

JACQUES MARITAIN AND THE RISE OF FASCISM

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The Vichy authorities ... vigorously dismantled all the structures that had existed for seventy years and unhesitatingly demolished all the 150-year-old principles. At the end of 1940 a new order was established and France changed more radically in a few months than at any other time in its history since the summer of 1789¹

Until quite recently, historical interpretations of France in the 1930's and under the Vichy regime have been much influenced by the post-war reversal of alliances and the pressures of the cold war. France needed to put aside the fratricidal hatreds and achieve national reconciliation after what had been a de facto civil war in that country in 1944. There was also the understandable desire of the French to see the period 1940-1944 as a peculiar aberration without any direct continuity with the creative political thinking and intellectual effervescence of the thirties in which men like Jacques Maritain figured so prominently. There has been a marked tendency to consider Vichy as isolated from the period that preceded Marshall Pétain's "National Revolution" and to minimize the historical significance of this period even if it was a time in which "France changed more radically in a few months than at any other time in her history since 1789".

If Vichy has been downplayed, there has also been a reluctance to see fascism as more than a simple aberration and to recognize that there existed home-grown fascist movements in nearly all European countries, and that the rowdy bands of street fighters were backed by a body of serious political ideas which could be no less logically defended than those of the democratic or liberal parties. In fact, merely recognizing that fascist thinking belonged not only to crackpots but to serious intellectuals, even to brilliant men, would entail a new way of perceiving the phenomenon.² Not long ago, even suggesting that fascism had been a mass movement possessing an ideology built upon serious reflection on the realities and contradictions of modern society led to one's being considered sympathetic to fascism. But most

historians of contemporary France now agree, as one of them put it, that "Fascist influence in France was much deeper, and far more groups were affected than is generally believed or recognized".³

Some historians are claiming both that France was far more affected by fascism than has been thought and that "France was ... the country in which fascist ideology in its main aspects came into being twenty years before similar ideologies appeared elsewhere in Europe...."⁴ But, if this was the case, it was of particular interest to Catholics for there had to have been considerable overlap between the rise of European fascism and the heyday of that remarkable French Catholic Intellectual Revival which came to have such an important impact on the Catholic Church in both Europe and North and South America. In this regard Maritain's early career is of interest for he is often considered the most important Catholic intellectual of this century and he converted to Catholicism in that same colourful Parisian atmosphere in the first decade of this century in which a protofascist disgust with the Jews and the bourgeoisie seemed to figure at least as importantly as the Sermon on the Mount. It has recently been pointed out, for example, that Maritain's best friend, Ernest Psichari, underwent a "conversion experience" at the same time as Maritain, but to a Christian-soldier mystique which had certain ominous irrationalist overtones.⁵

Like much of modern Catholic thinking in general, and that of the young Maritain in particular, fascism repudiated much of the legacy of the 18th century and the French Revolution. The fascists, like the Catholics, sought to lay the foundations of a new communal and anti-individualist civilization in which all classes of society would be perfectly integrated as in that "New Middle Ages" prophesied by Maritain's friend, the Russian Berdyaev.⁶ The revolution embarked on by the Vichy government - "the most important since 1789"⁷ - must be understood in relation to the long gestation of an "anti-materialist" mentality among the French elites, and to the immense vogue of antiliberal, antidemocratic, and anti-Marxist thinking, in the half-century which preceded the defeat of 1940.⁸ Maritain's Action-Française-phase books, such as *Antimoderne* (1922) and *Trois Réformateurs* (1925), figured importantly in this movement. But so did his important post-Maurrasian efforts such as *Primauté du spirituel* (Paris, 1927), *Religion et culture* (Paris, 1930), and *Humanisme intégral* (Paris, 1936).⁹ All of these works execrated the bourgeoisie, particularly the Catholic *bien-pensants*, and the "individualism" of the modern world - the legacy, for Maritain, of the pernicious writings of Luther, Descartes, and Rousseau.¹⁰

Alongside the successes and reverses of the self-consciously "Fascist" political groupings, there was a more general "drift toward fascism" in France. In the late 1930's there was a milieu in which a kind of sensitization to fascisms occurred which included men of both the Left and the Right who were contemptuous of parliamentary democracy. It included a variety of

dissidents, marginals, "non-conformists," many of whom, out of interest in a "spiritual revolution", had frequented the Maritains' at Meudon or the Berdyaevs' at Clamart. We can now see that the aspiration for a total renovation of the country was a factor predisposing all of these men to a reception of fascism - which might, of course, be effected to differing degrees and without necessarily leading to a complete "fascistization."¹¹ A good example of the complexity in definition lies in the case of Salazar's Portugal. Maritain, despite his growing reputation as the most important French Catholic anti-fascist intellectual, did not find the admiration for his thought in that country incongruous, and he accepted Dr. Salazar's invitation to come and see the Estado Novo (founded in 1933) for himself.¹²

But besides "soft" quasi-fascisms, like that of Portugal, German National-Socialism also exerted a certain attraction in Maritain's milieu. Take, for example, the case of Maritain's young Belgian admirer Raymond de Becker. This young editor of Louvain's influential student newspaper, *L'Avant-Garde*,¹³ went from a leadership position in Belgian Catholic action to a long pilgrimage through southern France and the founding of an ascetical community for laymen at the Savoyard Trappist monastery of Tamié, to another sort of "conversion experience" at the Nazis' Ordensburg of Sonthofen in Bavaria. This latter led him to leave the Catholic Church at the end of 1938 and become a major collaborationist figure in occupied Belgium.¹⁴ Maritain soon noted the signs of a disquieting evolution in the "dynamic, charismatic" Belgian but had considerable difficulty in persuading his younger French friends of the danger.¹⁵

After 1940, in the space of a few months, France drew far closer to its two neighboring countries than had seemed possible a short time before. During the summer and fall of 1940 a sort of revolution took place in the country with a result that very little seemed to remain of the France of 1789. The great French liberal and democratic tradition disappeared before the shocks of crisis, defeat, and the occupation of an important part of the national territory. In the autumn of 1940, the French government, of its own volition, fell into line with Italy and Germany. How could this have happened? Maritain, like his friends in North America such as Yves R. Simon and Paul Vignaux, was shocked and disgusted at the rapid adaptation to the "New Order" of their friends back home, particularly at the sudden political transformation of many of their fellow Thomists.¹⁶ Maritain was particularly shocked, for example, when a man of austere piety such as the great Dominican theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, former *aumonier* of the Maritain salon at Meudon, simply declared that it would be a mortal sin for a Catholic to support General De Gaulle.¹⁷ But Garrigou-Lagrange was no exception: Maritain and his North American colleagues quickly discovered themselves painfully isolated and alone among the French Catholic intelligentsia in their suspicions about the Vichy regime.¹⁸

How did Maritain's writings affect events in France during the late 1930's? "Antimaterialism" was the dominant trait of all the movements of revolt of the interwar period. This brought together, in a single movement of critical opposition to capitalism and liberalism, schools of thought that had arisen from right and left but were in conflict with both the Republican right and left. Inspired by antimaterialism men with very different ideological backgrounds condemned Marxism, liberalism, and the traditional left and right in general. Many of the Catholics among them, particularly since the time of Léon Bloy, Drumont, and Marc Sangnier, professed hating money, cultural uprootedness, and bourgeois ways. They also condemned the exclusion of the proletariat from the life of the nation.¹⁹ In an important and original section of *Three Reformers*, Maritain had condemned the *individualism* of the modern world over against the "personalism" he considered properly Catholic. Eventually a vague "personalist" ideal came to inspire the general condemnation of materialism of all of these movements of revolt and helped create the atmosphere of inventive social theorizing, of readiness for new ideas, characteristic of the 1930's. This language surfaced again in the major doctrinal speeches of Marshall Pétain in which, after condemning the individualism and money-mindedness of the modern world, he outlined the main themes of the "Révolution Nationale" which would give France a worthy place in the new European order.²⁰

We must revise our understanding of Catholic intellectuals such as Maritain in our new lucidity about the general drift of French thinking in the interwar period. Maritain was something of the "educator of a generation" in France before he crossed the Atlantic. Whatever his intentions he must be seen, in retrospect, as having assisted at the creation of another kind of "French fascism". Over against the Nietzscheanisms and "paganisms" of men like Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and Céline, an authoritarian Catholic social thought came into its own in the early days of the Vichy regime ... and greatly influenced a host of "antibourgeois" initiatives, from "progressive" communitarian theological speculation to liturgical innovations and the worker priests.²¹

Maritain's disciple Yves R. Simon, also self-exiled in America, helped convince him that there was a dramatic slippage toward fascism among their closest friends back in France. The two men began to notice disquieting signs even among men who were adamantly "anti-fascist", even "of the left," in the early 1930's. They knew many men who continued to adamantly criticize important aspects of nazism or Fascism as late as the eve of the war but who *nevertheless* began adopting what were clearly proto-nazi positions by the late 1930's.²²

What had happened to Maritain's hopes for a dramatic spiritual renovation of society by the late 1930's? His call for moral revolution, "the primacy of the spiritual" in politics, seemed to have gone beyond what he imagined, had gone beyond his circle and begun to touch non-believers -

even some of whose political orientations he could not approve. In fact, by the end of the thirties the Belgian "neo-socialist" theorist Henri De Man, the ideologues and planners in the French trade union movement, and even the ex-bolsheviks of Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français, were arguing that the revolution had to be spiritual and "moral" before anything else. The case of Doriot, mayor of the working-class city of Saint-Denis and foremost candidate for the leadership of the French Communist Party just a few years earlier, was illustrative: in his last major speech before the war, in April 1939, Doriot called on the youth of France to abandon "egotism" for the ideal, "materialism" for spirituality. His PPF, whose public political liturgies made it seem the most Hitlerian of French parties, celebrated the feast of Joan of Arc with unprecedented solemnity in May 1939, and in June Doriot went on a pilgrimage to Lourdes during which he denounced the dechristianization of France.²³

Self-declared "fascists" were never more than a tiny minority among those Frenchmen who responded in 1940 to the call for youth, dignity, purity, and unity, to the rejection of determinism and materialism, to "this affirmation of the primacy of the spiritual."²⁴ Far more numerous than the confirmed fascists were the supporters of a new non-proletarian type of revolution, a revolution of the spirit, which Maritain's writings - ironically, given his self-exile in the United States and his support for De Gaulle - had done much to encourage. The popular response to the ideas of the fascist intellectuals who vehiculed these ideas was much greater than is often thought. And even more numerous than the conscious fellow travelers were those who regarded that resurrection of anti-bourgeois values, "the revolution of 1940,"²⁵ with a benevolent neutrality. Maritain's *Humanisme intégral* had been a prominent and influential anti-bourgeois tract in 1936, in a direct line of inspiration from Léon Bloy, and it played an important role in alerting young Catholics to the mediocrity of liberal and democratic societies, and the Church.

With the collapse of 1940 an ideology that had been spreading through society for half a century rose to the surface and became a significant influence on the holders of political power. Several important figures in the shaping of the ideology of the "National Revolution" had been close to Maritain: his former close friend Henri Massis was in a position of some influence and his protégés of the Esprit group such as Emmanuel Mounier, along with some of the brightest Dominican intellectuals, played decisive roles at the Ecole Nationale des Cadres d'Uriage. In the romantic *Chateau Bayard* in the mountains above Grenoble they helped create an authoritarian, "personalist and communitarian," "spiritualized" replacement for that defunct Ecole Normale Supérieure which had produced "secularized" elites for the Republic before the war.²⁶

Vichy could draw its anticapitalism, some of its antisemitism, from Catholic influences because there was a generally recognized "Catholic

Option" for France in 1940 - an alternative economics, culture, foreign policy, ... and, of course, sexual morality (Simone de Beauvoir tells of a female abortionist being guillotined under Vichy). Maritain noted that there was a notion of an authoritarian "Catholic order" even in the progressive Catholic publications to which Maritain contributed, such as *Sept* or *Temps Présent*, which a fascist victory in Europe would be assumed to further.²⁷

Whether Vichy might properly be termed a "Fascist" regime, or not, is a matter of semantics: the fact remains that a number of individuals in responsible positions in that regime came to desire a German victory in Europe. And the Vichy government came to promote, more and more, a proto-Nazi life-style, values, and mentality in the young. Many French, when Germany appeared to be winning the war, simply assumed that France would become more and more nazified, more clearly and distinctly "fascist." This, in any case, is how Maritain and his handful of resistance friends came to see things, and they became acutely sensitive to their isolation as Frenchmen as long as the fascist side seemed to be coming out on top. Yves R. Simon was so disillusioned with the political comportment of his fellow Thomists that he concluded that Thomism had not been up to the challenge represented by fascism and nazism. He became determined to rethink, even achieve a "break" with, his philosophical past, and he suggested that Maritain might do the same. In 1943 Maritain wrote *Christianisme et démocratie*, a book which, in Bernard Doering's words, "marked a new stage in Maritain's thought. From this time on he was wholly committed to democracy as a political and social institution."²⁸ The attractiveness of fascism for the French does not, in itself, explain the French defeat but it helps us to understand the ease, the naturalness, with which an alternative regime was set up in that country and the wide consensus it enjoyed. We now know that Vichy was neither an accident nor an aberration but the logical sequel to a host of imaginative attempts at political renewal in the half-century which preceded the collapse of 1940. Catholic social thinking - on the Left as well as on the Right - contributed to the *Révolution Nationale* and helped promote a distinctive mentality valuing family, chastity, the land, the repression of liberalism and individualism, the primacy of the spiritual dimension, etc. Maritain's case shows how difficult and paradoxical it is to describe that French Catholic "slippage" toward fascism which was so important in those years.

Certainly Maritain contributed to a broad movement of ideas which effected a situation in which "France changed more radically in a few months than at any other time ... since the summer of 1789."²⁹ His powerful and influential anti-modernist and anti-bourgeois writings made a significant contribution to the ideas of the men who effected that change. But Maritain

also came to play an important role in the Resistance movement which would undo those very changes. His intellectual and political itinerary during these years was controversial, instructive, dramatic, principled, and far more unpopular among French Catholics than we tend to think.³⁰

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NOTES

1. Zeev Sternell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: the University of California Press, 1986), p. 299.
2. For example, René Rémond, perhaps France's most distinguished historian of the French Right, and of the contemporary French Catholic Church, has largely ignored the existence of a French fascist tradition in his myriad writings despite the fact that important non-French experts on his country's history have documented its importance. Rémond's perspective was also adopted by the leading North American historians of French ideas such as H. Stuart Hughes, and of French political thought, such as Roy Pierce. North American scholars have also tended to follow Rémond, a prominent figure in the French educational establishment and among the French Catholic intelligentsia, in bending over backwards to avoid tarring Catholic intellectuals with the fascist brush.
3. Sternhell, p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
5. Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 5-41.
6. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Un nouveau moyen âge* (Paris, 1929). During the period in which he wrote this book, Berdyaev kept an intellectual *salon* in his home in the Parisian suburb of Clamart which alternated with that of the Maritains' at Meudon. White Russian emigrants frequented both, and while the Maritains had some differences with Berdyaev's epistemological and metaphysical positions, they were sympathetic with his mystical vision of the Soviet Union's world historical role, and his prophetic announcement of its eventual mass re-conversion to purified, newly "medieval", Christianity. Both *salons* were frequented by the elite of the young Parisian Catholic intelligentsia, clerics and laymen alike.
7. Sternell, p. 29.
8. As in the case of Georges Bernanos, the other prominent Action Française heretic of the time, Maritain's "anti-fascist" activities, notably his refusal to take sides in the Spanish Civil War, did not necessarily bring his numerous admirers, friends, or disciples to an anti-fascist position. Bernanos' "non-conformism" to what seemed *the* Catholic position was often attributed to his irascible temperament, Maritain's to his strong-willed Jewish wife. Even after Maritain was considered an important Free French supporter he received an invitation from occupied Paris to pose his candidature for a position at the prestigious Collège de France.
9. One of Maritain's most important contributions to Catholic intellectual life in the period was his acerbic criticism of "individualism" which he juxtaposed to everything in the mainstream Catholic tradition. Like so many other unsavory things, he blamed it on the Protestants from whom he had come. In *Trois Réformateurs* he juxtaposed "individualism" to the more "Catholic" notion of the person. This distinction had immense subsequent influence in the Catholic world.
10. Only very recently have French social critics begun to question the prevailing assumption among modern French intellectuals that there is something obviously very wrong with modern "individualism." This assumption has been common to intellectuals of both right and left, and Maritain had much to do with it becoming a sort of orthodoxy among Catholics: the "person" was Catholic, the "individual" was not. In his very popular lectures at Harvard during the 1936-37 school year, published as the *Unity of Philosophical Experience* (1937), Etienne Gilson provided an extremely sophisticated and learned

defense of Maritain's earlier charge that Descartes was behind the scourge of modern "individualism." Gilson's celebration of the anti-individualistic medieval epistemology reinforced this all-pervasive anti-individualism among Catholic intellectuals.

11. Cf. Philippe Burrin, *La Dérive Fasciste, Doriot, Déat, Bérger, 1933-1945* (Paris, 1986), p. 94. This well-documented study shows how important personalities of the French Left gradually, almost imperceptibly, evolved toward fascism. It convincingly demonstrates that fascism and nazism had far more appeal for French intellectuals of the 1930's, of both the left and right, than has been assumed. But, like so many of his contemporary historians, Burrin is extremely discrete in dealing with the Catholic dimension of his three subjects.
12. Maritain wrote at least one letter to Yves R. Simon about his Portuguese experiences. Salazar claimed inspiration from Catholic social thought in general (notably the "Social Encyclicals"), and Jacques Maritain in particular. Most historians shy away from calling Salazar's regime "fascist."
13. This newspaper had been made influential in this period by the famous Catholic youth leader become fascist, Léon Degrelle.
14. Cf. Raymond de Becker, *Le live des vivants et des morts* (Brussels, 1942), p. 229. De Becker expressed a certain respect for Maritain even when he had become contemptuous of his own Catholic past and most of the other prominent Catholics who figured in it.
15. The correspondence *Maritain/Mounier, 1929-1939*, ed. Jacques Petit (Paris, 1973), contains an interesting exchange of letters between Maritain and his French protégé Emmanuel Mounier over de Becker in which the older man's warnings largely fell on deaf ears. The French *Esprit* group kept trying to maintain joint projects with the mercurial Belgian.
16. This is a major theme of the unpublished Maritain-Simon correspondence during the years 1941-1942. Maritain's bitter feelings about, and harsh judgements upon, his friends at Vichy were, for several understandable reasons, hushed up after the war.
17. A copy of a letter from Maritain to Garrigou-Lagrange in late 1946 in which this fact is recalled remains in the Yves R. Simon papers.
18. The entry of the United States into the war and, particularly, the ill-fated German invasion of the Soviet Union, altered matters by the end of 1942. But even at that date militant anti-Pétainistes were a relative rarity among the French Catholic intelligentsia and were often considered traitors to "the Catholic side." French Catholics were prepared for non-cooperation with the German occupants much sooner than for working against a regime in which they had far more influence than under any government of the Third Republic.

The only major study of French Catholics under the Vichy regime, Jacques Duquesne's *Les Catholiques français sous disproportionnée importance to a handful of Catholic "resisters."* There is still no study of Vichy's intellectuals, and Catholics figured prominently in their number.
19. The role of Bloy's vituperative polemic in shaping Maritain's thinking is well known and Maritain himself published *Quelques pages sur Léon Bloy* (Paris, 1927). Far more influential than Bloy in the 1930's was Edouard Drumont whose left-wing, anti-capitalist, and anti-bourgeois anti-semitism was considered "Catholic socialism" at the turn of the century. In 1932 Georges Bernanos, frustrated with the footdragging bourgeois conservatism of his friends in the Action Française, published a vibrant celebration of the ideas of his "vieux maître" Drumont (*La Grande Peur des Bien-Pensants*), and in 1938 was dissuaded by his publisher, Grasset, from publishing a book of excerpts from Drumont - whose nationalist and socialist tendencies he admired. See my article "Drumont, Bernanos, and the Rise of French Fascism" in the forthcoming special Bernanos centenary issue of *Renascence*.
20. Several of the individuals considered to be Pétain's speechwriters, or the most important sources of his social ideas, such as René Gillouin, Gaston Bergery, François Perroux, Gustave Thibon, frequented "Personalist" circles before the war.

21. In his studies of the birth of progressive Catholicism in general, and the worker priests in particular, the distinguished scholar Emile Poulat simply avoids giving the larger Vichy context in which many of the initiatives which he described in great detail such as the Mission de Paris, which he describes in great detail, were born. So does the post-war anglo-american celebrator of these same movements and personalities, Maisie Ward. Cf. Emile Poulat, *Naissance des prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris, 1969); Maisie Ward, *France Pagan? The Mission of Abbé Godin* (London, 1949). Ward does not tell us that her hero, the Abbé Godin, was enthusiastic about Vichy's social and economic initiatives, which he analyzed in his book *La Charte du Travail* (Paris, 1943). In his lively and critical portrait of his parents, whom he describes as firm anti-fascists, Wilfrid Sheed does not allude to his mother's apparent indifference to the ambiguous origins of some of the "progressive" ideas she helped import from France into the English-speaking world. Cf. *Frank and Maisie: A Memoir with Parents* (New York, 1986).
22. Cf. Philippe Burin, *op. cit.*
23. Cf. Lanoux, "Le discours de Lourdes," *L'Emancipation Nationale*, 9 June 1939, p. 2. On Doriot see Jean-Paul Brunet, *Jacques Doriot* (Paris, 1986), and Burin, *op. cit.*
24. Sternhell, p. 272. Whether or not Maritain was originally responsible, the phrase "primacy of the spiritual" became a commonplace to describe the shared aspirations of the French in a new European order by the late 1930's and during the period of the occupation.
25. The phrase is Maurice Duverger's as cited by Sternhell, *op. cit.*, p. 272.
26. On Uriage, see my *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930-1950* (Toronto and London, 1981), Chapter VIII. For decades, the French Catholic intelligentsia had demanded proportionate influence in the French Republic's educational and cultural institutions. The Uriage school is an instructive instance of these Catholics, suddenly, in power. Its numerous graduates steadfastly maintain that it was a "Resistance" institution (against the Germans) and, at this writing, they constitute a mafia sufficiently powerful to dissuade young French historians from saying anything too critical about it. It was clearly anti-individualistic, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-communist and anti-american. Cf. Pierre Dunoyer de Segonzac, *Le vieux chef: Mémoires et pages choisies* (Paris, 1971). One of the instructors claimed it was modeled after the Nazi Ordensburgen. Cf. Gilles Ferry, *Un expérience de formation des chefs* (Paris, 1945), p. 33.

Poet Pierre Emmanuel wrote Maritain (27 September 1941) about "great movements" in France, "rich in hope and promise," of "the same spirit of enthusiasm in discipline and hope in the future" in the Ecole des Cadres d'Uriage which is "forming true men, in whom the feeling for spiritual reality is not stifled but rather exalted". Cited and translated in Bernard Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame, 1986), p. 201.
27. The unpublished Maritain-Simon correspondence reveals how remarkably isolated these two men felt in the Catholic world for adopting a global anti-fascist position in the late 1930's and during the first two years of Vichy. Even in the United States they were delighted to find the odd maverick like Dorothy Day. One need only study the attitude toward the European conflict in very Catholic Québec during those years to realize the extent to which, as Maritain and Yves R. Simon were shocked to find, pro-fascism was the generally perceived "Catholic" position. *The Commonwealth* later claimed to have been firmly antifascist in this period but Maritain and Simon saw it as, with the exception of C.G. Paulding, "a nest of pacificism" at the time.
28. Bernard Doering, p. 179.
29. Sternhell, *op. cit.*
30. In interviewing a host of French Catholic intellectuals of Maritain's generation, I found an almost complete lack of interest in, or appreciation for, his resistance activities. Could they

have been expected to welcome him home then after the war with open arms, as North Americans rather naively assumed they would?