

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE:  
REMEMBERING JACQUES MARITAIN

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Jacques Maritain counts as one of the brightest Catholic thinkers of the past century, one who opened the doors of the Church to modern democracy and modern ways of life. The title of this essay - “Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times”— can be read as a passkey to his entire work. Throughout his life, he was a “humanist” (not of the narrow anthropocentric type) and a religious believer open or reacting to the crises of modernity, especially political crises.

Apart from being a humanist and a supporter of democracy, Maritain is also known (and perhaps chiefly known) as the founder of neo-Thomism, that is, of the revival of scholastic metaphysics. In his early years, Maritain had been strongly attracted to the work of Henri Bergson with his accent on the dynamic flux of time; however, what was missing for him in this flux was a stabilizing transtemporal anchor—which he detected in Aristotle’s notion of “Being” (*ousia*) taken over by Thomas Aquinas under the label of *essentia*. As it happens, Martin Heidegger too in his early years had been influenced by Bergson (as well as some scholastic thinkers, like Scotus); however, he refused to switch from temporality simply to essence viewed as non-temporality (or as “endless” time). As is well known, his first *magnum opus* was titled *Being and Time*—where “Being,” although adopted from Aristotle, is by no means equated with essence or an abstract “concept” (*Begriff*) but seen as a constitutive mode of “being-in-the-world.” In his later writings, this revised notion is elaborated in many novel ways—for instance, in the texts on *Ereignis* which signals human participatory praxis without subjective will power or epistemic cognition.<sup>1</sup>

As Maritain's essay of 1939 shows, he was not the strict essentialist Thomist that he sometimes claimed (or was charged) to be. As he firmly states in the opening paragraphs: "My point of view is that of the philosophy of culture, and not that of metaphysics." (1939, 1) Explicating the meaning of this kind of philosophy, he adds that it involves a correlation of ideas or aspirations with the "concrete logic" of historical events, a correlation which may be called "dialectical—though not in a strictly Hegelian or Marxist sense. What stands opposed to such dialectical correlation is the modern infatuation with antithesis, with the rigid bifurcation of immanence and transcendence, of concern with "this" world and concern with the divine. In Maritain's words, from the angle of a dialectical philosophy "there is no occasion to choose, so as to sacrifice one or the other, between the vertical movement toward eternal life . . . and the horizontal movement whereby the substance and creative forces of 'man' are progressively revealed in history." (1939, 8) As he adds a bit later: "One of the worst vices of the modern world is the dualism, the dissociation between the things of God and the things of the world." (1939, 15-16) Under the aegis of this dualism, the things of this world have been "abandoned to their own carnal law" (1939, 16) while the teachings of religion (especially of Christianity) have been turned into abstract "formulas and words" which in turn have been effectively "vassalized" or instrumentalized by temporal powers for their own purposes.

Are we here not close to the "Declaration of Barmen" signed in 1934 by Protestant leaders in defiance of Hitler's totalizing claims to power?<sup>22</sup> And are we here not also close to the "dialectical theology" formulated by Karl Barth and Paul Tillich during the same time? And with his opposition to "dualism" is Maritain not really in the proximity of Heidegger's "being-in-the-world," where human being is seen as radically open to concrete "others" as well as to the otherness of transcendence? A Catholic priest of Spanish and Indian background, Raimon Panikkar, has taken up the accent on non-dualism and linked it with the great Indian philosophical tradition of *Advaita* (which was also a loadstar for Mahatma Gandhi). Exploring

further the notion of non-dualism—which simultaneously means also non-monism—leads him and the reader into a completely new terrain which was not suspected by traditional Western logic and which, in fact, constitutes the hidden tremor running through Western philosophy from the ancients to the moderns. What the tremor opens up is the possibility of new horizons: those of a “difference” which is neither the same nor totality “other,” neither synthesis nor antithesis. An important feature of this difference is the correlation of being and non-being (or nothingness) as mutually constitutive—which in recent times has led to the fruitful exploration of Buddhism and Asian thought by Western theologians.<sup>3</sup>

Awareness of this tremor is present but not fully examined in Maritain’s essay. His “philosophy of culture” is critically directed at dominant features in the world of 1939: fascism, racism, national socialism, communism, and materialism. No doubt, the relevance of the targeted topics has changed in the course of the past eighty years. Thus, national socialism Hitler-style was defeated in World War II. In the same way, Soviet communism (in the rigid Stalinist mode) has vanished in the wake of Russian “perestroika” and other changes. However, other targets have not disappeared; on the contrary, they have been revived and even strengthened in recent times. This is true of fascism taken in the sense of aggressive chauvinism; of a racism coupled with elitism and social oppression; and, of course, it is true of materialism in the sense of the worship of material goods and their egocentric appropriation. On all these topics, Maritain’s comments are powerful and right on target—although they might sometimes be sharpened in the light of current experiences. Regarding fascism, his essay treats the term largely as equivalent with the state-centered ideology found in his time in Italy and Spain; but today we may want redefine it as brute (chauvinistic) power politics wedded to the rule of the strongest. Regarding racism, his comments are sometimes a bit simplistic, as when we read that racism is “above all an irrational reaction,” a “protest of the man in the street against the scholar,” even “a pathological protest of nature with all its forces of vitality and ferocity rising

out of the depths of mother-earth.” (1939, 11) Statements like this may indeed capture the primitive counter-cultural animus found in some racists; but they bypass a deliberate or calculated racist strategy, a strategy allied often (and increasingly today) with advanced technological methods of domination and oppression.<sup>4</sup>

Without question, the strongest and most persuasive arguments of Maritain’s essay are directed against materialism evident in the egocentric (capitalist) pursuit of material goods. In this respect, his essay strikes one of the central nerves of the contemporary malaise in the West (and in the world at large). Today, a convenient and widely used term for the malaise is “neo-liberalism—which perverts the legitimate striving for freedom into the cult of self-centered acquisitiveness and control. It is at this point that Maritain’s key idea of “integral humanism” enters the picture as a remedy for our public ills. As he notes, the idea stands as a corrective to a faulty kind of humanism prevalent in past centuries (sometimes called “classical humanism”) which was basically egocentric and anthropocentric, conceptions viewing “man” and nature as “self-enclosed or self-sufficient,” as “shut up in themselves and exclusive of everything not themselves.” In opposition to this legacy, Maritain does not marshal a “counter-humanism” proclaiming the “end of man” but an “integral” or relational conception able to overcome every type of antithesis (or dualism).<sup>5</sup> As he writes, such a new conception is able to rehabilitate and “dignify” the human creature “not in isolation, in a closed-inness of the creature in itself, but in its openness to the world [of others and] of the divine and super-rational.” (1939, 7) This implies in practice “a work of sanctification of the profane” where “man would direct social work toward an heroic ideal of brotherly love.” (1939, 7-8)

As it seem to me, the cited passages contain the truly crucial and forward-looking message of Maritain’s thought. To be sure, in articulating his view, Maritain himself was not isolated or shut up in himself; in fact, his essay fits into a broader discourse about humanism, which was beginning to unfold at the time of his essay. As is well known, Martin Heidegger at

the end of the war penned his famous “Letter on Humanism” where he distanced himself from the anthropocentric “existentialism” of Jean-Paul Sartre and portrayed *Dasein* (human being) as an “ecstatic” creature standing out into the solicitation of world and the transcendent call of “Being.”<sup>6</sup> A few decades later, Charles Taylor penned his magisterial study *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* where he traced the vicissitudes of modern selfhood and bemoaned the progressive narrowing or stiffening of its horizons. In this and subsequent texts, Taylor pinpointed as central feature of the “malaise of modernity” a basic shift in human self-conception: a shift leading from a “porous” social relationship to an increasingly “buffered” egocentrism (wedded either to economic acquisition or private emotional enjoyment).<sup>7</sup> Drawing my inspiration partly from Heidegger and partly from Taylor, several of my own writings in recent years have focused on the meaning and status of “humanism,” always with an edge against economic or emotive self-enclosure and in favor of human “integration” (distantly reminiscent of Maritain’s thought). As I have tried to show, “human being” should be taken not as a fixed empirical object, but rather as an open-ended possibility, as a wayfarer steadily in need of further humanization (which points to the trans-human, but not the counter-human or inhuman).<sup>8</sup>

What this conception of humanism and steady humanization implies is a shift—a paradigm shift—also in terms of social and political philosophy. While Western modernity—as previously indicated—was anchored in a number of “dualisms”—between self and community, freedom and solidarity, secular immanence and sacred transcendence—the shift I am talking about does not mean an option in favor of one of the binary terms. Thus, what we are facing is not a move from individual to community or from immanence to transcendence; rather what emerges into view is a relationality without synthesis or antithesis, that is, a gathering difference. This is precisely what one means by “paradigm shift”: a change where all the elements of a previous view are placed into a new “constellation” which gives new meaning to each element.

As it seems to me, such a shift is adumbrated in a series of currently fashionable terms, like “postmodernism,” “post-secularism,” and “post-liberalism.” Thus, a term like “postmodernism” implies a critique of the malaise of modernity, but not necessarily a return to the “pre-modern” or else leap into the “anti-modern” (which would be a binary negation). Likewise, the term “post-secularism” does not signal a rejection of the entire secular world nor a leap into religious dogmatism (as the negation of secularism).<sup>9</sup> Finally, the politically most pertinent and pregnant term “post-liberalism” must not be taken in the sense of a denial of freedom or an endorsement of autocratic totalitarianism. While clearly denoting a critique of egocentric connotations of liberty (evident especially in neo-liberalism and psychic narcissism) the term “post-liberalism” also has a positive or constructive significance by bringing into view and promoting a politically responsible kind of “public” freedom which is necessary for a viable democracy.<sup>10</sup>

Here my presentation rejoins Maritain’s essay. For in advancing his notion of “integral humanism,” he seems to be quite aware that he is advocating a paradigm shift—in fact, a shift which is urgently needed in our time. When introducing his novel view, he insists on the breadth and depth of this conception. “A new humanism,” he writes, “ought then to be new in a singularly profound sense: it ought to evolve within the movement of history and create something new in relation to those four centuries that are behind us. If it has not such power to renew, it is nothing.” (1939, 7) As he adds, the change envisaged would affect not only a cultural or clerical elite, but would permeate society as a whole. It would “care for the masses, for their right to work and to a spiritual life, and for the movement which historically brings them to an historically full age.” In this manner, it would “radically transform the temporal order”, thus unleashing a “Copernican revolution,” that is, “a great [paradigmatic] change in the relative importance of the elements in the universe of action. (1939, 16) However, sheltered behind the temporal-historical process, something else is unfolding or making its way. For, the very movement seeking to “better man’s condition here on earth at the same time and in a recessed

way “prepares in history the Kingdom of God which, for each individual person and for the whole of humanity, is something meta-historical.” (1939, 8)

Reading Maritain’s essay, I recall Pope Francis’s famous saying that the Church does not live for itself but for the sake of the world (which is in need of the good news of redemption), a saying quite in accord with the biblical passage that religious faith should be “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). In terms of this passage, faith cannot be separated or divorced from the world nor be collapsed into it.<sup>11</sup> In this context, I also recall Father Hesburgh’s (Notre Dame President from 1952 to 1987) repeated insistence that faith is supposed to be a “leaven” or transformative agent in society and the world at large. Maritain has taken these sayings to heart in his life and writings, offering a valuable beacon to his readers and friends—including myself.

#### NOTES

1. See Martin Heidegger, *Breiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 65 (Frankfurt-Main: Klostermann, 1989); and *Das Ereignis*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 71 (Frankfurt-Main: Klostermann, 2009).

2. See my *Thy Kingdom Come: The Relevance of Barmen Today*, a text in the book series *Faith and Politics: Political Theology in a New Key* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), forthcoming.

3. As Paul F. Knitter states in the title of one of his works: *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009). I have explored the attractiveness of Buddhism and Asian thought for some Western theologians (especially Paul Tillich, Raimon Panikkar, and Thomas Merton) in my book *Spiritual Guides: Pathfinders in the Desert* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Press, 2017).

4. His comments reach greater depth when he writes that “racism is existentially bound to demonic para-theism. Because in its reaction against individualism and its thirst for communion, it seeks

this communion in human animality which, separated from the spirit, is no more than a biological inferno.

5. For a while, Jacques Derrida was leaning toward a radical anti-humanism. See “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alain Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 111-136. Compare also, Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970).

6. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in David F. Krell, ed., *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 193-242. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (1972; Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003); and Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John N. Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1960).

7. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1991); and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

8. See my “Humanizing Humanity: For a Post-Secular Humanism,” in my *Against Apocalypse: Recovering Humanity’s Wholeness* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 75-86; “Who Are We Now? For an ‘Other’ Humanism,” in my *The Promise of Democracy: Political Agency and Transformation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 135-154; “Humanizing Humanity: Education for World Citizenship,” in my *Being and the World: Dialogue and Cosmopolis* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), pp. 59-71.

9. Compare my “Post-Secular Faith: Toward a Religion of Service,” *Revista di Scienza Politica*, vol. 28 (2008), pp. 3-15; “Rethinking Secularism (with Raimon Panikkar),” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 61 (1999), pp. 715-735.

10. On “post-liberalism” see especially John Gray, *Post-liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Ruth Abbey, “Charles Taylor as a Postliberal Theorist of Politics,” in Arto Laitinen and Nicholas H. Smith, eds., *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Charles Taylor* (Helsinki: Societas Philosophica Fennica, 2002), pp. 149-161; John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016); and my *Post-Liberalism: Recovering a Shared World* (New York & Oxford University Press, 2019).

11. For an elaboration of this point see my “Religion and the World: the Quest for Justice and Peace,” in my *Integral Pluralism: Beyond Culture Wars* (Lexington, KY: University of Press of Kentucky, 2010), pp. 85-101.