

# Jacques Maritain: Protean Figure of the Century

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WHILE WE USUALLY think of Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) as a philosophical monolith, a solid block of Catholic humanism, he was a typical modern intellectual, wearing the imprint of all the century's dominant ideologies. I do not believe in writing "psycho-analytical biographies," a sterile product of modern culture, yet we should at least weigh a few intimate factors which determined Maritain's philosophical religious personality.

As a high-bourgeois Protestant (in the France of the nineteenth century this fact had its importance in building a life), he converted under the Jewish Henri Bergson's influence to Catholicism, together with dozens of thinkers, writers, and artists. He was also the husband of Raissa Oumansoff, a Russian Jewess and a very forceful personality. I have it from a witness, guest at literary gatherings in the Paris of the 1920s and 1930s, that Raissa exerted a great influence on Jacques, something I may confirm through my own observation in 1950, at their home at Princeton University: the wife dominated the conversation around the dinner table, while the philosopher whom we had come to hear interjected only from time to time. She shaped the

ambiance with sentences like this: "Jacques and I think that...." A not infrequent case.

The second dominant impact on Maritain's poetic and half-mystical sensitivity was that of Charles Maurras, unquestionably the *princeps philosophorum* of this century's first half, and beyond. This influence did not only produce a superbly analytical (perhaps too rational) approach to issues, it also showed Maritain's predisposition to be of two minds, at once Bergsonian and Maurrassian, as much a contrast as possible. Thus, being a Maurrassian (Maritain later denied it) and a disciple of Bergson was no small exploit, and we must add also a third impact, that of the Jesuit priest, Clérissac, who was not only an admirer of Maurras, but also a mastermind easing Maritain's course in the Thomist direction. In a land where sharp intellectual differences create conflict and conciliation, four persons—Raissa, Bergson, Maurras and Clérissac (plus an untold number of others: Cocteau, Gilson, Max Jacob, Berdyaev, Julien Green, Mounier, Marc Sangnier)<sup>1</sup>—were sufficient to bring about either a life-long confusion or a living synthesis. This explains perhaps Maritain's own wide influence on his younger contemporaries, from Pope Paul VI, whom he enthralled, to America's Catholic professors (the

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“Commonweal-type”) in the years between 1940 and 1970 when the Vatican Council radicalized issues and brought other personalities to the fore.<sup>2</sup>

The Maritainian synthesis was Catholic philosophy, but not simply in its orthodox form, rather as a Thomism gently nudged toward leftist sympathies. The two rails were to determine a remarkable career. One was Thomism as such, again alive since Leo XIII’s pontificate. The other, a *mélange* of leftist currents whose fashion had begun at the end of the last century, not with Marx, but with the standard ideology of Jacobinism, Russian populism,<sup>3</sup> Marc Sangnier’s Catholic democracy, and Emmanuel Mounier’s Christian personalism, creator of the *Esprit*-group. Partly under his wife’s influence, Maritain broke with the Maurras-led *Action Française*, taking advantage of the opportune condemnation of the movement by Pius XI in 1926. That date represents an important reorientation in Maritain’s world-career. Before, he had been an anti-modernist, naming Descartes, Luther and Rousseau (“the three Reformers,” as he called them in an important work) as the fountain-head of credal and speculative errors. Later he turned to issues like social justice, the discontented masses, a certain sympathy for collectivism, anything hostile to the bourgeois mentality and structure.<sup>4</sup> Maritain’s intellectual development thus served as a blueprint for that of others, from Archbishop Montini of Milan (Paul VI) to Yves Simon. Many others made a similar pilgrimage from Right to Left, while others made it in the opposite direction.

The reasons for such a *déplacement* from one ideological horizon to the other are not hard to discover in Maritain’s case. Independently of ideas and concepts, we detect a disquiet soul waiting for high drama and shaken up by opposite intellectual encounters like the ones with Bergson, Maurras, Raissa herself.

In another register, we find that Maritain abandoned his attraction to Marxism (its Christian variety) and became, again in the name of Christianity, an enthusiastic devotee of the United States, believing that the American democratic model has a universal applicability, not because of this country’s prosperity and relative social peace, but because, in Maritain’s mind, it had come to embody the ideal, *spiritual democracy*. He trusted this model in a kind of supernatural way, believing that it is mankind’s vocation to establish such an ethical-political community. In spite of his later critique of an even more enthusiastic Teilhard (in *The Peasant of the Garonne*), Maritain wrote, in *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, that in a truly democratic society there would be no need to introduce legislation protective of the rights of religious believers, not even when such rights rest on basic (Christian) truths. Democracy is itself the common good. Needless to say, such convictions later had a tremendous influence on the atmosphere of the Vatican Council, so that people spoke of Maritain as one of the Fathers of the Council, as important through his influence as any bishop.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while Maritain’s Thomism became the latter’s classic expression in the eyes of our contemporaries, on another plane (this is what we called above the other pair of rails in Maritain’s thought), he taught a kind of Christianized Bergsonism, not far removed from the views of another follower of Bergson, Father Teilhard de Chardin. Like the latter two thinkers, Maritain seems to have posited a vast evolutionary impulse, a rise of man’s consciousness which is irresistible and which ought to be constantly fortified by the adherence of prominent men like priests and scholars. We very often meet this kind of mixture: enthusiasts for democracy who believe, however, in great, semi-mystical, guiding personalities. Fascism was a

suitable illustration: the masses *and* the *Führer-Prinzip*. Father Teilhard was convinced, for example, that the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes are a rudimentary form of collective consciousness, slowly elevating itself to the status of the ideal community. Maritain did not really question this evolutionary impulse, he merely objected when he found that Teilhard's apologists deified the impulse. As a historical-evolutionary motor force he went essentially along.

Nonetheless, Maritain's Catholic faith and sense of Thomist speculative discipline acted as a constant reminder that the lava of mystical rapture must be allowed to cool in conceptual moulds. There are famous passages in his oeuvre showing a remarkably sober thinker who resists not only particular theories, but also entire trends, rooted in centuries of tradition. Such passages read like judgments passed on grave errors, yet they seem to originate in a man of charity entitled to examine and draw conclusions. In some of these passages he settles his account with several of the outstanding men whom various traditions protect. Protestantism and the Enlightenment are in for such a critical treatment when Maritain's verdict falls: "Luther brought to mankind, 230 years before Jean-Jacques [Rousseau], the liberation from intelligence, a deliverance from the effort to think and to think according to the rules of logic." Sentence is passed on all idealist philosophies—Kant's, later Husserl's, and earlier Berkeley's—and of many of the moderns: "Idealist thinkers hold that we should not start from the knowledge of things but from the knowledge of knowledge" (*Les degrés du savoir*). Of Brahmanism he writes: "These pseudo-mystics strive to reach heights by human effort alone, without grace" (*An Introduction to Philosophy*). And there are the famous pages in *Le Paysan de la Garonne* in which Maritain, as it were, passes

before the rows of philosophers, each of whom receives less than honorable discharge. Descartes, Kant, Ricoeur ("Whom I rather mistrust"), Sartre: each is covered with compliments and admiring epithets for his insights, style, and achievements, until in the summary Maritain declares, emphatically aware that he is right, that in spite of their brilliance they are *not* philosophers! "They are *ideosophes*....The term is not pejorative, it merely suggests that their search proceeded along another path; not that of philosophy."

Bernard Doering calls this style "sarcastic." This is, of course, immaterial. Maritain's career, in spite of its detours and deviations, is integrally philosophical enough to be credited with genuine and well-argued theses, hard to contradict. In fact, Maritain makes sure to acknowledge the criticized thinker's great contributions to the achievements of the human spirit. Of Mircea Eliade, for example, he writes that "God be praised, he [Eliade] never wanted to be a guide for young people." These statements imply, whether the style is sarcastic or not, that Maritain easily escaped becoming an ossified mouthpiece for the ultimate wisdom advanced by many phenomenologues, hermeneutes, and other inventors of jargon. This is also because he walked, or at least he was tempted to walk, the many paths he later rejected, even blocked. His sarcasm may have been directed against himself, against the potentialities of his own speculation.

The resulting richness of thought turned Maritain into a popular speculative hero in both camps, and at any rate into a kind of enigmatic figure, perhaps even a traitor, for the Maurrassians.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he was not soft on his followers of the Left either, he who understood so well—at least outside of politics—the sources of sentimentalist errors, the false because objectless mys-

ticism, the science fiction of Teilhard. Yet, the question remains, though allies and opponents are too committed to find the answer: Having been a Catholic realist, how could Maritain espouse in politics so many leftist positions, centering around democracy, popular sovereignty, pluralism, and international relations?<sup>7</sup> Clearly Maritain seems to have reconciled the two. On the one hand, there are the works which gave him high credentials among Thomists,<sup>8</sup> Maurrasians (up to his secession, in 1926), the right-thinking; on the other hand, there are the circles which welcomed the questions he asked: How to reconcile the thinking of intellectuals within the Church with post-*Rerum Novarum* social concern, even its radical expressions like communist parties, American democracy, and pluralist society. Behind the latter, there was the hope of the intellectuals later fulfilled by the Vatican Council, that democracy had sturdy Christian roots, that the democratic regime is not necessarily Jacobinistic, that it can be trusted with passing laws friendly to Christianity liberally interpreted.

Here I have a personal interlude to cast light on the "Maritainian" intellectual attitude. *Esprit* magazine had been launched by Mounier in 1932, together with Maritain, Berdyaev, Albert Béguin, and others, labeled variously "Christian Democrats" or "Christian Socialists."<sup>9</sup> The summing-up of the journal's policy and outlook could have been a display of most things that a somewhat earlier Maritain would have probably rejected, which shows the rather rapid change that his ideas underwent in a few years. The time, the early thirties (the Wall Street crash, Roosevelt's New Deal socialism, Stalin's five-year plan, Hitler's national socialism), raised enough expectations for Mounier to become convinced that a new commitment by Christians was aborn. It was to lean on Marc

Sangnier's faith in democracy, Berdyaev's freshly imported Russian Orthodox mysticism, Teilhard's new cosmogony, secular social democratic dreams not yet detached from nineteenth-century spirituality, and not last, the "real" spirit of Marxism as opposed to disquieting news from the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding its eclecticism, *Esprit* was riding the waves that a few years later brought with them the Popular Front (and in Spain the anti-Franco *Frente Popular*) with its anarchist-communist component, then World War II, partly engineered by Stalin's need of a "final clash" of bourgeois powers of Germany, France, and Great Britain.

Many years later, in 1958, I walked into the *Esprit* office in Paris, in order to meet Jean-Marie Domenach, successor of Albert Béguin, himself having taken over the editorship from Mounier. Note that this was two years after the Budapest uprising, Khrushchev's famous speech, etc. But let us skip the topics of our conversation, and stop at Domenach's summing up: Yes, the communist regime committed evil deeds, but Khrushchev still presides over the destinies of the only country where the means of production are collectivized.<sup>10</sup>

*Esprit* was not just one journal among many, it was a religious gathering—one increasingly secular; it was also an ideological ambiance, almost a political party, allied not only with Maritain and his admirers, but also with Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*, an openly fellow-traveling leftist forum. The question is, however, not the exploration of the journal's supportive convictions of the Maritainian beliefs, but Maritain's place in the movement—while he became the dean of Thomist philosophers and occupied a privileged position among the future pope's, Paul VI, advisors.

A (tentative) answer is Maritain's supreme skill at balancing acts. Raissa's book of reminiscences oozes with love,

charity, and expressions of friendship, a kind of semi-mystical rise toward an ineffable (apophatic) deity who is activated in history as the ultimate inspiration of human endeavor. Almost all spiritualists (think of the all-embracing word, *esprit*), no matter their point of departure and their itinerary, may join this gathering of pious rebels. As the uncontested charismatic leader, the ex-Maurrassian (and so much else) Maritain became a central figure: a strict Thomist, an anti-fascist, an admirer of democracy, yet leading a devotional yet professional life, even a public and political life if we count his ambassadorship to the Vatican in the immediate post-war years. Here was a modern and complex man who immersed himself in erudition and practicality, and who ended up sacralized by the brand new alliance between Catholicism and democracy. The final act of consecration came with the Vatican Council whose general orientation and particular decisions bear, in the eyes of all, the Maritain imprint.

But there are, of course, better than tentative answers also as to why did Maritain become a kind of repository of Catholic, and not only Catholic, wisdom in this century of savage conflicts. In a medieval sense he was a *viator*, a pilgrim visiting and searching out many shrines. This is a testimony to his intellectual honesty, but it has only become credible because of his insistence on solid, unchangeable roots. These roots are of a metaphysical nature, and this metaphysics is inalterably Catholic and Thomist. While his admirers have been intrigued by his manysidedness, their true recognition of him is based on his central commitment, which may or may not be theirs too. This is not to veil Maritain's baffling paradoxes. Here is an illustration of his "two sides" justifying many of the attacks on him, for example by Father Julio Meinvielle, the Argentine scholar-priest. This is what Maritain

writes in his *Preface to Metaphysics*: "For the moderns, the object of logic is no longer things themselves, thought as transported into the mind, but pure forms of thought, as though knowledge had a structure and forms independent of things and the logician studied these forms and structure of thought." This is Aristotle and his struggle against the forever active invasion of subjectivism, identical in scope with Maritain's own struggle against forms of modern subjectivism, Luther, Descartes, Kant, Husserl.

Yet the same Maritain, with a kind of irresistible movement toward the modernist duality of mind, accepts the Bergsonian and near-Teilhardian supposition that man's mental and moral stuff has been rising thanks to some evolutionary *élan*, and will continue to do so. In its most aggressive form I have met this mentality in pre-Allendist Chile where Jesuit journals and forums, even Catholic syndicalists, discussed the necessary "conscientization" of peasants and workers, an effort which came down concretely to Marxist propaganda. Was this because Maritain's name is literally sacralized by the South American bourgeoisie (the clergy is more radical) as the author of formulas reconciling opposing poles of the economic struggle? The fact remains that Maritain's status was enhanced, while he warned against religions rooted in a mixture of emotionalism and science, giving as an example the positivism and sentimentalism of Auguste Comte. Yet his own religious philosophy, both orthodox and Thomist, did not save him and his disciples from occasional excursions into strange semi-spiritual lands. As he wrote in *Scholasticism and Politics*: "The liberation demanded by man is such that the possession of the world would still leave him unsatisfied; we consider man to be an unusual animal who will be content with nothing less than absolute joy."<sup>11</sup>

1. See Raissa Maritain, *Les Grandes Amitiés* (1949), among other things also a chronicle of the men and ideas swirling around the couple. 2. Bernard Doering celebrates Maritain in quasi-uncritical terms in his book *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame, 1983). Maritain introduced to American Catholic college professors and journals the other side of French Catholicism about which the American Catholic milieu used to hear little, the leftist (progressivist) side. This prepared them for the liturgical and other reforms effected later by the Vatican Council. 3. In the late twenties, Nicolas Berdyaev, a recent refugee from the Soviet Union, joined Maritain and others as "leftist Christians." Let us mention that Jacques and Raissa had met while collecting signatures for the defense of Russian socialist students put on trial by the Tsarist tribunals. 4. This detestation of the "bourgeois" has been very much a French phenomenon. Facing individualism with its capitalistic overtones, the pull of the masses on young intellectuals of Left and Right has been present since 1789, basically a liberal-bourgeois revolution, from Lamennais to Emile Zola. This attraction for the "masses" may turn a French intellectual toward Hitler or Stalin, as numerous examples show. I have found this mental gravitational force as far as Brazil: Bishop Helder Camara, a prominent leftist in the sixties and seventies, had begun as a sympathizer of fascism, later of communism, the Spanish-American variety, alive in Portuguese-speaking Brazil too. 5. Father John Courtney Murray, the American Jesuit, shared Maritain's judgments about democracy and the Church and about their expected convergence, almost fusion. He was probably as influential at the Vatican Council as Maritain himself, and more directly so with regard to certain conciliar documents. 6. This is especially true in the case of Father Julio Meinvielle of Argentina, who devoted several writings and entire volumes to the critique of Maritain, his concept of politics and the human person (1945, 1948, etc.). 7. Among the addenda to *Le Paysan de la Garonne*, (the manuscript was finished in December 1965, that is when the Vatican Council, too, ended), Maritain continued his struggle with Teilhard de Chardin's ideas. Was the controversial Jesuit a genuine mystic, as theologian Henri de Lubac and Cardinal Journet argued, or a subjectivist, and "enthusiast" as Ronald Knox would re-

gard him? Visibly, Maritain was unable to settle the case, but again his indecisive way of writing about it may endear him with leftist preferences. 8. It would be, of course, a gross error to place all Thomists in the Maritainian camp, but following Father Clérissac, this was for a while a semi-official stance. 9. These two labels are variously given to political parties in South American countries, until they turned to the model of the United States and began using "Conservative" and "Liberal." However, "Christian Democrat" and "Catholic Socialist" better expressed the Maritainian heritage, and suggested, at the same time, the leading interpretation of the French philosopher's religious/political idea. "Christian" and "Catholic" had an odor of moderate leftism about them in the South American context, which was then pulled farther to the "Left" by the words "Democrat" and "Socialist". 10. Jean-Marie Domenach died in 1997, an anti-communist, but still hesitant on most issues of public interest. His last battle literally crushed him: it was against Jewish intellectuals who accused him, as the retired director of the very progressivist *Esprit*, of being against Israeli policy *vis-à-vis* the Arabs, a disguise, they insisted, of his anti-Semitism. 11. We may note a somber feeling of self-destruction on the part of leading intellectuals of the Catholic Church, at any rate a lack of confidence and certainly a lack of decisive guidance and action. Well-known are Pope Paul VI's desperate words about the questionable wisdom of sacrificing the Latin language on the altar of the world, which may not even care. Maritain himself declares: "In my opinion we have today to deal with a considerable liquidation, a liquidation of five centuries of classical culture, the culture in question being a brilliant dissolution of medieval civilization." (*Scholasticism and Politics*). Self-destruction, questionable wisdom, liquidation, dissolution are not exactly hopeful and promising words on the part of an institution's leaders. The book in question sheds some further light on the "Hamletian" features of Maritain's thinking also. The initial sentence suggests the "two rails" on which this thinking runs: "...I should note at once that my point of view will not be that of mere logic of ideas and doctrines, but that of the concrete logic of the events of history." On what then, does the "first logic" rest?