

## “THE PURE TEACHINGS OF JESUS”: ON THE CHRISTIAN LANGUAGE OF WILHELM WEITLING’S COMMUNISM

ANTON JANSSON

**Abstract:** The relation between communism and religion is a complex and contested question. In this article I will engage with this question concerning one specific thinker, namely Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871). Weitling researchers have interpreted religion differently and have seen it as everything from the foundation of all his thought, to a negligible addition to a basically secular theory. In this article I argue that Weitling’s work needs to be understood as expressing a Christian political language, in the sense suggested by the intellectual historian J. G. A. Pocock. Departing from this, this article seeks to unpack the Christian political language of Wilhelm Weitling and to sort out how it is expressed in his three main works.

**Key words:** Wilhelm Weitling, communism, history of political thought, Christian socialism, political language.

## Introduction

What is the relation between communism and religion? This is a multifaceted question, not least since religion is a complex concept, and both friends and foes of communism have found very differing forms of answers to this question. On the one hand, communism has certainly, both in theory and in practice, been starkly anti-religious – Karl Marx was an outspoken atheist, and many 20<sup>th</sup> century communist regimes inhibited institutional and organized religion. But on the other hand, it is a very common trope to accuse communism of actually being religious, so to speak, in disguise, owing for instance to alleged dogmatism and utopianism; as Fredric Jameson has put it, this is “one of the principal arguments of the anti-Communist arsenal” (Jameson 1974, 117).

This article will engage with this question in regard to one specific thinker, namely the German utopian communist Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871). As the leading Weitling scholar Waltraud Seidel-Höppner has pointed out, maybe the most complex and contested question in Weitling reception and research is “the relation between communist theory and religion” (Seidel-Höppner 2014, 677).<sup>1</sup> While religion seems to have meant different things in the existing research, Weitling has been depicted as everything from very religious to basically secular, and his writings have been interpreted both as a kind of religious gospel, and as an actually atheist and anti-clerical work.

In this essay, I suggest my own perspective on this complex question: I argue that Weitling’s work needs to be understood as expressing a Christian political language, in the sense suggested by the intellectual historian J. G. A. Pocock. Interpreting Weitling along this perspective from the history of political thought will allow us to avoid discussing his personal conviction or answering the question of whether he was *really* religious or *really* secular.

The purpose of this article, then, is to contribute to the discussion of how best to understand religion in the work of Wilhelm Weitling. I will present the case that it is to be understood as a political language and unpack the different dimensions of this Christian political language in Weitling’s three main political works. The focus is on the Christian language of Weitling, but since I will treat the theory in all his main work, the article will automatically also contain a brief introduction to his political thought in general, which has been surprisingly little discussed outside of German scholarship. Most importantly for me, it has not been scrutinized with perspectives stemming from intellectual history, or from the history of political thought.

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<sup>1</sup> In the words of historian of socialism Sebastian Prüfer, there is a “clear disagreement within the research” (Prüfer, 2002, p. 276). All translations from German into English, both of secondary literature and of Weitling’s texts, are my own. I have striven to translate as literally as possible.

## Wilhelm Weitling – a religious or secular thinker?

Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) was in the late 1830s and the early 1840s a leading figure in the nascent German labor movement. Like many German radicals, he resided in Paris in the 1830s, and here he became one of the leading figures in the communist organization *Bund der Gerechten* (English: League of the Just). This was an expatriate German organization, which however had connections and cooperation with French radicals in Paris. For this organization Weitling wrote a manifesto or program, *Die Menschheit wie sie ist und wie sie sein sollte* (English: Humanity as it is and as it should be).

Weitling was originally a tailor from Prussian Magdeburg, the son of a maid and a French army officer who disappeared in Napoleon's Russian campaign. Weitling had little formal education and had travelled around central Europe as a journeyman tailor. In the early 1840s, he was active in Switzerland, where he published communist journals<sup>2</sup> and wrote two further books, *Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit* (English: Guarantees of harmony and freedom) and *Das Evangelium des armen Sünders* (English: The poor sinner's gospel). He was here also prosecuted for (among other things) blasphemy and incitement to rebellion and was given a six-month prison sentence. After the mid-1840s, Weitling was marginalized within the German-speaking labor movement. In 1846 he moved to America and stayed there for most of the remainder of his life.

Possibly the most salient and contested area in the scholarship on Wilhelm Weitling and his communist political thought has been religion, broadly spoken. Exactly what religion has meant for researchers has differed, and religion has been interpreted variedly as being just an unimportant and unnecessary addition, or as being the foundation for his theory, or even for his life.

More Marxist-leaning accounts of Weitling, especially those written under the GDR, have tended to claim that religion was not an important part of Weitling's life and theory. In a teleological framework conditioned by what was perceived as correct socialist theory (Marxism), references to religion were interpreted as a "regression" (Kaufhold 1955, xxxii), a "relapse" into something "primitive" (Mühlestein 1948, 118), or an "expression of a fatal error" (Hundt, 1993, 159). They were only an insincere concession to the working classes and so a sign of "ignorance and incapacity" (Seidel-Höppner 1961, 161). Waltraud Seidel-Höppner, by far the most prominent Weitling scholar, has since published a lot more on Weitling, and has also qualified her discussions of religion. In two later works, she has fruitfully analyzed it by placing Weitling carefully in the context of religious debates of his time and has, for instance,

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<sup>2</sup> From 1841 *Der Hülfesruf der deutschen Jugend*, which later morphed into *Die Junge Generation*, published in 1842-43. These were printed in around a thousand copies and disseminated throughout Western and Central Europe (Seidel-Höppner 2014, 233-248). They have been re-published by Werner Kowalski (Weitling 1973).

related him to the left Hegelians Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss. Still, Seidel-Höppner sees Weitling's interpretation of Christianity as "thoroughly secular" (Seidel-Höppner 1989, 52), or as a secularization of all Christian teachings (Seidel-Höppner 2014, 754-756). Werner Kowalski, a scholar of the 19<sup>th</sup> century German labor movement, claims that Weitling's theory could simply not be based in religion, as it was born in the specific class struggles of his day (Kowalski 1973, xxiv). From these perspectives, religion has been seen as a negligible addition to a basically secular theory.

On the other hand, there are those who take religion very seriously, see Weitling as a very religious man, and give importance to this in interpreting his texts. The prime example is the only English-language biography of Weitling, Carl Wittke's *The Utopian Communist*. Wittke claims that Weitling had a yearning for the "balsam of religion", and that "inwardly he was motivated by a deep-seated religious sentiment" (Wittke 1950, 108, 29). Wittke connects this supposed inner religiosity with an ethical or moral foundation for Weitling's communism (Wittke 1950, vi, 25). The connection between religion and ethics is also made in the work of Ellen Drünert, who discusses a "religious-ethical motivation" as the foundation for Weitling's work (Drünert 1979). The religious aspects in Weitling have also been seen as his being, in a sense, a mystic (Droz 1972, 425), or someone who deified himself as a new Messiah (Barnikol 1929).

Aside from works on Weitling which do not give religion any prominent role (e.g. Knatz 1984, Haefelin 1986, Marsiske 1990), the research thus has tended to understand Weitling as either a basically secular or a basically religious thinker. I would argue that this is a problematic dichotomization, and will suggest that trying to answer the question of whether or not he was really religious is not the best way to understand his political thought in a historical context.

## Pocock and political languages

To resolve this apparent opposition regarding whether Weitling was religious or secular, and to answer the question of how best to understand religion in relation to Weitling, in this article I turn to the intellectual historian J. G. A. Pocock's considerations on how to do historiography of political thought, and more specifically to his presentation of political languages. Pocock is, together with Quentin Skinner, the leading scholar of what has come to be known as the Cambridge School of intellectual history, whose contextualism dominates the international field of intellectual history, especially the history of political thought (Whatmore 2016).

In one of Pocock's earlier methodological inquiries he claims that: "Any stable and articulate society possesses concepts with which to discuss its political affairs, and associates these to form groups or languages" (Pocock 2009b, 14). A language is in this version an association of concepts, but can be defined slightly differently; in another text Pocock writes

about political language as “a way of speaking and writing which is recognizable, internally consistent, capable of being ‘learned’, and sufficiently distinct from others like it” (Pocock 2009c, 77). The task of the historian, then, in order to understand past political thought, is not to try to find out what the individual author privately really thought, but rather what modes of criticizing and defending the legitimacy of political behavior and the political system there existed in a given society, and to sort out and analyze these languages (Pocock 2009b, 16).

There are many examples of what Pocock calls languages, recognizable and consistent ways of speaking and writing about politics, or sets of principles and concepts. These can be on grander and smaller scales. Pocock himself mentions, for instance, languages of medieval scholasticism, classical republicanism, and commonwealth radicalism (Pocock 2009a). I will here discuss what I quite broadly term a Christian political language. A Christian language, including references to the Bible, to central theological concepts, figures and metaphors, I claim, is definitely a recognizable and consistent way of speaking and writing. It is a complex of concepts and principles by which political (and other) affairs may be discussed. What I will set out to do is to flesh out this assumption, by showing what this means in practice, and in the works of one thinker.

For the remainder of this article, I will discuss how the Christian language is manifested in Weitling’s three main political works, produced in the later 1830s and the early 1840s, when he was a leading figure of the early movement of German communism. In doing this, I will also touch upon the question of additional and competing languages in Weitling’s work. In a concluding part I will discuss and contextualize Weitling’s language somewhat by pointing to similar and dissimilar languages of his time.

## A manifesto on neighborly love: *Die Menschheit wie sie ist und wie sie sein sollte*

The communist manifesto of 1848, Marx’ and Engels’ *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, was a text commissioned by the League of Communists (Brandenburg 1977). This was, however, not the first communist manifesto. Ten years earlier, the former incarnation of the organization, the *Bund der Gerechten*, had recently been formed and was requesting a programmatic text which could set out in more detail its principles and goals, not least about community of property and how this could be reached. Wilhelm Weitling was deemed to be the most competent candidate for composing such a manifesto, and the result was the 1838 *Die Menschheit wie sie ist und wie sie sein sollte* (henceforth: *Menschheit*) (Marsiske 1984, Seidel-Höppner 2014, 94-112). It includes a description of the unjust society as it is, and an exhortation to rise up against it and create a new one. Weitling presents a set of political

principles, and sketches a new coming communist society where labor and the fruits of labor will be shared justly between all members of society.

*Menschheit* opens with a Bible quotation, a free rendering of Matthew 9:36-37, where Jesus spoke to his disciples and said that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. The harvest in this version is humanity, which according to Weitling is ripe for entering into a perfect state. The workers need to put fear and cowardice aside and gather for the harvesting, for the introduction of a new society. Weitling goes on saying that “neighborly love is our sickle, and the truly godly law: love God above all and your neighbor like yourself, is the steel on which we sharpen it” (Weitling 1971b, 142).

Weitling thus chooses to start out this manifesto with a familiar biblical language: a Bible quote and his own explanatory expansion of the metaphor. This is not the only Bible quote which pops up in the work. The usage of the Bible is not systematic, as we will see that it is in a later work, but relatively frequent. For instance, Matthew 20:25-27 is quoted, wherein Jesus proclaims that whoever wants to be great must be a servant. This is used in relation to how Weitling says that Christianity was in a sense destroyed after the Constantinian shift, when Christianity became state religion of the Roman Empire. He claims that it was then kidnapped by the wealthy and powerful, who were not ready to be servants to all their brothers, but rather became oppressors (Weitling 1971b, 152).

It is no coincidence that it is precisely neighborly love (*Nächstenliebe*) which is (both!) the sickle and the sharpening steel in Weitling’s metaphor referred above, because this Christian command is recurrent in the book, and is one of the prime examples of Weitling’s propagation of communism with a Christian language. Neighborly love, it is said at the end of the first rallying chapter of *Menschheit*, is the “touchstone on which you can acknowledge the genuineness” of your fellow human beings and of their political standpoints (Weitling 1971b, 153).

At the beginning of the second chapter, Weitling presents a set of basic principles for the future felicity of humanity. The number of principles, ten, certainly rings familiar from the commandments of the Old Testament Decalogue, and they are presented as based on the teachings of Christ, Christian love, and the law of nature (Weitling 1971b, 154). These include the unification of humanity in a family federation (*Familienbund*), equal distribution of both work and goods, and the abolition of inheritance and private property, as well as equal upbringing and education regardless of gender. “These principles can be summed up in a few words; they mean: love your neighbor as yourself” (Weitling 1971b, 154). These last words are recognizable from the teachings of Jesus in the gospels, there presented as the greatest commandment (e.g. Mark 12:31). As neighborly love is presented here and elsewhere in the book, it must be interpreted as a kind of principle of equality, universality, and the inclusion of everyone on the same terms.

Around the presentation of the ten principles, there is also a palette of other Christian concepts with which Weitling paints his message: to stand up for your fellow human beings is expressed as “holy”; for the sake of the just society, you need to have belief and faith (*Glauben und Vertrauen*), and Weitling here quotes John 20:29 (without explicitly citing it) and says that blessed are those who believe without seeing (Weitling 1971b, 154-155).

Neighborly love returns as a theme towards the very end of the work, when Weitling moves from a more descriptive account of humanity “as it should be”, i.e. the organization of the future communist society, to more grandiloquent motivational preaching about the imminent restructuring of society. On what grounds may we have hope for the introduction of a future paradisiacal order, Weitling asks, and he answers himself “Through wisdom, courage and love of our neighbor” (Weitling 1971b, 174). This love is lacking among the enemies, he says, but is the principle by which the struggle for a new just society will be fought.

Love of one’s neighbor is also there in the very last sentence of the book, and this can be read as a sort of connection to the introduction. As mentioned, Weitling at the outset calls for workers to fulfill the promise of a perfected society; humanity is ripe for “perfection on earth” (*irdischen Vollkommenheit*). Coming perfection is also the note on which the book ends, but here it is served in an even more eschatological language.

Poor deceived but good-natured people!—Keep sleeping until you are awakened by the trumpets and the tocsin call to the last judgment. Then sweep them away, the men of Wittenberg and of Rome, who speak for throne and money bags and scorn your bareness. Then unity will plant the banner of neighborly love in your districts, your youths will fly with it to the world’s end and the world will transform into a garden and humanity into a family (Weitling 1971b, 177).

Here, there are clear echoes of the Book of Revelation, with the words about last judgment and trumpet calls. The reference to the “men of Wittenberg and Rome” should be seen in relation to a preceding discussion about the Reformation. At that time, Weitling wrote, a total transformation into a happy state was within reach with the radical reformers, such as Thomas Münzer and John of Leiden. The radical wing of the Reformation, according to Weitling, presented the poor people with a flash of light, with a hint of an earthly paradise founded on the realization of the true teachings of the gospels. But since this version of the Reformation failed, the world turned dark again, and only a “faint beam of light of the gospel” (*matter Strahl des Evangeliums*) remained (Weitling 1971b, 177).

It is a common dimension of Weitling’s communist propaganda that the world stands before an imminent transformation, which will fulfill the promises of Christianity. It returns in the form of Messianism, and in the form of Weitling’s interpretation of the Kingdom of God (or Heaven), which we will return to below.

## A great turn in human history: Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit

As Pocock rightly points out, many political languages may coexist not only in one society, but within the works of one thinker; yes, even in one text (Pocock 2009a). One instance of this is in Wilhelm Weitling's most comprehensive work *Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit* (henceforth: *Garantien*).<sup>3</sup> In this book, first published in 1842, Weitling's communist conviction and analysis is dressed in what we may term a language of conjectural history. Conjectural history has mainly been connected to the Scottish Enlightenment, but is in a broader sense also present in 18<sup>th</sup> (and 19<sup>th</sup>) century thinkers on the continent, such as Rousseau, Condorcet, and Herder. Conjectural history is a way of telling the origins of social and political organization through a historical and naturalistic account in which humanity passes through different stages. It often lays emphasis on the earliest phases of human history, where no records exist, and tries to provide plausible narratives of what could or must have happened in order for humanity to develop language, religion, authority, etc. Not seldom is it used to criticize the existing order (Palmeri 2008, 2016).

So, Weitling here tries to uncover the inequalities of his own time by recounting how they were created, starting in a natural condition, stressing the origin of property, which fills an important role as it is claimed to be the basic cause for wars, slavery etc. He ends this with a discussion of religion and ethics, where he presents a communist anti-clericalism, criticizing priests for supporting injustice and oppression (Weitling 1974).

If *Das Evangelium des armen Sünders*, which we will come back to, is the work in which Weitling most delves into the resource of the Christian language, *Garantien* is the one with the least presence of it. After the conjectural history account of humanity, there follows Weitling's positive presentation of society as it should be, and this is descriptive and quite detailed in its portraying of how society will be organized in communism, with accounts of elections, governance and the allocation of work and goods. This may be read as a deepened version of what was presented in *Menschheit*.<sup>4</sup>

Weitling also here discusses religion in quite general terms, in relation to its role in history as it had been up to his own day, and also how it should be in communism. Religion had too often been a tool for oppressors promising eternal life if one only behaved according to certain ethical norms and accepted one's poverty in this world (Weitling 1974, 114ff). To avoid misuse

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<sup>3</sup> This book was written by Weitling during his years in Switzerland, and preparatory texts were published in his journals. This work was not a programmatic text commissioned by *Bund der Gerechten* in the same way as *Menschheit*, but many members anticipated it and had helped finance it by advance payments. During this time, Weitling had many discussions with the more national-republican radical organization *Junges Deutschland*, and in *Garantien* he deepened his theory of communism (which had now been even more firmly established as a term). The book was a success, translated into a few other European languages and hailed throughout Europe, including by Karl Marx (Seidel-Höppner, 2014, 297-517).

<sup>4</sup> For a comparison between his first and second works, see for instance Seidel-Höppner (2014, 301-309).

of religion, and to avoid religious conflict, religion would be separated from state life in the future. In schools a very general religious education would be taught, distinct from any denomination, and while religion would certainly be tolerated, there would be no full-time priests, and any religious community would have to support themselves (Weitling 1974, 259-263).

These discussions are however not argued with a very specific Christian language, but are devoid of references to the Bible, usage of Christian concepts and symbols, or references to Christian tradition. The main application of a Christian language in *Garantien* is instead another version of the trope of coming perfection, namely the promise of a Messiah, a coming leader, liberator or savior. Weitling here writes about the revolutionary upheavals in Leipzig in 1830 and claims that they failed because of the lack of leadership, of a revolutionary leader of the rebelling crowd, which instead was deceived into continuing to be governed by the existing government (Weitling 1974, 272ff). But he adds that there will soon come a time when there will be such a leader directing the people in such situations.

Now we stand on the eve of important events, the most important that earth has ever seen. A new Messiah will come, to implement the teachings of the first one. He will demolish the rotten construction of the old societal order, lead the fountains of tears into the sea of oblivion and transform the earth into a paradise (Weitling 1974, 275).

This Messiah will despise the “allurement of Mammon,” open his heart and be one of the people, abstaining from personal gain or wealth, and fight until the power is in the hand of everyone (Weitling 1974, 275). This messianic outburst has been interpreted as if Weitling meant himself (Barnikol 1929, Joho 1958). This may be so, but it is not self-evident; for instance, Weitling writes that the Messiah will descend from wealthy circumstances, which was hardly how he would describe himself. However, whether he had himself or any other specific person in mind or intended this to be interpreted more metaphorically is of lesser importance; the point is that such a Messianism is put together with the revolutionary movements of its time, and how the revolutionary hope of a “great turn in human history” is coupled with the Messianic tradition (Joho 1958, 65).

### Kingdom and community: *Das Evangelium des armen Sünders*

The title of Weitling’s third book in itself communicates that it is the work in which the Christian language is most central: *Das Evangelium des armen Sünders*, (henceforth: *Evangelium*). It is presented as a gospel, a work containing “good news” to the world’s poor sinners: the destitute, poor and outcast, among whom Weitling here counts himself (Weitling 1971a, 8, 14). The purpose of this work, published in its complete version in 1846, was to show how

Christianity and communism were not in conflict, but rather in harmony with one another, as the “pure teachings of Jesus” (Weitling 1971a, 61) were teachings about a coming just society without private property.

At the same time as *Evangelium* was propagation for communism with a Christian language, and thus in a sense propaganda for Christianity, it was also highly critical of Christianity as it existed in Weitling’s own time. The author himself admitted elsewhere that this was a very instrumental work, using Christianity as a means of propagating communism, and to expose the hypocrite priests and Christian aristocrats of his time (Weitling 1977, 41).

So, *Evangelium* is a work drenched in Christian language and biblical references. But it is also in a sense attacking Christianity, and the author does not shy away from disregarding much of Christian dogma. Weitling denies the divinity of Jesus Christ and says that for him it would not even matter if Jesus had not existed at all; the message is the important thing (Weitling 1971a, 21, 31-37). He claims that the Bible is wholly human, as well as being a messy and disorderly work which is full of peculiarities and falsity (Weitling 1971a, 18-22). His interpretation of the Holy Spirit is metaphorical, and more or less equated with human reason (Weitling 1971a, 79-84).

Generally, what Weitling performs in *Evangelium* may be termed a communist exegesis of the New Testament, mainly of the four gospels. He interprets and explains the Bible text, carefully supporting his arguments with Bible verses. I will give a few examples of this first, and then look closer at the specific trope of the first Christian congregations, and at one specific theological concept: the Kingdom of God.

The exegesis, as mentioned, is focused on Jesus. The longest chapter is titled “The Pure Teachings of Jesus” (*Die Reine Lehre Jesu*), in which Weitling seeks to explain, beyond the occasional peculiarities and apparent contradictions of the New Testament, what the principle in Jesus’ message was. After this follows a chapter on Jesus’ actions, which, according to Weitling, he made on principle to back up his teachings (they were “*prinzipielle Handlungen*”) (Weitling 1971a, 100).

And what Weitling speaks about when he speaks about Jesus is often money and property. A long section is devoted to the abolition of private property and the introduction of community of property. Community of property (*Gütergemeinschaft*) was *the* central principle for the *Bund der Gerechten* and can even be said to be a kind of designation for Weitling’s utopian communist society (Marsiske 1984). This is an “indispensable” (*unentbehrlich*) principle of the teachings of Jesus, according to Weitling (Weitling 1971a, 64). If you take away this principle, a lot of the sayings of Jesus just do not make sense. This is the case for instance with Luke 14:33, where Jesus says that in order to be a disciple, you have to give up everything you have. The famous saying about the camel and the eye of a needle, where Jesus tells a rich man to sell everything he owns, is also mentioned (Luke 18:22-25) (Weitling 1971a, 64ff).

Weitling goes on to speak about the abolition of inheritance, and the abolition of money. After declaring how destructive money is, since it keeps the poor worker from taking part in society, Weitling admits that Jesus did not positively and explicitly say exactly that money was to be abolished, but that this principle can be extracted from his teaching. This is because Jesus encouraged his followers to give away money, said not to collect treasures on this earth (Matt 6:19), and proclaimed that no one can serve both God and Mammon (Matt 6:24) (Weitling 1971a, 67ff).

Further on, Weitling points out that Jesus did not have respect for property at all. Did he not preach that if someone took your shirt, you should also give him your cloak (Weitling 1971a, 91ff)? And when Weitling discusses Jesus' actions, he focuses on what he calls "Jesus' attacks on property" (Weitling 1971b, 100ff). With many references to specific Bible verses, mainly from the synoptic gospels, Weitling retells the stories about how Jesus and the disciples plucked grain on the Sabbath, how Jesus sent a herd of pigs into a lake so they drowned, and how Jesus drove out those who did business in the temple court. Weitling's conclusion is that the society of his own time is not Christian at all, because in the society as it is property is respected enormously and the smallest assault on the property of the rich is harshly punished. But in reality, the poor are so much more stolen from. This is no system for justice, for morality, for virtue, Weitling says. "And when will this end? When we follow Jesus." (Weitling 1971a, 101).

Connected to the discussion on the centrality of community of property in the teachings of Jesus is also another trope throughout the history of Christianity, specifically in the history of radical Christian movements: that of taking as example the first Christian congregations, especially how they lived in community and owned everything jointly (Leutzsch 1994). This is normally based on a few verses from the Acts of the Apostles, to which Weitling also refers (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-34, 5:1-3). Weitling interprets this in line with how he discussed community of property elsewhere: property which someone held for himself could be considered as stolen from the public or common belongings (Weitling 1971a, 65). In this case, as in many other cases, there are less developed versions of the same argument in the earlier *Menschheit* (Weitling 1971b, 152).

Noticeable in *Evangelium* is the frequent application and discussion of the concept of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, or the synonym Kingdom of Heaven, is frequent in the New Testament, not least in the teachings of Jesus. It is at its core an ambiguous or contested concept and has been interpreted variedly throughout the history of Christianity (Caragounis 1992). To enter into the Kingdom may be equated with being granted eternal life in an other-worldly heaven, but the Kingdom can also be regarded as something immanent, in this world, either as a quality within the human being, as a religious bond between Christians, or as an actual kingdom in the sense of a political-social order. It is often related to eschatology,

or to an occasion when something more perfect will arrive in one sense or another. This is not least so in Weitling's time; as Marion Dittmer has pointed out in a work on 19<sup>th</sup>-century German theology, the concept of the Kingdom was strongly about an expected coming salvation (*das zu erwartende Heil*) (Dittmer 2014, 13).

Just as Weitling has used references to the last judgment and the Messiah above, here he generously applies the concept of the Kingdom to point to an imminent salvation or transformation of the world. Weitling clearly wants to formulate the Kingdom as something which is not in a distant *Jenseits*, but something which is promised and will be instigated in this world. In a gospel-like formulation he writes:

Repent! Improve, unite: the promised Messiah is coming! The Kingdom of Heaven, the best Kingdom on earth, the most felicitous condition of society, the victory of the poor and the oppressed, the defeat of the rich and the oppressors is near! (Weitling 1971a, 61)

He bases this on a few Bible verses and claims that this was the message of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. This underlining of how the Kingdom of Heaven (*Himmelreich*) must be understood as nothing else than the best possible condition on earth is repeated (Weitling 1971a, 89, 114). Weitling also stresses that Jesus' message included a call for action; the poor sinners could not just wait for the Kingdom to arrive without active engagement. We must have the courage to found this Kingdom, Weitling says, and the Kingdom will arrive when we listen to Christ and live up to his commands. Weitling here returns to the metaphor from *Menschheit* of ripe fields to be harvested, and calls everyone to be ready for sacrifices for the Kingdom (Weitling 1971a, 89-90).

The Kingdom thus more or less equals community of property, or communism, which is what was promised by Jesus Christ in his preaching, although he had to hide it in parables and metaphors, since it was a dangerously revolutionary message (Weitling 1971a, 48). And connected to the active creation of the Kingdom by the oppressed is a call to arms. Weitling is a revolutionary, and he supports this too with a Christian biblical language. For did not Jesus say that he came with a sword (Matt 10:34) and that he came to bring fire to the earth (Luke 12:49) (Weitling 1971a, 97)? This is yet another point which was there already in *Menschheit* (Weitling 1971b, 156) and is fleshed out somewhat in *Evangelium*.

## Concluding discussion

As mentioned, the historian Werner Kowalski claimed that Weitling's communism could not be based in religion (as "non-marxist" biographers had claimed), because the foundation of communism lay in the class antagonism of the capitalist society of Weitling's time (Kowalski

1973, xxiv). This is a rather strange, and unnecessary, dichotomy; it is clear that both aspects are there. Weitling treats the big issues and catchwords of the revolutionary-era Europe of his time from the perspective of the exploited and excluded: justice, liberty and equality, revolution, the emancipation of women, and above all the central question of property. And he does so – not exclusively, but prominently – with a language which is based in Christianity, in the Bible, and in the Christian theological and historical tradition. For Weitling this included references to the preaching of Jesus about property and neighborly love; to the life of the first Christian congregations living in community; and to Christian conceptualizations of an imminent revolutionary transformation of the world as it is, such as an immanent interpretation of the Kingdom. This association of figures, metaphors and concepts definitely makes what Pocock called a recognizable political language with which it is possible to discuss the political affairs of a society (Pocock, 2009b, 2009c).

Weitling was evidently and strongly anti-clerical, he claimed that he was not much of a church-goer, and what he expressed about Christianity was often very undogmatic. But he himself underlined at different times in his life that he was a Christian. Although some people already in his time, for instance Heinrich Heine, considered him to be an atheist, Weitling did not want to be called either that or a deist (Seidel-Höppner 2014, 693, 708, 758). This is however not the important point. It is possible to speculate a lot about whether Weitling was, so to speak, a true believer or not; historian Wolfgang Schieder for instance claimed that in the 1830s he was, and later he was not (Schieder 1963, 263-279). But it is hard to determine and value the authenticity of someone's private belief. And, even if we could, it would not necessarily give the best and most interesting historical answer to how we are to understand religion in his texts. The meaning and power of the political language do not come from the inner regions of the author, but from the social, political, and discursive contexts where it is uttered. A way of discussing religion that stresses inner belief as motivation frames religion as something separate and unique, rather than as the social phenomenon it is. In the history of political thought, there is no reason why a political language of Christianity should be valued differently from other languages.

Compared with the much more famous communist theoretician Karl Marx, who was a younger contemporary of Weitling, the Christian language of the latter stands out. This invites the analysis of Weitling's Christian political language in a wider context, including how typical or untypical he was, and his similarities with other political authors.

First, there are both diachronic and synchronic aspects of Weitling's usage of the Christian political language. There is reason to claim that there is a deeper diachronic "tradition of discourse" (Pocock 2009b, 18) of a radical or revolutionary Christianity. In an older text on Weitling, Charlotte von Reichenau draws parallels between Weitling and earlier radical thinkers and movements from the medieval and early modern era such as Joachim of Fiore, the

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Waldensians, the Taborites, and Thomas Münzer, who all used biblical and theological argumentation to advance radical politics (Reichenau 1925). In her work this is rather sweeping, but a deeper and more detailed investigation into this tradition of discourse would be possible and could reveal more about Weitling's language in historical perspective.

Furthermore, while Weitling refers to historical figures such as Thomas Münzer as forerunners, this is not only a deeper diachronic discursive tradition, but one which was very much alive during his own time. He is not original here. In the French context where Weitling was active there were variations of religious and biblical themes by radical and communist thinkers that inspired Weitling, such as Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Felicité de Lammenais, and (later) Étienne Cabet. In the revolutionary era the Jesus figure played a role in France; there was, as it has been expressed by one researcher, a "Christ of the barricades" between 1789 and 1848 (Bowman 1987).

But looking at it synchronically, not only radicals applied a Christian language. Rather, one of the most salient "modes of criticizing and defending the legitimacy" (Pocock 2009b, 16) of the political system was Christianity, and this is not least true for the German-speaking Europe of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That Weitling polemically underlined that the Kingdom is on this earth speaks of course to the fact that there were others in his own time who were of another opinion. For conservatives, the concept of the Kingdom could work as an argument *against* radical politics. The Kingdom then would be something which was to arrive only at the end of history, society within the limits of history could therefore not be perfected, and radical politics consequently would be futile. This is the case for instance with the contemporary Prussian conservative Friedrich Julius Stahl, who also underlined the sinfulness and incompleteness of humanity in order to argue for the need of a strong hierarchical order in this world (Stahl 1845). The radical or left Hegelians could of course be understood as attacking the Christian establishment of their time, and as advancing a materialist position against it, and there are similarities between their influential theories about Christianity and Weitling's.<sup>5</sup> But the strongly biblically and theologically grounded way of reasoning that David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach advance cannot in any reasonable way be said to be devoid of a Christian political language. As has been pointed out in intellectual-historical studies of the 1830s discussing these thinkers, this was an era of very strong political-theological discourse (Massey 1983, Breckman 1999, Stewart 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see Waltraud Seidel-Höppner's analysis of similarities and differences between the young Hegelians and Weitling (Seidel-Höppner 2014, 714-734). For more about Feuerbach's influence among radicals at the time, see Caldwell (2009).

So, it is rather Marx and Engels – who also criticized other left Hegelians for being too religious<sup>6</sup> – who are atypical and are creating a slightly new political language for communism, in breaking with the very established and traditional mode of political criticism provided by the Christian tradition. It has been pointed out that it is rather towards the end of the 1840s that a Christian-based communism falls out of favor in the European communist networks (Stedman Jones 2016, 214). In the shift that occurred in communist circles, Weitling was not in the forefront, and while he continued to be read among workers – at least for a while until about the 1860s, possibly more than Marx (Hölscher 1989, 286, Prüfer 2002, 277ff.) – after the 1840s Weitling disappeared from the leading circles of organization and theorizing of European communism. But at the time of his peak in the European communist movement he used a conceptual language which was a recognizable and established way to communicate political discourse, including for radicals.

It is difficult to claim that Weitling was “thoroughly secular” (Seidel-Höppner 1989, 52), seeing how deeply Christian his texts are. He was undogmatic and anti-clerical, yes, but not secular in the sense of being devoid of religion or separated from religion. But it may also be problematic to label him “religious”, as this often connotes a strong inner conviction and piety. This is even more the case if religion is taken as irrational or mystic, as it has tended to be in some research (Schieder 1963, 221). But Weitling’s texts are examples of the powerful political language, in the Pocockian sense, of Christianity. And given that Christianity has provided a resourceful political language throughout history, and was not least potent in Weitling’s time, his application of a Christian language must rather be seen as natural and reasonable.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Die deutsche Ideologie*, written in the mid-1840s (although published much later), they claimed that the critique of their time was deeply characterized by religion (Marx and Engels 1958, e.g. 19). Marx elsewhere famously claimed that “the criticism of religion has been essentially completed,” but this should not be interpreted as a remnant of times past, but rather as a performative statement: a way of stating his position about which direction he wants the theorizing to take right there. (Marx 1956, 378).

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**Anton Jansson** - holds a PhD (2017) in History of Ideas and Science from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His dissertation was on the intersection between political thought and Christian theology in the German Vormärz period. Jansson's general research interests are related to questions of religion and secularization, as well as to the history of political thought. His postdoc studies are devoted to the history of atheism and secularism, and he has also published on other subjects, such as Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

**ADDRESS:**

Anton Jansson  
University of Gothenburg  
Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion  
Box 200  
405 30 Gothenburg  
Sweden

**EMAIL:** anton.jansson@lir.gu.se

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**AUTOR:** Anton Jansson

**TYTUŁ:** „Czysta nauka Chrystusa”: o chrześcijańskim języku w komunizmie Wilhelma Weitlinga

**ABSTRAKT:** Relacja komunizmu i religii stanowi obszerne i budzące spory zagadnienie. W artykule odnoszę się do tej kwestii, przywołując specyficznego myśliciela, mianowicie: Wilhelma Weitlinga (1808-1871). Badacze jego idei interpretowali religię w różny sposób, traktując ją jako to, co stanowiło sam fundament jego poglądów, lub, dla odmiany, jako nieznaczący dodatek do jego świeckich teorii. W niniejszym studium argumentuję, że prace Weitlinga powinny być rozumiane jako wyrażające chrześcijański język polityczny w sensie, jaki nadal temu terminowi historyk J.G.A. Pocock. Wychodząc z tego założenia, artykuł zmierza ku ujawnieniu sposobów wyrazu chrześcijańskiego języka Weitlinga i do wskazania, w jaki sposób manifestował się on w jego trzech najważniejszych pracach.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** historia myśli politycznej, język polityczny, komunizm, socjalizm chrześcijański, Wilhelm Weitling