

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

Jacques Maritain and the Jewish Question: Theology, Identity and Politics

Robert A. Ventresca

King's University College at The University of Western Ontario

Volume 2, Issue 2(2007): 58-69

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol2/iss2>

Author's note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 37th Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, March 11-13, 2007, Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic Studies and *Case Western Reserve University*, Cleveland, Ohio.

Introduction

In a curious interview with the American Catholic journal *The Commonweal* in December 1938, the noted French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain was asked pointedly: *Are you a Jew?* “Unfortunately, no,” Maritain responded, “I am not a Jew. I regret it, because it is a great privilege to belong to the same race as Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin.”¹ The question was prompted no doubt by the earlier comments of General Franco’s Minister of the Interior, Serrano Suñer calling Maritain not only a Jew, but a mason and a communist as well. When asked whether he was a communist, Maritain sarcastically observed that, since he was a Jew according to the pro-Franco press, how could he not also be a communist?²

Maritain understood, of course, that Francoist officials were decrying him as a ‘Jew’ because he was a thorn in the side of the many Catholic supporters of Franco. Here, after all, was a well known and highly regarded European Catholic thinker who refused to support Franco’s ‘holy war’ against republican elements, which in Maritain’s view, “was bringing Spain to ruin with the help of Mussolini’s fascism and Hitler’s racism.”³ Maritain’s opposition to what he decried as the *Catholicism of Franco* thus became intertwined with the Jewish Question. As we shall see, Maritain’s thinking on the place of anti-Semitism in the authoritarian and racist ideologies of interwar and wartime Europe played a catalytic role in his life-long effort to address the Jewish Question in Catholic political theology and philosophy.

In the modern age, there was a deeply held belief in Catholic circles, which saw the seeming ‘ills’ of modernity as the product

of nefarious ‘Jewish influences.’ In this suspicion of Jewish influence and its supposed deleterious effect on the moral health of society, Catholic teaching and preaching contributed a significant cultural antecedent to the political anti-Semitism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴ In short, Catholic theological attitudes towards Judaism were manifest in normative conclusions about the civil status of Jews in European society. Clearly, Catholic moral doctrine demanded the outright condemnation of racial anti-Semitism on the grounds that it violated Church teachings on natural law. But, crucially, this condemnation did not necessarily translate into a belief in the *equality* of all peoples in civil law. That the Church never advocated the full political and civil rights of Jews in European states speaks to the unresolved tensions between Catholic political theology and philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and modern liberal democracy; to some of the fundamental differences between traditional Catholic and liberal views of freedom, of the source and meaning of human dignity, and of the nature and purpose of the State.⁵

Maritain was a leading figure in a comparatively small but discernible movement *within* Catholicism, in Europe and North America, before, during and after the Second World War to resolve these fundamental and deeply consequential tensions on theological and philosophical grounds. In his survey of the dynamic relationship between Catholic and American ideas of freedom in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, John T. McGreevy identifies Maritain, together with John Courtney

⁴ Martin Rhonheimer, “The Holocaust: What Was Not Said,” *First Things*, 137 (November 2003): 18-27.

⁵ Oliver Logan, “Catholicism and anti-Semitism,” review article of Renato Moro, *La Chiesa e lo sterminio degli ebrei* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002) and Catherine Brice and Giovanni Miccoli, eds., *Les racines chrétiennes de l’antisémitisme politique (fin XIXe-Xxe siècles)* (Rome: Collection de l’Ecole Française de Rome, 2003), in *Modern Italy* 9 (May 2004): 101-105. See also, Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

¹ “Une Interview de Jacques Maritain,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 7: 1086-1096, here at 1086.

² On the speech by Serrano Suner, see *Oeuvres Complètes*, 6: 1167.

³ “Une Interview de Jacques Maritain,” 1086.

Murray, S.J., as “leaders in a campaign...to move Catholic theology and philosophy toward a more nuanced understanding of the challenges posed by modernity.” European Catholic intellectuals, many of whom were living in exile in the U.S. by the late 1930s, helped to populate this movement; from Germany there was Dietrich von Hildebrand, Heinrich Rommen, Heinrich Bruning, to name but a few. From Italy there was Don Luigi Sturzo, while the French were well represented by such thinkers as Yves Simon and Paul Vignaux.⁶

One of the distinguishing features of Maritain’s work, however, was his persistent concern with the Jewish question. By the late 1930s, it was evident that Maritain hoped to furnish the intellectual basis for concrete transformations to how Catholicism thought and taught about Jews and Judaism. Equally important, the fusion of theological and philosophical reflection on the Jewish Question, with public action was intended to effect – ambitiously – an epochal transformation in the way Christians and Jews interacted as members of the same body politic, working to realize the same common good. In this regard, Maritain’s thought on the Jewish Question, on anti-Semitism, and on its relationship to Christianity in the modern world serves as a prism through which to view the evolution of Catholic thought and political action before and after the Shoah, and indeed *because* of the Shoah.

Our reconsideration of Maritain’s thought on the Jewish question will follow *two* broad lines of inquiry. First, we will sketch a general outline of Maritain’s central arguments against any and all forms of Catholic-Christian anti-Semitism, as well as his earnest, albeit vague and perhaps naïve search for workable solutions to what he readily identified as the ‘Jewish problem’ in European life. Second, we will take up a dimension of Maritain’s thought that has long troubled Maritain scholars –

⁶ John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 191.

one has in mind here Ralph McInerney’s contentious juxtaposition of Maritain’s capacity for “great lucidity” at the level of speculative enquiry, with Maritain’s propensity for “practical opacity” in the concrete application of philosophical insights to the pressing temporal matters at hand.⁷

Maritain’s contemporaries and even his most loyal and devoted disciples realized the tension in Maritain’s work. Writing to Maritain at the end of 1940, the French philosopher Yves R. Simon, one of Maritain’s most accomplished students, remarked, “I am more and more persuaded that even the healthiest theoretical work can...contribute to the disasters in the immediately practical realm because when the house is burning with the inhabitants locked inside, what is important is the immediate and practical.” A few months later, Simon expressed his growing conviction that Maritain’s continued defence of Thomism and his idea of “democracy of the person” – *personalism* – were inadequate to confront the immediate dangers posed by authoritarian movements and regimes. Simon told Maritain, “[y]our method is neither utopian nor mythic; let’s call it *prophetic*. It is conceivable to me that this method will have great value for private contemplation.” Still, Simon worried that the practical effect of Maritain’s theoretical work might be to “kill action,” precisely at a time when concrete action was needed to meet the threat posed by totalitarianism.⁸

Let us consider, then, Maritain’s early writings on the ‘Jewish question’ through the critical lens afforded by Yves R. Simon, namely, with an eye to assessing the *practical* implications for

⁷ Ralph McInerney, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain* (Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 86-87.

⁸ Yves R. Simon to Maritain, February 11, 1941. This letter is found in the voluminous correspondence between Maritain and Simon, now conserved by the Jacques Maritain Center at the University of Notre Dame. My profound thanks to Anthony O. Simon, Director of the Simon Institute for his gracious generosity in providing me full access to this vast and rich resource.

the world today of Maritain's *prophetic* conception of a 'new Christendom.'⁹ For the purpose of brevity and clarity, we will concern ourselves with *three* defining strands of Maritain's though on the Jewish question.¹⁰ The first strand offers a diagnosis of the issue by isolating what Maritain called the *spiritual essence* of anti-Jewish sentiment, namely the world's hatred of Jews and of biblical Israel's 'sacred mission.' That mission, of course, was to serve as abiding 'witness to the Scriptures.' To this end, Maritain described anti-Semitism as *Christophia*, linking the hatred of Jews to anti-Christian sentiments. "It is the vocation of Israel which the world execrates," Maritain concluded. "To be hated by the world is their glory, as it is also the glory of Christians who live by faith." In short, anti-Jewish and anti-Christian sentiments sprang from the same source, a common 'spiritual essence', namely, "the same recalcitrance of the world, which desires to be wounded neither with the wounds of Adam nor with the wound of the Savior."¹¹

The second strand in Maritain's thought spoke of Israel – understood here as the *biblical Israel* or the Jewish people, rather than the postwar state of Israel per se – as a *paradox* and a *mystery*. Maritain likened the "mystery of Israel" to the

⁹ By far the most comprehensive list of Maritain's many writings on the subject is Charles P. O'Donnell, "A Select Bibliography on Jacques Maritain's Writings on Jews, Christians, and Anti-Semitism," in Robert Royal, ed., *Jacques Maritain and the Jews* (Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 273-275.

¹⁰ Unlike much of his other writing, Maritain's thought on the Jewish question is remarkably accessible to the interested lay reader. The definitive statement, so to speak, can be found in Maritain's *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* (New York, 1939). It is important to note, however, that this book was written *before* the events of the Second World War and so some of its analysis seems painfully inadequate and anachronistic when read against the backdrop of the subsequent tragedy that befell European Jews. Still, the book remains the most comprehensive representation of Maritain's thinking on the subject.

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question*, 29-30.

"mystery of the Church" – the idea of the people of Israel as a "mystical body"; with a sacred, and "superhuman" vocation. "It is true," Maritain wrote Sir Robert Mayer in 1954, "that Israel is both people and religion." But, Maritain concluded that Jews could only maintain their "spiritual identity" by virtue of the "fire of their religious faith," not by virtue of a secular state alone.¹² To be sure, Maritain supported the Zionist cause, as he had done since the 1920s. In the middle of the Second World War, writing on behalf of the *United Palestine Appeal* (based in New York) Maritain acknowledged that Zionism was not the only solution to the Jewish problem, but that it constituted "an historic importance of the first order." Maritain spoke eloquently of the "return to Palestine" as the "prelude to the deliverance from exile." Still, Maritain insisted that Zionism "is called upon, I don't mean to give rise to a political state like the Gentile ones (whose nationalism, moreover is not a blessing for humanity), but rather to become one day the animating center for all dispersed Jewry."¹³

The third strand of Maritain's thinking on the Jewish question reflected an earnest, if somewhat naïve attempt to propose concrete, workable ways to afford European Jews peace, security and stability within the confines of European nation-states, and beyond. Here Maritain was arguably his most prophetic, but perhaps at the same time, his least practical. For the future of European and international politics, Maritain posited an ideal political regime based upon the twin concepts of *pluralism* and *personalism*. Maritain envisioned the emergence of what he called a "new Christendom." He was careful to distinguish it from medieval forms of Christian states,

¹² Jacques Maritain to Sir Robert Mayer, November 9, 1954. Maritain Papers, Jacques Maritain Center, The University of Notre Dame. File JM 1/07.10.

¹³ Jacques Maritain to Nathan Strauss, Honorary Chairman of the United Palestine Appeal (For the Defense and Upbuilding of the Jewish National Home in Palestine), September 20, 1943. In JM 4/04.01, Maritain Papers, Jacques Maritain Center, University of Notre Dame.

which had fostered various forms of anti-Semitic attitudes and anti-Jewish practices.

For Maritain, if such a new Christendom ever were to emerge, it would be a “secular” type of civilization, *not* the “sacral” civilization of the Middle Ages. Most important, the new Christendom, precisely because it was faithful to the Gospels, was to be a regime founded on the *dignity of the human person*, and on the complete *equality of all individuals in civic rights and liberties*.¹⁴

Maritain’s understanding of pluralism was concerned expressly with the place of religious faith and its open expression in the public realm. This new pluralist regime was to be organized along the lines of what Maritain called *spiritual families*, as opposed to national or ethnic lines. Maritain thus envisioned Jews and Christians, as members of distinct, legally recognized spiritual families that would enter into direct agreement with one another, to work together in fellowship towards the realization of the common good of the political community writ large.

Faced with the *political* crisis facing European Jewry in the 1930s, which in turn had been enabled by the *political* crises of the interwar period, what was the *practical* value or effect of Maritain’s philosophical and theological ruminations on the nature and origins of the Jewish Question? More to the point, of what immediate practical value were Maritain’s ill-defined visions of a ‘new Christendom’ emerging from the age of the dictators; of a new political regime based on Gospel-values and thus recognizing the complete civic equality, political and religious freedoms of European Jews, regardless of their religious or political commitments? That is the question.

¹⁴ See the highly useful collection edited by Robert Royal, *Jacques Maritain and the Jews* (Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

Tentative First Steps: The Early Maritain on the Jewish Question

From the start of his career, Maritain devoted a considerable amount of time and effort to thinking about the religious, social and political relationship of Jews and Judaism to European society.¹⁵ We can discern two distinct periods in Maritain’s thinking on the Jewish Question and on anti-Semitism. As a relatively young philosopher and recent convert to Catholicism, Maritain’s early writings on the Jewish Question betrayed an altogether conventional approach to the topic, adhering to rather commonplace assertions regarding the two distinct aspects to the Jewish question: the theological or spiritual dimension, and the political-social dimension of the problem. There was nothing new in this distinction between Judaism as a religious system, and the Jewish question as a political, social and economic dynamic in European life. Authoritative Catholic publications in the nineteenth century, including the Vatican’s official newspaper *l’Osservatore Romano* or other influential journals like the Jesuit *La Civiltà Cattolica* were replete with commentary on the purported difference between the *religious Jew* and the so-called *irreligious Jew*, and on how Christians of good conscience ought to deal with either accordingly.¹⁶

Maritain’s early writings exhibited strains of the same popular stereotypes about Jews as politically and socially subversive and revolutionary. The young Maritain was beholden to what we might consider a variation of Catholic-Christian *secessionism* that saw the persecution of Jews as the

¹⁵ As we will see below, one of the earliest recorded samples of Maritain’s thinking on the Jewish Question was reflected in a talk he gave to the *Semaine des Écrivains Catholiques* in 1921. See his “A Propos De La Question Juive,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 2, 1196-1203.

¹⁶ For an excellent survey of how ‘the Jewish question’ was dealt with in the pages of the Jesuits’ *La Civiltà Cattolica*, see Ruggero Taradel and Barbara Raggi, *La segregazione amichevole. La Civiltà Cattolica e la questione ebraica*, (Rome: Riuniti, 2000).

regrettable but inevitable expression of the “providential decree” felt throughout history as the living witness to Golgotha. For the young Maritain, it was self-evident that “from the moment [the Jewish people] refused the true Messiah, they were destined fatally to play a subversive role in the world.”¹⁷ While European Jews had proven their loyalty to their respective states by their blood during the First World War, Maritain insisted that the great mass of the Jewish people “nevertheless remain separated, reserved, in part because of the persecution they face.” According to Maritain, then, one could hardly expect from the Jews any real “attachment” to the “common good” of the Christian West. Maritain concluded that the Jewish disinterest in the common good of Christian civilization explains the presence of “Jewish intrigues” and the “Jewish spirit” at the heart of most revolutionary movements of modern times.¹⁸

It is jarring to hear Jacques Maritain, renowned for his teachings against anti-Semitism and for his rescue activities of so many European Jews during the Second World War,¹⁹ speak of the obvious “necessity” for a “struggle for civic health against the *secret judaeo-masonic societies and against cosmopolitan finance*.” [Emphasis added] Maritain even saw the need for certain “general measures” to preserve social

¹⁷ “A Propos De La Question Juive,” 1196-1197.

¹⁸ Maritain, “A Propos De La Question Juive,” 1197. Cf. Bernard Lazare, *L'Antisémitisme, son histoire et ses causes*, first published in 1894. See the English translation, with an introduction by Robert S. Wistrich, *Antisemitism: Its History and Causes* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), here at p. 142. Lazare wrote “[t]o the scourges befalling him [the Jew] replied neither with the Mohammedan’s fatalism, nor with the Christian’s resignation, but with revolt. As he possessed a concrete ideal, he wanted to realize it, and whatever retarded its advent aroused his wrath. Maritain also refers to a book by Darmsteter, *Les Prophètes d’Israël*, as well as the book by Maurice Muret, *L’Esprit Juif* (Paris: Perrin et Compagnie, 1901).

¹⁹ See Michael R. Marrus, “The Ambassador and the Pope: Pius XII, Jacques Maritain and the Jews,” in *Commonweal*, October 22, 2004, 14-19.

order and civic health; such measures, Maritain admitted without a hint of hesitation, admittedly were easier in a time when “civilization was officially Christian.”²⁰

Maritain was careful to insist that any such measures be entirely lawful and enacted by virtue of the duly constituted governing authority. Above all, he urged his fellow Catholic writers to insist that the political and social dimensions of the Jewish Question be met with reasoned and charitable debate – without hatred, he wrote, and in keeping with intellectual consistency and discipline. “Popular passions and pogroms,” Maritain concluded, “never resolved anything; just the opposite.”²¹ What is more, Maritain insisted that the “faults and infidelities” of Christians themselves be acknowledged as among the foremost causes of the “universal disorder” troubling the present time. Accordingly, Catholic writers were to avoid deforming the Jewish Question into a gross caricature in which ‘the Jew’ was the sole cause of societal ills.

The Practical Limits of Maritain’s Prophetic Method

Maritain’s identification of a certain segment of the Jewish population, and of a mystical Jewish ‘spirit’ or character that explained the preponderant influence of Jews over revolutionary disorders in society, is a telling indication of the extent to which the young philosopher’s views on the Jewish Question bore the influence of the French neo-Thomists whom he regarded as his spiritual advisors and teachers. It also suggests something of the naiveté and superficiality with which Maritain often approached practical matters of political and social consequence. In addressing the political dimensions of

²⁰ To illustrate his point, Maritain points his reader to a study titled *Saint Thomas et la question juive* by Monsignor Deploige, as well as a study by one M. de la Tour du Pin, titled “La question juive et la révolution sociale,” in the collection *Vers un ordre social chrétien* (n.d.).

²¹ Maritain, “A Propos De La Question Juive,” 1198.

the Jewish Question, Maritain revealed the influence of his neo-Thomistic preparation in his repeated references to the common good, to the need to struggle against the sources of social dissension and civil unrest, and in his openness to legal and/or political measures to limit the deleterious effects of 'Jewish intrigues' in society that called to mind some of the worst anti-Jewish excesses of the Middle Ages.

It is well known that the French neo-Thomists with the greatest influence over Maritain demonstrated considerable sympathy, and in some cases outright support for authoritarian, reactionary movements such as Charles Maurras's *L'Action Française*. In his seminal study of the movement, the historian Eugen Weber attests to the well-known affinity leading French neo-Thomists displayed for the politics of Maurras and his movement. "Unwordly men, great scholars like Billot or Father Thomas Pègues," Weber observes, "saw only [A.F.'s] single-minded opposition to the worldly forces of modernism. Catholic faculties were crowded with admirers of Maurras who...tended to consider his anti-liberal ideas infallible."²²

So it was with Father Humbert Clérissac, the man who introduced the young Maritain, only recently converted to Catholicism, to the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. Raïssa Maritan, herself of Jewish origin and a convert to Catholicism along with her husband Jacques, recalled that Clérissac "passionately admired Maurras; in his disgust with the modern world, in his pure enthusiasm for the metaphysical notion of order, [Clérissac] trusted [*l'Action Française*]."²³ Such was Maritain's admiration of Clérissac and other French neo-Thomists, and such was his impressionability at this stage in his career, that Maritain came to be loosely associated with (although never formally a member) of Maurras's movement.

²² Eugen Weber, *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 220.

²³ Weber, *Action Française*, 220.

This affiliation was an embarrassment to Maritain already by the 1930s, spurred on in large part by the papal condemnation of the movement in 1926. This embarrassment was further heightened during the years of the Second World War, when the seeds of the reactionary, anti-parliamentary politics of the 1920s and 1930s were bearing deadly fruit in the collaborationist policies of the Vichy regime. Maritain's student and friend, the French philosopher Yves R. Simon, an émigré intellectual teaching at the University of Notre Dame, was not shy about reminding Maritain of his brief flirtation with the Action Française in the 1920s. Nor was he shy about decrying the troubling propensity of leading French Thomists like Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange to support Petain's regime and its more odious policies. Simon wrote Maritain in early September 1941, "How disgusting this Garrigou! Were I not so respectful of the sacerdotal character, I would, I think, write him that he is the one I will hold responsible if harm befalls even one of my Jewish friends."²⁴

For many Maritain scholars, his long and very public association with a right wing, anti-Semitic, reactionary movement was an unfortunate, regrettable episode in the distinguished career of a great thinker, and thus prefer to gloss over this early period of Maritain's life. Still others insist that Maritain's affiliation with the movement was superficial, and ephemeral. Yet, as Bernard Doering and Ralph McInerny, among others, have demonstrated, it is hard to justify paying so little attention to the perplexing matter of Maritain's association with *Action Française*, or to Maritain's evident propensity to change political commitments virtually overnight.²⁵

²⁴ Yves R. Simon to Jacques Maritain, September 3, 1941, *Yves R. Simon Institute*, South Bend, Indiana.

²⁵ Ralph McInerny, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain*, 64. See also Rene Mougel, "Jacques Maritain et la condamnation de l'Action Française," *Cahiers Jacques Maritain*, 41 (December 2000): 4-51.

That Maritain's loose affiliation with Maurras was connected to Maritain's recent encounter with Thomism (he first read Aquinas a few years after entering the Church) is made evident by the collaboration between the two men on the journal *La Revue Universelle*. Notably, Maritain was designated as the journal's philosophy editor, to guide the journal's work of promoting Thomistic philosophy.²⁶ The significance of Maritain's work with the journal should not be underestimated. After all, he remained associated with it, to varying degrees, from 1920 to 1927. The journal's joint promotion of Thomistic philosophy, under Maritain's tutelage, along with its promotion of the political ideas of *Action Française* solidified the growing public association between Thomistic thought and the politics of the French Right.

Maritain's growing interest in Thomism after converting to Catholicism brought him into contact with prominent French neo-Thomists such as Garrigou-Lagrange, Billot and Pègues. These neo-Thomists, as we have seen, were themselves politically committed to Maurras and his movement. Speaking of Père Clérisac, Maritain's recalled that his spiritual advisor saw in *Action Française* the political shield to protect the "dogmatic statement of the faith" from the "dangers then posed by Modernism." Maritain went on to explain, "[t]he fact that *Action Française* fought these errors from outside, denouncing relentlessly the influence of Bergson, the anti-intellectualism of a Blondel or Laberthonnière, endeared it to him, and all the more because he was upset by the ravages of these errors made among young priests and seminarians."²⁷

²⁶ For further detail on the journal and the circumstances surrounding its establishment, see Bernard Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals*; and Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain: Les Mèdiants du Ciel* (Paris: Stock, 1995). See also Guillaume Bourgeade, "Jacques Maritain et la Revue Universelle," *Cahiers Jacques Maritain* 46 (June 2003): 2-30.

²⁷ Quoted in Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain*, 147.

It would be tempting to dismiss Maritain's affiliation with *Action Française* as an aberration, or youthful naiveté. That it was naiveté is easy enough to believe. The problem, as Ralph McInerny reminds us, is that Maritain's political involvement demonstrated a consistent pattern of such naiveté and about-faces. It suggests that Maritain demonstrated a kind of "practical opacity" alongside the "great lucidity on the level of practical theory" for which he was, and is, greatly admired. "The deeper fact," McInerny concludes, "is that [Maritain] was far more interested in atemporal things, and his excursions into the practical put one in mind of Plato's philosopher being dragged against his bent into the political realm, something that happened again and again over Maritain's long career."²⁸

Thomism and the Promise of Democracy

Whether Maritain's tendency to move across the political-ideological spectrum was the product of naiveté, or the result of inexperience with and inattention to modern mass politics, his commitment to Thomism as the basis for his political thinking remained a constant throughout his life. And the political thought of Aquinas left room open to be interpreted – and in the case of Charles Maurras, manipulated – for different political ends. As Paul Sigmund observes, Aquinas's political writings provide "authoritarian, constitutionalist...and democratic" answers to the basic political questions on the nature and extent of government.²⁹ A systematic consideration of Aquinas's political thought is beyond the scope of the present study.³⁰ It is nevertheless relevant to understand that, as with

²⁸ McInerny, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain*, 64, 86.

²⁹ Paul E. Sigmund, "The Catholic Tradition and Modern Democracy," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Autumn 1987): 530-548, here at 534.

³⁰ For an introduction to Thomas's political thought, see Paul E. Sigmund, editor and translator, *St. Thomas Aquinas, On Ethics and Politics* (New York, 1988); Walter Ullmann, *A History of Medieval Political Thought* (New York,

any corpus of philosophical thought, clarity and incisiveness coexist with ambiguity, contingency and contradiction in Aquinas's political thought. What is more, the political use, or abuse of his thought by shrewd political activists like Charles Maurras should never obscure the spirit or the letter of the original. Maritain, unlike Maurras, spent a lifetime working to discern the true spirit of Aquinas's thought.

For this reason, we can agree with Ralph McInerney in appreciating how Thomism provided a "solid continuity" in Maritain's encounter with modernity.³¹ Maritain's intellectual and spiritual commitments to Thomism moderated his approach to the problems of modernity, especially in the political and social realm. Through a dynamic application of Thomism, Maritain's work helped to bridge Catholic thought on politics and modernity with prevailing liberal, secular ideas about the proper relationship between religion, society and politics. In short, Thomism influenced Maritain in his efforts to resolve the longstanding "alienation" between the Church and the modern liberal democratic system.³² At the same time, it was Thomism that solidified Maritain's conviction that the prevailing political ideologies of the modern era and the modern view of man – as proposed by liberalism or by communism – were untenable and fundamentally incompatible with Christian faith.

It is arguably Maritain's singular contribution to Catholic thought on the Jewish Question that he attempted, with varying degrees of success, to fuse Catholic theological understandings of Judaism with the political and social realities

1975). See also *The Political Ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas*, edited with an introduction by Dino Bigongiari (New York: The Free Press, 1997).

³¹ McInerney, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain*, 86.

³² See Paul E. Sigmund's excellent article, "Maritain on Politics," in Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini, eds., *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 153-170, here at 153.

presented by the "dispersion" of the Jewish people in predominantly Christian lands. This central fact of history, as Maritain saw it early on in his career, presented a "delicate" and perhaps irresolvable problem. The realization that the theological understandings of Judaism could not be separated from the political and social dimensions of the Jewish question, at least not in practical terms, came to Maritain rather lately in his career. Certainly by the latter part of the 1930s, with the increasingly radical and violent nature of anti-Semitism in Germany and other parts of Europe, including predominantly Catholic countries like Italy and even Maritain's beloved France, the Thomist philosopher jettisoned what appears, in the light of posterity, a naïve and illusory distinction between theology and politics. On the level of speculative enquiry, which was always Maritain's strongest suit, it was fine and good to speak of "the vocation of the Jewish people" as distinct altogether from "political" questions such as Zionism or the revolutionary impulse of the "Jewish spirit." Yet, in terms of attitudes and policies designed to marginalize Jews from public life and restrict their civil rights as citizens, such a distinction was easily lost, or rather ignored.

In the early part of his career, Maritain did not give any systematic or profound consideration to the nexus between vague or ill-defined theological concepts, and the exploitation of such vagueness for political ends. It was a practical insight that escaped Maritain in his relationship with Maurras and *Action Française* in the 1920s. The pattern repeated itself in subsequent years. As we saw above, during the Second World War, for instance, Maritain's student and close friend Yves R. Simon and other colleagues such as Waldemar Gurian, both of whom taught at Notre Dame, repeatedly questioned the practical consequences of Maritain's speculative reasoning. Commenting on Maritain's *A travers le desastre*, a book chronicling the events leading up to the fall of France in 1940 and the establishment of the Vichy regime, Simon remarked,

“Your method is neither utopian nor mythic; let’s call it prophetic. It is conceivable to me that this method will have great value for private contemplation.” Simon worried that the practical effects of such prophetic vision, however, would be to “kill action.”³³

The corpus of Maritain’s work on the Jewish question similarly might be described as “prophetic,” even if, as we have seen, there were always lingering concerns about the practical utility of the eminent philosopher’s ruminations on the heady events of interwar and wartime Europe. The prophetic quality of Maritain’s thought on the Jewish question is evident in his central thesis about the “vocation of the Jewish people” and its relationship to the whole stream of human history, and especially to Christianity. The intellectual coherence and moral force of Maritain’s argument would come into sharp focus by the late 1930s. But even in the early 1920s, it is evident that Maritain saw it as an utmost priority to urge Catholic writers to confront with intellectual rigor and moral clarity the anti-Semitic politics and press that were gaining numbers and gathering strength. Maritain urged his fellow Catholic writers to distinguish themselves by “guarding against all hatred and all contempt against the Jewish race and the religion of Israel.”³⁴ He insisted, echoing Saint Paul and Augustine, “the race of the prophets, of the Virgin and the Apostles, the race of Jesus is the trunk to which we have been grafted.”³⁵

Above all, Maritain insisted that his fellow Catholic writers differentiate themselves, markedly, from the increasingly “shrill” tone with which the political dimension of the question was being discussed by non-Catholic and non-Christian writers. “It

³³ Simon to Maritain, February 11, 1941. *Yves R. Simon Institute*, South Bend, Indiana.

³⁴ Maritain, “A Propos De La Question Juive,” 1198.

³⁵ Maritain cites Augustine’s *Adversus Judaeos*, c. x, and St. Paul’s letter to the Romans. Other sources include Saint Jerome, Estius and Bossuet.

is incomprehensible that Catholic writers would speak with the same tone as Voltaire about the Jewish people and the Old Testament, about Abraham and Moses.”³⁶

It is important to acknowledge here that which is bold, courageous and, indeed, prophetic about Maritain’s insistence that Catholic thought on the Jewish Question distinguish itself by virtue of its theological appreciation of the intimate relationship between the Jewish people and Christianity. True, there was nothing particularly original or unique about this viewpoint; after all, Maritain could call upon some of the oldest and most venerable Christian writings to substantiate a point that, sadly, was lost on so many self-professed Christians throughout Europe, and elsewhere. But what matters most, arguably, is the firm conviction, clearly expressed, that the Catholic writer, and by extension Catholic thought more generally, had a moral obligation to speak about Jews and Judaism in a restrained, respectful and even loving manner.

In short, it is a fact of some historical significance that a Catholic writer of growing reputation should speak in such open, unapologetic terms about the “vocation of the Jewish people” and about the Jewish roots of the Church. In the light of subsequent events, including overt Catholic support for avowedly anti-Semitic policies and regimes throughout Europe, this early call for Catholic thought to distinguish itself by its reverence for the “religion of Israel” assumes that prophetic quality Yves Simon and others saw in Maritain’s vision.

It is important to acknowledge, in turn, the substantive limitations and indeed the inherent weakness in Maritain’s early arguments regarding the theological or spiritual aspect of the Jewish question, as distinct from the political dimensions of the problem. In separating the theological and the political dimensions of the Jewish

³⁶ Maritain, “A Propos De La Question Juive,” 1199.

Question, Maritain unwittingly acquiesced to that subtle but inexorable process in interwar Europe by which cultural and social mores came to accept the legitimacy of restricting the civil status and political rights of Jewish citizens *qua* citizens.

In the end, the distinction between the theological and the political dimensions of the Jewish Question was not only intellectually wrongheaded; it also proved to be politically advantageous for the anti-Semites, and politically dangerous for that mass of European Jews who by the mid-1930s, found themselves increasingly marginalized from civic life of their respective countries, and, eventually, stripped of any meaningful civil or political rights. The bishops, priests and theologians would continue to decry anti-Semitism and Nazi racism as pagan and un-Christian. But until a coherent Catholic political philosophy and theology emerged to defend the basic civil and political rights of Jews as members of the body politic; until Catholic political theology and philosophy condemned anti-Semitic practices and policies as harmful to the cherished common good, there was little realistic chance for the full social, cultural and religious power of Catholicism to make itself felt against the racist anti-Semitism of European authoritarian movements and regimes.

It is not my intention to suggest that a lone philosopher, with a fairly modest albeit growing reputation in fairly confined French cultural circles, could have effected such a movement from *within* Catholicism. My point simply is to underscore the embryonic, and under-developed state of Catholic thought on the Jewish Question well into the interwar era. In this respect, Jacques Maritain's thought on the Jewish Question can be seen as a kind of microcosm of Catholic thought more generally on the subject; of the vulnerability of thinkers who were sympathetic to the Jewish people and cognizant of the Jewish roots of Christianity to a chimerical differentiation between the theological or religious and the political nature of

the Jewish Question. What is more, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which Maritain's thinking on the subject evolved over time, dictated in large part by the tragic events that befell European Jews, and much of European society, in the late 1930s and throughout the years of World War Two.

Conclusion

What, then, are we to make of the paradox in Maritain's views on the Jewish Question, between prophetic vision and practical opacity? Perhaps the best way to resolve this seeming dilemma is to recognize Maritain's thought as *aspirational* – a vision of might be, and what ought to be in a world infused with Gospel values. More to the point, Maritain the philosopher, devout student of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, saw that his task was to elucidate and articulate first principles in thinking about the Jewish problem in European life. From these first principles, concrete political action and policy decisions could follow – following logically, coherently from the first principles.

What is clear, in any case, is that Jacques Maritain had some very important things to say about Catholics, Christianity, Jews and Judaism. We must be careful not to exaggerate the problem of practical opacity, nor should we underestimate the potential Maritain's prophetic vision had for realm of practical, concrete action. For instance, although Maritain was not present for the Seelisberg meetings in 1947 – it would appear that his duties as French ambassador to the Holy See prevented him from attending the meeting – his intellectual and, so to speak, spiritual presence was felt. As Ramon Sugranyes de Franch notes, Maritain addressed a letter to Pierre Visseur, general secretary of the gathering in which Maritain asserted,

“[t]he battle against anti-Semitism is a fundamental obligation for the conscience and a primordial duty of moral health for what is left of our civilization.” Sugranyes de Franch even suggests that Maritain was the “direct source” of the seventh of the Seelisberg *Ten Theses* – which dealt with the way the story of Christ’s passion ought to be presented in Christian teaching. In a letter written to Hayim Greenberg and published in the *Jewish Frontier* in August 1944, Maritain wrote, “Who put Christ to death? The Jews? The Romans? I myself, I put him to death, every day through my sins. There is no other Christian answer to this question...This is what the Christian teachers should be teaching to their students.”³⁷

Yet, even here, the paradoxical quality of Maritain’s prophetic vision vis-à-vis the Jewish question is impossible to ignore. Perhaps it is not so much a paradox, after all, if viewed through

the lens of Maritain’s intense Christian faith. In the end, for Maritain, the suffering of the Jews in the Shoah conforms the people of Israel ever more to “her” Messiah. As Maritain wrote, “behold, then, how without knowing it, Israel has been persecuted by the same hatred that also persecuted (and first) Jesus Christ. Her Messiah conformed her to himself in sorrow and abjection before conforming her to himself, some day, in light.” For Maritain, then, the so-called Jewish question required the Christian answer; the mystery of Israel and the mystery of the Church, intertwined and inextricably linked, but ultimately fulfilled, or better yet, resolved, at Calvary. “Like strange companions,” Maritain concluded, “Jews and Christians have traveled the way of Calvary together...The great mysterious fact is that the sufferings of Israel have taken on, more and more, the form of the cross.”³⁸

³⁷ Quoted in Ramon Sugranyes de Franch, “A Personal Memoir,” in Robert Royal, ed., *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, 260-266, here at 263-264.

³⁸ Quoted in Rabbi Leon Klenicki, “Maritain’s Vision of Judaism and Anti-Semitism,” in Robert Royal, ed., *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, 72-88, here at 85. Original text can be found in Jacques Maritain, *Pour la justice, articles et discours (1940-1945)* (New York: Editions de la Maison Francaise, 1945), 326.