destructive and virulent antagonism, and class hatred is its most counter-productive aspect. In *Vernieuwingen*, published in 1929, she writes: "o liefde, ik kende al uwe namen,/ maar uw wezen had ik nog niet verstaan;/ ik dachte dat ge kondt wone' in't hart te samen/ met haat, met hem in een gespan kondt gaan" (1929: 29).¹² Hatred of a specific class cannot exist in the heart together with love of humankind.

Love as "levenswet", life's law, became her firm conviction as early as 1896, when she wrote in *Sonnetten en verzen in terzinen geschreven*: "Ik werd geboren met een aard die sterk/ van zelf gaat naar de kern van alle zaken/ maar veel stond tusschen mij in en mijn werk./ Groeiende, heb ik dat op zij gezet:/ het werd al lichter, alle duisters braken/ en ik zag liefde als de levenswet" (1896: 25).¹³ She never abandoned this love in her work or perspective on life in her long career as a writer and activist. The skill to see the essence of things at a glance, addressed in this early sonnet, intimates that the real and the ideal are two very different aspects of any given concept of existence. Capitalist societies possess their principles of democracy and Christian values, but seriously desecrate those values in their material economic and political existence. The socialist society in the former Soviet Union was based on communist principles but destroyed them in its realization and material development of a state capitalism. Roland Holst wishes to abandon both systems but save their respective ideals, that have much in common.

Humankind's redemption can occur in two ways, depending on which signals one follows in Roland Holst's work. It could either come from within human history, so to speak, the only place where

basic Marxist ideas can be employed, i.e. revolutions can be fought, organization is the key to success, and political struggle is the method of change. Here there exists antagonism between classes, solidarity must be inculcated through propaganda, and the premise for change is violent and promotes the types of affects, especially hatred, that actually make the brotherly community for which Roland Holst strives, impossible. Her collection *De vrouw in het woud* (1912) is an exercise in coming to terms with the fact that party politics lead to these negative affects and contradict her humane cause (cf also 1949: 129). Otherwise we must either be lifted up out of the quagmire of human history by a savior, or somehow lift ourselves up out of it by changing our social values so that positive affects like brotherhood create a humanistic socialism. With the first method, change will be a long and rather tumultuous and bloody occurrence, while the latter could, as Benjamin says of the Messiah, enter history at any point (1968: 266). All in all, no matter which phase of Roland Holst's life or literary production one takes under scrutiny, one will find that it was the dignified and peaceful existence of her fellow human beings that lay at the center of her concerns. In this sense she was a true Christian as well as a true communist.

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NOTES

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² All my translations from the Dutch were done by myself and, in some instances, revised by my colleague Judy Cochran, in these notes, respectively GLB and JC.

³ Revolution is an awful disease,/ a crisis of life and death/ in the body of society. (GLB).

⁴ Somewhere, in the falling night,/ a spray of light begins,/ the waters rise,/ and distant gates are opened:/ new birth ensues. (GLB and JC).

⁵ Brotherhood gleamed in the web of your morals,/ silver thread; in it something was revealed/ of Christ's spirit. (GLB).

⁶ Sweep your house clean of all vanity;/ whatever is vain cannot exist before him;/ let a strong wind blow through your room,/ and in peace you will see him draw near. (GLB and JC).

⁷ The idea is very explicitly expressed at p. 36-37 (we translate): Because from his understanding it follows that a socialism which views the economic, i.e., the material conditions as the basis of society, as the only social reality, has been overtaken by scientific development and is obsolete. From this understanding it also follows that a socialism that exclusively directs its attention to the antagonistic principles in society, is one-sided. And finally it follows that only a socialism based on respect for the nobler things in all people and on the feeling of human solidarity and human responsibility, only a socialism that appeals to the desire for justice and that wants to help every person obtain his human 'right', - out of a feeling of responsibility for everything that is coming because indeed all that happens is linked and connected together and every thought is an element in the infinite power of the Whole that forms the world, - that only such a socialism is in harmony with the contemporary attitude of spiritual life and that therefore only such a socialism either consciously or unconsciously will satisfy more and more people. (GLB).

⁸ And yet a sound resounded through time,/ which was born, Christ, of your spirit;/ Communism drank from you/ its ideals, it was your child. (GLB).

⁹ The weakest part of all this remains the difficulty of getting over the chasm that separates the old, worn-out form of life from the new one. (GLB).

¹⁰ Mind you, the mere fact that we speak of crisis, and not of deterioration and degeneration, is the basis of our firm belief that opposite the negative factors, hostile to life, stand positive life-renewing and progressive powers. (GLB).

¹¹ One can only overcome them (those systems) through unwavering trust in the spirit, in the powers of reason and love, of good will and brotherhood, and through unremitting activity based on that trust. (GLB).

¹² Oh love, I knew all your labels,/ but your essence I had not yet understood;/ I thought that you could

exist together in the heart/ with hate, in a single
harness. (GLB).

¹³ I was born with the confidence/ to penetrate to the
core of all things,/ but something kept me from my
work./ As I grew, I put all that aside:/ everything
became clear, my doubts gave way/ so that I saw
life's law was love. (GLB and JC).