

THE SOCIAL THOUGHT OF JACQUES MARITAIN

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The philosopher Jacques Maritain developed a rich, multi-layered political philosophy which was thoroughly informed by his deep Catholic faith. While clearly reflecting a debt to the thought of Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, it nonetheless bears the pronounced stamp of originality. The philosophy is the result of the sustained development of four interrelated ideas. The first is a philosophy of the person which is uniquely Maritain's. The second is his interpretation and peculiar application of the classical distinction between the secular and the sacral realms. The third is his philosophy of democracy, and the fourth is his theory of a new Christendom.

Jacques Maritain is fittingly recognized as one of the outstanding Catholic philosophers of the 20th century, but it would be wrong to think that his Catholic identity limits his preeminence to chiefly parochial circles. He was in fact simply one of the outstanding philosophers of modern times. He is, of course, very well known as a dedicated Thomist. Along with his compatriot Etienne Gilson, he contributed substantially to the Thomistic revival which followed upon the 1879 publication of Pope Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* and which flourished until the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that movement having the illustrious career it did in the absence of those two intellectual giants. Maritain was a Catholic philosopher with broadly catholic interests, and there was scarcely a philosophical issue of any import that he did not engage with at one time or another over the course of his long and very productive life. Maritain's most important contributions were, I believe, in the field of general metaphysics, but one must quickly mention moral philosophy, aesthetics, and political philosophy as three other fields in which he has written works of lasting value.¹ It is in Maritain's political philosophy where one finds the main lines of his social thought, and it is that philosophy which will be the focus of our concern in this article.

Of the several works Maritain wrote on political philosophy, if I were asked to single out one, I would be inclined to choose *Man and the State* (1947), for that work provides us with a very good summary statement of the main elements of his thought. But other works that should be consulted are: *The Things That Are Not Caesar's* (1927),

Integral Humanism (1936), and *The Person and the Common Good* (1947).²

The social thought of Jacques Maritain is impressively ambitious, for he does not hesitate to take on the largest and most challenging issues pertaining to man's political life. It would be presumptuous of me to think that I could do anything like full justice to his thought within the scope of this article, so I have formulated the modest aim of trying to provide a reasonably reliable general account of Maritain's social thought. I will concentrate on what I take to be the most salient features of his thought, four basic ideas, or sets of ideas, which, given the unique way in which he developed them over the years, represent his most original contributions to political philosophy. The four ideas can be labeled, succinctly if not felicitously: personalism; the secular and the sacral; the democratic philosophy; the new Christendom. The explication of these ideas, constituting the bulk of the article, will be preceded by a treatment of some of the key distinctions that figure importantly in Maritain's thought, and will be followed by some critical responses to his thought.

Distinguish to Unite

One of the prominent characteristics of Maritain's whole mode of philosophizing is the importance he attached to making careful distinctions. In this respect, I suppose, he could be said to be a true Scholastic. Like many other things that are essentially helpful, the making of distinctions can be overdone, or done carelessly, but this is never the case with Maritain. He was a master at practicing what he preached. The original French title of his masterpiece, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, is *Distinguer pour unir*, "Distinguish to Unite." This is a motto that accurately describes his approach to philosophy. In order to philosophize one must analyze, i.e., make distinctions, but unless the analysis is followed by synthesis, the task is incomplete. One must reassemble the whole with which one began.

In the literature of political philosophy there are a number of important terms, such as "state," "society," "people," "nation," "community," and "body politic," which, though liberally employed, are not often carefully defined, and this inevitably results in a lack of clarity where it is very much needed. Maritain begins by giving us precise definitions for all of those key terms.

A "community," in his vocabulary, is a natural assemblage of human beings; it is something into which one is born and not the result of conscious construction. The family would be an example of a

community, as would regional ethnic groups, social classes, and, importantly, the “nation.”³ The nation is in its essence a healthy community, but it can be corrupted by the phenomenon called nationalism, which Maritain describes as a plague. A “society,” in contrast to a community, is a construct of human reason; societies are consciously formed. The terms “people” and “body politic” mean basically the same thing for Maritain, and he will use them, and “society,” interchangeably. To say, as did Aristotle, that man is a “political animal” is, for Maritain, simply to say that he is a “rational animal,” for when man organizes societies in which to live he is but following the imperatives of reason. The notion of “perfect society” is commonly applied to the family and to the state. That is a correct application regarding the family, but not regarding the state. It is not the state which is a perfect society, Maritain maintains, but the body politic, or the people, gathered together in a society.

What then is the state? It is a part of the body politic, the uppermost part, as it were, and the governing part. The principal tasks of the state are to establish and preserve order, guarantee justice, and promote the common good.⁴ As Maritain puts it, the state is that part of the whole (i.e., the people) that specializes in the interests of the whole. To fulfill its proper tasks, the state must have authority, which it receives from the people. The people are possessed of a natural, God-given right of self-government, the exercise of which they voluntarily grant to the state. The state thus acts vicariously on behalf of the people. It is important to note, however, that in turning over to the state the exercise of the right of self-government, the people do not surrender that right, for it is inalienably theirs. Though government officials are the vicars of the people, they are not their mere instruments. These officials retain the autonomy which belongs to rational agents with free will, and they are under obligation to make decisions that are founded on right reason. If the people have cause to believe that governmental officials are abusing their authority, they have the right to remove them.

Maritain takes care to distinguish between power and authority. “*Power* is the force by means of which you can oblige others to obey you. *Authority* is the *right* to direct and command, to be listened to or obeyed by others” (emphasis in original).⁵ The two, power and authority, must always go together. The power by which the state exercises its authority comes, like the authority itself, from the people. A state abuses its authority and becomes corrupt when it takes itself to be the whole, rather than a part of the whole. Should this circumstance continue, the state eventually loses its authority, and no longer commands the allegiance of the people.⁶ While the proximate source of the state’s

authority is the people, its ultimate source is God, for all authority comes from God.

One of the more interesting aspects of Maritain's political philosophy is his repudiation of the notion of the sovereign state, a notion which some political theorists would consider to be beyond dispute. For Maritain, the sovereignty of the state is nothing but a long-standing fiction, albeit a very dangerous one. "It is my contention that political philosophy must get rid of the word, as well as the concept, of Sovereignty," he writes.⁷ This dangerous fiction was invented in the Middle Ages, when sovereignty was claimed for the monarch, but later, with the development of the nation state, that entity assumed the mantle sovereignty. Thus a grievous error was perpetuated. Because political sovereignty of any kind is a fiction, it is just as wrong to claim sovereignty for the people as it is for the state. The people are autonomous, by reason of their natural right to self-government, but they are not sovereign. However, the peculiar nature of their autonomy makes them superior to the state. "The people are above the state," Maritain asserts, "the people are not for the State, the State is for the people."⁸

Maritain's Philosophy of the Person

Maritain can be said to have developed a philosophy of the person, a personalism, the deep imprint of which is to be found throughout all of his thought. This philosophy is based firmly on the Catholic understanding of the nature of personhood.⁹ Our most immediate understanding of personhood comes, of course, from our knowledge of the human person, but the essence of personhood is fully and ultimately explicable only by making reference to the divine Persons.

Central to Maritain's philosophy of the person is the distinction he makes between the person and the individual. The first is the more comprehensive concept. As he points out, there is nothing unique about the distinction itself. What is unique, however, is the way he applies it to his political thought. Maritain describes the person as man's spiritual pole and the individual as man's material pole. They are but two ways of regarding the same thing, for this is a distinction without a separation. Personhood, the foundational and comprehensive reality, is grounded in the rational soul.¹⁰ Individuality is subsumed within personhood. To regard a human being as an individual is not to think falsely of him, but it is to regard him only partially, not taking into account all that he is. It is when states begin to regard the citizenry exclusively as individuals, ignoring their more fundamental identity as persons, that social ills of the gravest kind are introduced.

Human societies, as noted, are the direct result of the constructive workings of human reason.¹¹ One of Maritain's principal concerns is with the relation between man and the state, man considered, not exclusively as individual, but as both person and individual. Man, as individual, relates to the state as a part to the whole, and that makes him subordinate to the state. In this relation, the good of the whole, i.e., the state, transcends and takes precedence over the good of the individual. And that is why the citizen, in times of crisis, might be asked to sacrifice his individual good for the sake of the preservation of the common good of the state, even though the good to be sacrificed may be the supreme good which is his very life.

But the relation between man and state shifts dramatically if we consider man in terms of his identity as a person: now he relates to the state as a whole to a whole. Man, as person, is superior to the state, and consequently the good of the person transcends the good of the state. The ultimate good of the person is spiritual, being nothing less than eternal life, whereas the good of the state, the common good, is temporal. This should not mean that the two goods are in conflict, however, for, ideally at least—i.e., in a just state—the superiority of the spiritual good of persons will be honored by the state.

As can easily be imagined, it would be no small thing to maintain an equitable balance between man's two-fold identity as person and as individual and to meet the imperatives of each. In the best of circumstances tensions are bound to arise between the citizen and the state. How is the citizen properly to relate to the state as person and as individual?

The single most important obligation for any state is to foster the common good. There is not a little confusion today concerning the nature of the common good, much of which confusion could be dissipated, Maritain teaches, by beginning with the realization that the common good is a good of *persons*, which means that it is fundamentally a moral good, and not, as is usually thought, an economic good. To be sure, the state has to see to it that the citizenry has ready access to that sufficiency of temporal goods without which a truly human life is not possible, but it must also have a care for their spiritual welfare. The state fails in meeting its most important responsibility when it regards the citizenry as no more than a collection of individuals, and not a society of persons. This approach, which effectively dehumanizes the citizenry, has been the one followed by totalitarian states in all places and at all times.

Perhaps the single most influential of Maritain's books relating to social thought is *Integral Humanism*, which was written in 1935 and

published the following year. What inspired the book was Maritain's conviction that much of the woe besetting Western civilization is to be attributed to the triumph of anthropocentric humanism. If Western civilization is to be saved, and a new Christian-based order established, it will only be because anthropocentric humanism, which has its roots in the Renaissance and the Reformation, is replaced by a theocentric, or integral, humanism. Anthropocentric humanism is a humanism of the individual, and it is for Maritain essentially an anti-humanism for it does not recognize man in terms of his identity as a spiritual being. Integral humanism, on the other hand, is nothing else than a humanism of the person.

The triumph of anthropocentric humanism was uniquely expressed in the dominating presence of bourgeois liberalism, which blossomed in the 19th century and continued to assert itself into the 20th century until it was met by two belligerent social phenomena, which were themselves mutually antagonistic: Communism and totalitarian anti-Communism, the latter exemplified by Fascism and Nazism. What these three phenomena had in common was that they all made open war against the person. But the worst of the three, according to Maritain, was bourgeois liberalism, because it was the most irreligious. "Christian in appearance, it has been atheistic in fact."¹²

The Secular and the Sacral

Maritain's distinction between the secular and the sacral realms, and the way he developed his thought around that distinction, has proven to be the most controversial element of his political philosophy. And the reason for that, in more cases than not, is that it is inadequately understood. The secular and the sacral, or civilization and the Church, as Maritain will also identify them, are for him two distinct and autonomous realms, autonomous in the sense that each has its own proper end, the one, temporal, the other, eternal. To stress the autonomy of the secular realm, Maritain points out, is entirely consonant with the teachings of Leo XIII, "which say that the authority of the State is supreme in its own order."¹³ The key phrase here is "supreme in its own order." The autonomy of the state is relative, not absolute, and in fact the secular realm is subordinate to the sacral realm. This is so because the end of the secular realm, which is temporal, is subordinate to the end of the sacral realm, which is eternal. "Thus the common good of civilization asks of itself to be referred to the common good of eternal life, which is God."¹⁴

It would be a serious misunderstanding of Maritain's views regarding the secular and sacral realms to imagine that he is somehow attempting to drive a wedge between the two, or worse, that he is trying to diminish or marginalize the position of the Church. Maritain's carefully developed thought is not to be compared with the kinds of contemporary discussions that tend to surround the subject of "the separation of church and state." And his advocacy of the autonomy of the secular has no resemblance to the current crusade on behalf of secularization. Maritain's secular realm, as he envisions it, is to be totally informed by Christian principles, and he is continuously making reference to what he calls a "secular Christianity," which can be an oxymoron only for someone who fails to appreciate the new meaning that he is bringing to "secular." As he sees things, the secular is not the opposite, but the inferior complement, of the sacral.¹⁵ That the two realms can be antagonistically separated goes without saying, but it will be the work of Christians to ensure their harmonious conjunction, as they bring the spiritual into the realm of the temporal.¹⁶

Maritain regarded the distinction between the secular and the sacral realms to be essentially Christian, having its source in Sacred Scripture. "The order of temporal society has gained complete differentiation," he wrote, "and full autonomy in its own sphere, which is something normal in itself, required by the Gospel's distinction between God's and Caesar's domains."¹⁷ This differentiation may be interpreted as the working out of a law of history, part of the ongoing drama of "the progressive passage of the people."¹⁸

In the Middle Ages the difference between the secular and sacral realms was recognized, but the distinction between the two was blurred. Because the preponderance of the people were baptized, the sacral realm was able to exercise its influence in the secular realm in a way that would be impossible today because of the pluralistic character of modern societies. Today the sacral realm, the Church, is distinct from the secular in a way that was not the case in the past. Its role now is more emphatically spiritual, and less political, as is befitting its nature and its mission in the world. Its principal task is to act as guide and counselor for the secular realm. While the state, as we have seen, does not enjoy sovereignty, the Church does, by reason of its being a divine institution founded by Christ. From this point of view as well, then, the secular is clearly subordinate to the sacral, and "the good of the State must, therefore, be ordered to that same supernatural last end which is the good of every individual man."¹⁹ This is a point on which Maritain is emphatic. The autonomy of the secular does not involve any de-spiritualizing of the secular realm but just the opposite. And so he writes

that, “politics themselves, to be what they ought, insist that the spiritual be predominant.”²⁰

The distinction between secular and sacral, as Maritain sees it, rather than in any way diminishing the status of the Church, will actually enhance it. Maritain believes that an important consequence of the new order of things will be to liberate the Church, freeing her from involvement in matters that in the past often seriously distracted her from her principal tasks. And as for the secular realm, it too will experience a new-found freedom as, having long since abandoned the “holy empire” model for political society, it accommodates itself to the emancipating ambience created by the democratic philosophy.

The Democratic Philosophy

There are four principal facets to the grand transformation of the social scene that Maritain sees as the result of the progressive working out of principles that have their origin and inspiring impetus in Sacred Scripture. The maturation of the distinct and autonomous secular and sacral realms will take place within a political atmosphere which has been cleansed as the result of the supplanting of anthropocentric humanism by theocentric humanism. And theocentric humanism, in turn, will have gained the ascendancy because the primacy of the person over the individual is everywhere recognized and respected. To these three is to be added the democratic philosophy. So, then, the distinction between secular and sacral, theocentric humanism, personalism, and the democratic philosophy were all part, for Maritain, of a single coherent picture.

Maritain was a staunch champion of what he does not hesitate to call the democratic faith. Democracy, for him, represented “the highest terrestrial achievement of which the rational animal is capable here below.”²¹ What are the contents of this democratic faith, or what he otherwise refers to as the democratic charter? He gives a detailed account of the charter in *Man and the State*,²² the principal elements of which are: freedom, the recognition of the full range of rights by all parties concerned, representative government, fraternal charity, and the acknowledgment of the unquestionable supremacy of the moral law. Maritain is convinced that democracy has its roots in Christianity, and he reminds us that it was Henri Bergson who gave particular emphasis to this fact. What especially impressed Maritain about democracy was the intrinsic rationality he saw in it. For him, “democracy is the only way of bringing about a *moral rationalization* of politics. Because democracy is a rational organization of freedom founded upon law” (emphasis in

original).²³ In order for democracy to be able to thrive it must be sustained and nurtured by the democratic faith, and this faith, a secular faith to be sure, does not emerge automatically in a people but *must* be taught them from their youth. Hence the importance of education in any democratic society. The promotion of the democratic faith does not mean the promotion of a particular form of government. Almost any form of government will do, so long as it allows for the effective living out of the democratic faith. “In this connection,” Maritain writes, “whatever the political *regime* may be, monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic, democratic philosophy appears as the only political *philosophy*” (emphasis in original).²⁴ In any event, the essential condition that must be met by any particular form of government is that it be representative.

Democracy and personalism, for Maritain, are inextricably bound up with one another. It is only the human person, fully conscious of himself as such, who is able to live up to the democratic charter. Looked at from a different angle, the practical expression of the democratic charter in any given society would be proof positive that such a society is dominantly made up of people who are aware of themselves as persons. Maritain freely admits that his democratic philosophy is an ideal. He is describing something toward which we should aspire, not something that is already in place, or, for that matter, has ever been fully implemented in the past. Of course, there have been any number of states that have proudly described themselves as “democratic,” but in more cases than not these have been democracies of the individual and not of the person, which is to say that they have borne the heavy stamp of bourgeois liberalism. For Maritain, “it is through a sound philosophy of the person that the genuine, vital principle of a new Democracy, and at the same time a new Christian civilization, can be rediscovered.”²⁵

Pluralism is an integral part of the “new Democracy” which Maritain has in mind. In giving the emphasis he does to pluralism, one might think that he is merely acquiescing to an historical inevitability and making the best of a bad situation. But this would not be right. Certainly he recognized that there was something of the inevitable consequent, given modern history, in the pluralism that characterizes contemporary societies, but he also views pluralism in a definitely positive light. It should be said, however, that Maritain’s understanding of pluralism is not to be confused with what is being promoted today under the aegis of pluralistic “diversity.” One of the salient features of Maritain’s pluralism is that it entails the fact that the state does not officially endorse or foster a particular religion or philosophical system.

But what lies at the heart of his pluralism, and would make it possible, is what I will call the pragmatic consensus.

The pragmatic consensus is an agreement, regarding fundamental moral principles, which is forged by the members of a particular body politic, and which allows them, despite their religious and philosophical differences, to live harmoniously in civic community. The fundamental moral principles in question here would be simply the fundamental principles of the natural law. This is a pragmatic, not a theoretical, consensus. Among the practical items agreed to would be a list of basic human rights.²⁶

Because the pragmatic consensus plays so crucial a role in Maritain's political thought, I think it important that we hear a description of it in his own words. He writes: "Thus it is that men possessing quite different, even opposite metaphysical or religious outlooks, can converge, not by any identity of doctrine, but by virtue of an analogical similitude in practical principles, toward the same practical conclusions, and can share in the same practical faith, provided that they similarly revere, perhaps for quite different reasons, truth and intelligence, human dignity, freedom, brotherly love, and the absolute value of the moral good."²⁷ Maritain thus foresees that the members of a pluralistic society will be able to transcend their religious and philosophical differences and come together concerning certain fundamental truths governing human conduct. It was this idea of a pragmatic consensus, applied at the international level, that he articulated in his Inaugural Address to the Second International Conference of UNESCO, held in Mexico City in November, 1947, and which was the backdrop for the International Declaration of Rights which was promulgated the following year, in the writing of which Maritain was involved.²⁸ One of the features of Maritain's pluralism is the principle of subsidiarity, which has it that no task that can and should be undertaken by a smaller unit of society, such as the family, should be undertaken by a larger unit, especially not by the state itself.

The New Christendom

Nothing less than a new Christendom was to be the culminating result of the triumph of a theocentric humanism, informed by the philosophy of the person and conjoined to the philosophy of democracy. The establishment of a new Christendom would entail a total transformation of Western society as currently constituted, and bringing it about would be chiefly the work of Christians, who will be engaged in the struggle "to transform civilization by making it actually Christian."²⁹

Again, this new Christendom would be secular, not sacral, meaning that it would be realized within the pluralistic composition of contemporary societies. This new Christendom, like the theocentric humanism, personalism, and democracy which are integral to it, is part of the forward progress of human history, which is one and the same with salvation history. Creating a new Christendom would not be a matter of attempting to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, Maritain tells us, but rather of making the world a “place of a truly and fully human earthly life.”³⁰ He sees the progress of human history as coterminous with a steady raising of human consciousness with respect to moral matters. For Maritain, modern man, in comparison, say, to medieval man, has a keener, deeper awareness of the particular applications of the natural law, especially as they pertain to his social situation.³¹ This more acute moral consciousness on the part of mankind would be supported and enhanced by the gradual abandonment of an anthropocentric humanism and the adoption of an integral humanism that is rooted in Christian principles.

In the final pages of *Man and the State*, Maritain, responding to what were then contemporary concerns, speculates on the possibility of a world government. He does not regard this as intrinsically impossible, but he distinguishes between what is metaphysically possible and what is practically feasible. In the end, he does not show much enthusiasm for the notion, at least as it is commonly understood. To speak of world government, he believes, involves a serious misemphasis. People should not be talking about a world government, but rather about a world body politic. He sees a merely governmental theory of global organization as something that would be “wrong and disastrous.”³² The logic of Maritain’s political thought, taken as a whole, would seem to demand that, if such a world political society should ever come about, it would somehow have to be encompassed within—as perhaps the primary exemplification of—the new Christendom.

The advent of a theocentric humanism would put to rout both irresponsible individualism and ruthless totalitarianism, and, as accompanied by the ascendancy of the human person and the planting of the democratic faith, would open the way for the establishment of a new Christendom. This is a very impressive picture of the future which is offered for our contemplation. But one might fairly ask: Could such a picture ever be realized? Maritain himself shows not a little caution concerning the whole matter. “Let us eliminate, first of all,” he wrote in 1940, “the problem of the chances of the realization, near or remote, of an integral humanism such as I have tried to characterize.”³³ It is almost as if Maritain is inviting us to consider his reflections on this and related

issues as merely an elaborate philosophical thought experiment. In point of fact, however, and although he clearly regarded a new Christendom as possible in itself, he candidly concedes that its realization would be highly improbable unless a number of very demanding conditions were first to be met, such as, for example, the liquidation of anthropocentric humanism. But he also broaches the possibility that the shedding of Christian blood might be necessary, as a means of purifying the world, and thus making it worthy of a new Christendom.³⁴

Some Critical Responses

Perhaps the most noteworthy negative response to Maritain's social thought came from Cardinal Joseph Siri in his book *Gethsemane*, published in 1981. The book was devoted to reviewing the thought of several contemporary Catholic theologians, chiefly that of Fr. Karl Rahner, which Cardinal Siri subjected to rigorous scrutiny, and found it to be wanting in several serious respects. Jacques Maritain is one of the objects of Cardinal Siri's concerns, but the manner in which he deals with him is rather puzzling. In the first place, his treatment of Maritain's thought is rather cursory; of the book's 370 pages, only 7 are devoted to a discussion of Maritain. At the end of that short section Cardinal Siri advises the reader that he will return to Maritain later in the book, but this is something he never gets around to doing. All we have to go by, then, is a rather scant treatment of Maritain's thought.

Clearly, what most concerns the cardinal is Maritain's notion of the distinct realms of the secular and the sacral, which he refers to as "these two absolutes [which] constitute a sort of intimate secret of all Maritain's thought."³⁵ It hardly seems correct to refer to this notion as a secret of Maritain's thought, intimate or otherwise, for it is a pronounced feature of his political philosophy, to which he gives continuous and detailed attention. More to the point, however, it must be said that the cardinal's account of Maritain's notion does not do justice to it. Maritain's thought, regarding this and associated subjects, is considerably more complex than Cardinal Siri allows. To be specific, Maritain simply does not grant to the secular realm the kind of autonomy the cardinal intimates he does. He acknowledges that Maritain sees the secular realm as subordinate to the sacral realm, but the suggestion is that this was only a token gesture on Maritain's part, a *pro forma* tip of the hat to tradition as it were, and that Maritain's view implies a usurpation of the proper role of the sacral realm by the secular realm. As I hope this article has made clear, if Maritain insists on anything, it is the supremacy, indeed the sovereignty, of the sacral in relation to the secular.

The secular realm that Maritain has in mind would be utterly worthless if it were not thoroughly infused with Christian principles.

We have already made the point that Maritain's ideas regarding the secular bear no relation to the thought of our contemporaries who are promoters of secularization. To the extent that Maritain would give any credence to the notion of "the separation of church and state," it would be to say that, rightly regarded, it serves to call attention to a clear distinction between the two. It is a distinction whose most important effect would be, for him, to preserve and protect the autonomy, dignity, and freedom of the Church, a freedom which is to be most tellingly expressed in the Church's ability to direct and guide the secular realm. It would be difficult to find a more loyal son of the Church in modern times, clerical or lay, than Jacques Maritain. And, considering the general nature of the century in which it was made, his proposal for the establishment of a new Christendom is altogether remarkable; indeed, it borders on the astonishing. He earnestly believed that his advocacy of the secular, as he understood it, was the logical response to a reading of a history which was unfolding according to specific Gospel imperatives, and we need to remind ourselves, incongruous though it may sound to our ears, that the secular he was advocating was a secular *Christianity*.³⁶

It might be appropriate to mention, in passing, that not all highly placed churchmen thought Maritain to be a fit object for criticism. Maritain's *Integral Humanism*, which was the focal point of Cardinal Siri's criticism, was cited in Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*.³⁷ Another cardinal, Charles Journet, himself a theologian of the first rank, regarded Maritain "as being in his own way the most penetrating theologian of our time."³⁸

Before closing, there are a couple of points I would like to raise on my own behalf, in response to Maritain's political philosophy. His sweeping vision of a mankind on a course of steady ascending progress is certainly a noble and even a majestic one, and I think it might serve as an inspiring model for us, an ideal to meditate upon. But it seems questionable that the human race has, to this point, made the kind of moral progress that Maritain is attributing to it. I would not want to deny that it has made some progress in this respect, but I wonder if Maritain is not a bit too sanguine, both in his assessment of the past and in his projections for the future. And is there the kind of inevitability to the process which he sees in it, an inevitability which, if I read him correctly, carries with it the force of a "law" of history?

As we have seen, a key factor for the full realization of the democratic faith is what I have called the pragmatic consensus, the basic idea behind which, again, is that members of a pluralistic society can

agree upon a set of fundamental moral criteria allowing for a harmonious common life despite religious and philosophical differences. Maritain obviously considers such an arrangement to be possible and to be lasting. I believe this is open to serious doubt. According to Maritain's understanding of the arrangement, no one of the parties concerned is expected, or presumably in any way encouraged, to give up their deepest convictions, religious or philosophical, even though it be the case that any two sets of convictions, when compared with one another, could be found to be totally contradictory. Viewed from an objective point of view, if one set is true, the other must necessarily be false.

That any number of practical difficulties would inevitably ensue from attempting to maintain a viable moral code that somehow floats above (we could not say that it is based upon) conflicting religious and philosophical convictions could, I think, be easily demonstrated by citing any number of prominent case studies that date from the promulgation of the International Declaration of Rights in 1948. The impossibility of such an arrangement enjoying any lasting success is to be explained, in the final analysis, by the elementary fact that truth is one, and that in the practical order philosophical/theological truth cannot be severed from moral truth. Men may be brought to agree, on a purely practical level, on certain matters pertaining to civil rights, let us say. But if such agreement is not founded on deeper commonalities, i.e., shared convictions as to what counts for truth and falsity in philosophy and theology, then any such agreement will, indeed must, prove to be fragile and temporary.

But whatever possible weaknesses might be detected in Maritain's political philosophy, these are overshadowed by the dominating strengths of that philosophy. It is capacious in its concerns, and provocative in its insights. It constitutes a coherent, commanding whole. Perhaps its most signal feature is the fact that it is everywhere charged with an abiding awareness of the primacy of the transcendent. It is thus a political philosophy which is constantly reminding us that political man, man in society, is completely incomprehensible unless he is seen as one who does not have here a lasting city, as one whose destiny is measured by eternity.³⁹

Notes

1. Maritain's most important single work in metaphysics is *The Degrees of Knowledge* (1932), which is often cited as his masterpiece. Other works worth noting are *A Preface to Metaphysics* (1933), and *Existence and the Existent* (1947). Of his works in moral philosophy, three are especially noteworthy, *Neuf leçons sur les notions premières de la philosophie morale* (1960), and *Dieu et la permission du mal* (1963). As to his works in the field of aesthetics, *Art and Scholasticism* (1920) was the first he wrote, and it continues to be the most influential, but *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953) is a much more comprehensive work, and one of the most distinguished books on the philosophy of art written in the 20th century. Other of his works in this field that should be consulted are *Frontières de la poésie* (1935), and *La Responsabilité de l'artiste* (1961).

2. Two valuable collections of Maritain's social thought have been assembled, *Scholasticism and Politics* (1940), edited by Mortimer Adler, and *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* (1955), edited by Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward.

3. "A nation," Maritain writes, "is a community of people who become aware of themselves as history has more or less made them, who treasure their own past, and who love themselves as they know or imagine themselves to be, with a kind of inevitable introversion." *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 5.

4. "The state is only that part of the body politic especially concerned with the maintenance of law, the promotion of the common welfare and public order, and the administration of public affairs. *Ibid.*, 12.

5. *Ibid.*, 126.

6. "Unjust authority," Maritain writes, "is not authority, as an unjust law is not law." *Ibid.*, 127.

7. *Ibid.*, 29.

8. *Ibid.*, 26.

9. "Personhood" is admittedly a clumsy, even somewhat ugly, word, but it is the best I can do. The French *personnalité*, which Maritain uses, is

commonly, and not unreasonably, translated by the English “personality,” but that word, it seems to me, carries connotations which run contrary to the depth of meaning that the French word conveys. So, I opt for “personhood.”

10. “Personality [i.e., personhood] is the subsistence of the spiritual soul communicated to the human composite.” *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 41.

11. Maritain did not approve of the designation of man as a “social animal,” insofar as that was understood to mean that men gathered together in communities under the compulsion of a natural instinct, much like bees and ants. The fact that men form societies in which to live is directly attributable to their identity as rational creatures. Human society is a work of human reason.

12. *The Person and the Common Good*, 97.

13. Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 176.

14. *Ibid.*, 293.

15. Jacques Maritain, *On the Philosophy of History* (Clifton, New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, 1973), 111 *et seq.*

16. *Integral Humanism*. See Appendix, “The Structure of Action,” 291-308.

17. *On the Philosophy of History*, 111.

18. *Ibid.*, 115.

19. Jacques Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar’s* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 11.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Man and the State*, 59. He adds: “Yet democracy is the only way through which the progressive energies in human history can pass.” *Ibid.*, 60.

22. *Ibid.*, 112-13.

23. *Ibid.*, 59.

24. *Ibid.*, 129.

25. Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960), 7. Elsewhere in this book Maritain writes: “Democracy of the person and humanism of the person spring forth from theocentric inspiration.” *Ibid.*, 85-86.

26. *Man and the State*, 76.

27. *Ibid.*, 111.

28. Charles A. Fecher, *The Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), 207.

29. *Man and the State*, 70.

30. *Integral Humanism*, 111.

31. In contrast to the situation which obtains today, Maritain believed that in medieval Christendom, “there was no similar growth in awareness bearing on the social as such and on the proper reality it constitutes.” *Ibid.*, 117.

32. *Man and the State*, 202.

33. *Scholasticism and Politics*, 19.

34. *Integral Humanism*, 242, 255, 287.

35. Joseph Cardinal Siri, *Gethsemane* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981), 92.

36. Cardinal Siri’s critique of Maritain’s thought, short as it is, deserves a much fuller treatment than I was able to give it here, chiefly because of the negative effect it seems to have had on some people, causing them to question Maritain’s standing as a philosopher and as a Catholic. An additional brief note: citing the Preface to *About the Church of Christ* (Maritain’s last book), Cardinal Siri remarks on the “solicitude and

perseverance [with which] he endeavors to defend the autonomy of philosophy compared with theology” (*Ibid.*, 94), leaving the impression that this is somehow an indefensible position. But I believe one can find passages in Pope Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* which support such a position, and it received clear support from Pope John Paul II. A large part of the problem here is that Cardinal Siri has a different understanding of autonomy than does Maritain, and he does not sufficiently appreciate Maritain’s very carefully developed thought regarding the concept. My own understanding of the concept sees no contradiction between granting real autonomy to philosophy, while at the same time acknowledging it to be subordinate to theology, and thus respecting philosophy’s honorable status as the “handmaid of theology,” *ancilla theologiae*. Finally, it should be said that Cardinal Siri, though a critic of Maritain, was a very respectful one, and he refers to him, quite aptly, as a “noble being.” (*Ibid.*, 95.)

37. Professor Joseph Evans, the founder of the Jacques Maritain Center at the University of Notre Dame, and the translator of *Integral Humanism*, among other of the philosopher’s works, was of the opinion that *Integral Humanism* has had more influence than *The Degrees of Knowledge*. This may be so, but the latter is by far and away the greater work. It is appropriately regarded as his masterpiece.

38. Charles Cardinal Journet, “Jacques Maritain Theologian,” *The New Scholasticism* (Volume XLVI, No. 1; Winter, 1972), 32-50. In this highly instructive article Cardinal Journet wrote: “Maritain has touched on the most profound and the most mysterious problems of the Christian life and theology.” (*Ibid.*, 49.)

39. Professor Ralph McInerny, for many years the director of Notre Dame’s Jacques Maritain Center, has written a beautiful tribute to the French philosopher in his book, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame.)