
Part II
Habits of the Heart

Matthew J. Mancini

Maritain's American Illusions

Jacques Maritain never permitted his well-known affection for the United States to go too far. It was always a wary sort of attachment, hedged about with all manner of uncertainties and a keen sense of the possibilities for disenchantment. He was never a mere apologist, even though he sometimes gave the impression during his long period of residence on the American strand that he could scarcely believe his good fortune in finding himself among such a great and caring people. A careful reading of his works in which he comments on the United States reveals a caution well-grounded in both a philosophy of critical realism and a lifetime rich in pondered experience.

Yet in one way, at least, he tended toward an undue sanguinity in his assessment of American culture; and he did so in an area crucial to his interpretation of this nation's great potential destiny as a seed-ground for an integrally humanist social order. He seems, I would maintain, to have underestimated the centrifugal forces in American civilization, those tendencies that drive men and women toward isolation from one another and from society. He was laboring under certain illusions here, I believe, and so I have called my article "Maritain's American Illusions." I hope that the title does not sound contentious; but I do want it to seem, as it were, disputatious. For what I propose to do here is to set up the terms of an imaginary disputation, in the sense in which that term was described in the beautiful seventh chapter of Josef Pieper's *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*. In that chapter Pieper portrayed a model of disciplined argument animated by a profound spirit of mutual respect between the parties and motivated by a humble desire to discover a truth. With careful precision disputants strove to articulate the argument of the opposing party, so that a refutation was not a mere victory in a contest between sportsmen but a means by which a truth could be clarified.

In the present case I wish not to present a detailed script, but simply to establish the scenario for such a disputation and to suggest the general direction of the argument; and I propose, as interlocutor in the discussion, a man named Alexis de Tocqueville, a compatriot of Maritain who himself had acquired something of a reputation for commenting on American beliefs and practices. The *articulus*, or question at issue which I am proposing, is as follows: "Whether the Americans are Cartesian."

Few topics could be more central to an understanding of Maritain's career. If we may look upon that career as a positive effort to infuse Thomism into the anemic bloodstream of modern thought, we might also view it as, negatively, a struggle against the proliferation of errors whose origins can be traced to the spirit of Cartesian philosophy. That is, Maritain was as much an anti-Cartesian as he was a Thomist; and though it is certainly true that the two labels describe different aspects of the same reality, they do represent different perspectives on it. In this view the truly pivotal book in the Maritain canon is *Three Reformers: Luther--Descartes--Rousseau*, in which his quarrel with Descartes is raised to a high level of articulation.

Yet as important as *Three Reformers* is, the true index of its centrality is the frequency with which Maritain returned to the anti-Cartesian theme in the half-century after its publication in 1925. Descartes, after all, had committed "the original sin of modern philosophy," Maritain had said;¹ and that is an assertion rich with implications about the seriousness of Maritain's concerns.

Three Reformers was brilliant, eccentric, irascible. In it Descartes emerged as a wilful man, almost intoxicated with his beautiful errors. Even though the tone of Maritain's opposition would soon show a penchant for gentle, ironic humor (in 1931 he referred to "my dear enemy René Descartes"²), the firm and consistent opposition persisted. There was no subject in Maritain's work that did not begin as an attempt to counteract the Cartesian error.

Just what was Descartes's terrible deed? It was to tear apart the fabric of human nature, thus creating two domains--that of the intellect, and that of *extension*, or the properties of bodies. Descartes had reasoned that,

¹Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 77.

²Jacques Maritain, "Religion and Culture," *Essays in Order*, trans. J.F. Scanlon (London: Sheed and Ward, 1931), 24.

since it is derived from a realm radically unlike that inhabited by the body, the mind cannot grasp certain knowledge of things as they truly are. All that one's intellect can grasp are appearances; and, were it not for his faith that God could not deceive him, he would despair of there being any congruence between what he thinks he knows and the nature of the extended bodies outside of him. Just as Marx after him, Descartes took the orthodox philosophy of his day and stood it on its head. In Marx's case, the orthodox philosophy was Hegelianism; in Descartes's it was the Scholastic teaching about angels.

Maritain's opposition to what he saw as the Cartesian derailment of modern thought was full of meaning for his encounter with America; for the United States, he averred in a well-known passage of *Reflections on America*, was the potential home of a new Christendom.³ By a new Christendom he meant an integral humanism--as is clear from the full title of his work *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*; and an integral humanism, a humanism of the incarnation, entailed a renewal of the human personality, its reconstruction in the wake of the Cartesian split.

Maritain labeled the Cartesian doctrine *angelism*. Angelism is a subject on which I need not elaborate here; but I would like to note, nonetheless, something about the historic legacy left by this modern form of idealism. What Descartes managed to accomplish was to give a kind of philosophic permission to Jean Jacques Rousseau, with his confused notion of how to build a state out of a collection of self-sufficient individuals, and his famous and monstrous compensatory myth of the General Will.

At the base of the manifold failures of the modern democracies, then, lies the great bourgeois myth of the self-sufficient individual pursuing his narrow self-interest. The errors of the modern democracies "correspond to the advent of the bourgeois class and ideology," Maritain wrote, and are "deadly to democracy";⁴ and the true progenitor of the myth was the twenty-three-year-old René Descartes who had once found himself

³Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), 188.

⁴Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), 48.

"all day alone in a warm room," with, significantly, neither a companion nor a book, where he experienced the great revelation that, as he had put it, "I am...residing in my body, as a pilot in his ship." I will be the judge of thought for and by myself alone, Descartes had said; and he thus became the first example of what Herman Melville would call "*isolato*." "Over Cartesian vortices you hover," Ishmael learns from his self-absorbed reveries on the mast-head. "Heed it well, ye Pantheists!"⁵

Thus Maritain's famous antipathy to bourgeois individualism was of a piece with his fierce opposition to the Cartesian legacy. That aversion to the bourgeois was, in turn, linked to Maritain's perception of the United States. "You have no bourgeois," he asserted to what I imagine to have been a roomful of raised eyebrows at Chicago in 1956. "That is one of the blessings of this country."⁶ The explanation he put forward for this absence of a bourgeois was that, while social classes do exist in the New World, they are not bound up with a sense of fatalism. A person born into such a class in the United States does not feel as if he will never leave it; it is not taken as his unchanging lot in life; but actually Maritain's assertion can be seen to emerge from deeper levels of social analysis. If bourgeois are Cartesian, they must be idealist; and, indeed, in excoriating bourgeois man in *Integral Humanism* Maritain wrote of his characteristic malady, "A whole idealist and nominalist metaphysic underlies his comportment. Hence, in the world created by him, the primacy of the sign: of opinion in political life, of money in economic life."⁷

Now, for Maritain could such charges legitimately be brought against the Americans? By no means! In fact, Maritain insisted, allegations that Americans are egocentric materialists are just an *old tag*, a fable belied by the actual good nature, generosity, concern for moral values, and respect for intellectual freedom that this remarkable people evinces. Those charges involve bourgeois characteristics; and America has no bourgeois; so clearly Americans could not have those characteristics.

Here I must emphasize the point I mentioned at the outset, that

⁵Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Airmont Books, 1964), 142.

⁶Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, 87.

⁷Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner's, 1968), 78-79.

Maritain was no apologist. For him the absence of a European class structure was exhilarating to contemplate. Such a lack led him to speak of the American future with great hope--but with a warning as well. Americans need an *explicit philosophy* of democracy in the modern world, he continually asserted--or else they will one day awaken to find themselves simply defending capitalism.⁸

This need to be explicit is a major theme of Maritain's writings on democracy, which constantly uphold the vital Thomistic distinction between the individual and the person. If this and other distinctions are not maintained, the result must be an empty search for individual fulfillment.

A time will come when people will give up in practice those values about which they no longer have an intellectual conviction. Hence we realize how necessary the function of a sound moral philosophy is in human society....

These remarks apply to democracy in a particularly cogent way, for the foundations of a society of free men are essentially moral. There are a certain number of moral tenets--about the dignity of the human person, human rights, human equality, freedom, law, mutual respect and tolerance, the unity of mankind and the ideal of peace among men--on which democracy presupposes a common consent; without a general, firm, and reasoned-out conviction concerning such tenets, democracy cannot survive.⁹

To summarize Maritain's thoughts, then, about the possible Cartesian nature of Americans: Descartes is the progenitor of bourgeois habits of thought; he gave rise to Rousseau, whose myth of Democratism perverted democracy at the moment of its modern formulation; Descartes tore human nature apart; and, as a consequence, a re-integration of the human personality has become the task of philosophy and must be the goal of a new kind of democracy--an integrally human democracy; Americans, however, are not bourgeois; moreover, though they too suffer from these Cartesian mistakes which have become the world's

⁸Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, 29-42.

⁹Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 12.

inheritance, the United States is the place most promising for the development of such an integrally humanist society.

The conclusion is there for anyone to draw: The Americans are not Cartesian.

Here I must stress that the premises, or steps, in the argument are Maritain's, but the conclusion is mine. It is an inference I drew from the foregoing evidence.

The question whether the Americans could develop an explicit philosophy is, if anything, more urgent today than it was a quarter of a century ago, when Maritain wrote the words just quoted above. It is also a more highly visible problem today than it was then. The recent book by Robert Bellah and his collaborators, *Habits of the Heart*, is just one of the contemporary examples of the concern. That book's little title comes from Tocqueville, a man who had his own opinion about the prospects for an explicit American philosophy.

In *Democracy in America* he wrote: "I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States."

The Americans have no philosophical school of their own; and they care but little for all the schools into which Europe is divided, the very names of which are scarcely known to them. Yet it is easy to perceive that almost all the inhabitants of the United States use their minds in the same manner, and direct them according to the same rules; that is to say, without ever having taken the trouble to define the rules, they have a philosophical method common to the whole people....But if I go further and seek among these characteristics the principal one, which includes almost all the rest, I discover that in most of the operations of the mind each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding.

America is therefore one of the countries where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and are best applied.¹⁰

So we find Tocqueville not only giving Maritain's urgings for an

¹⁰Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage, 1945), Vol. 2, 3-4.

explicit philosophy for the Americans but also his dubbing Americans the world's leading Cartesians! What a dreary thought for anyone even remotely sympathetic to Maritain's concerns! How could Tocqueville be so at odds with Maritain on the question? Perhaps it is simply because the two were writing a century apart. To be sure, this imaginary disputation, this thought-experiment, is ahistorical. The burgeoning agricultural, tumultuously egalitarian society that Tocqueville visited in 1832 was enormously distant in social, economic, and even political terms from the nation Maritain surveyed in depression, war, and cold war in the twentieth century. Yet this point having been conceded, it remains that the American past forged the present, and this is as true of the Jacksonian years, during which Tocqueville had visited the United States, as of any other, with the possible exception of the Federalist era. Moreover, the uncanny relevance of Tocqueville's writings to our modern condition is a characteristic so striking that no commentator seems able to refrain from remarking about it. Nor would I.

The mystery deepens when it becomes clear that Tocqueville and Maritain were many times in agreement. For instance, both were astounded at the accommodation between religion and democracy that the Americans had effected. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the French church was the enemy of republicanism, and both republicans and churchmen knew it. "What the ecclesiastical history of this century shows above all," writes Theodore Zeldin, "is a crisis of communication: churchmen and free-thinkers were so carried away by the bitterness of their disagreements that they became confused as to what their quarrels were about."¹¹ In short, no intellectual tradition linked French Catholics with the secular, rationalist roots of French democracy. It would be Maritain who, more than anyone, forged those links.

For Tocqueville, reared as he had been, in the aristocratic atmosphere of antagonism between religion and democracy, the discovery in America of harmony between the two was a revelation and, in fact, one of the most important sources of fascination for him. In Europe, he says, religion is "entangled with those institutions which democracy de-

¹¹Theodore Zeldin, *Intellect, Taste and Anxiety*, Vol. 2 of *France 1848-1945* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), 983.

stroys."¹² "What has always most struck me in my country, especially of late years," he wrote to Gobineau in 1836, "has been to see ranged on one side men who value morality, religion, and order, and on the other those who love liberty and legal equality. To me this is as extraordinary as it is deplorable....Men can only be great and happy when they are combined."¹³ Such a conjunction, however, was precisely what he had perceived in America, where, as he said in *Democracy in America*, "the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of liberty* are as one."¹⁴ Those words are recognizably Maritainian in spirit.

Of course, when it comes to the point of our discussion, the Americans' characteristic approach to thought and feeling--their "habits of the heart"--one finds the path of close agreement between Maritain and Tocqueville diverging into different roads. "Who does not perceive," wrote Alexis de Tocqueville, "that Luther, Descartes, and [no--it is not Rousseau; that would be too fortunate a conjunction!] Voltaire employed the same method, and that they differed only in the greater or less use which they professed should be made of it?"¹⁵ Yet this apparent agreement with Tocqueville was something which Maritain allowed to slip out of his grasp. For instance, he saw clearly enough the loneliness of Americans. "In the midst of general kindness and the busiest social life," Maritain observed, "it is not rare to find in individuals a feeling of loneliness"; but rather than follow up on the insight, he allowed it to fade. "This is a point I only submit. I don't know, but it seems to me that there is something there."¹⁶

There is, indeed, something there. Tocqueville saw it, and feared it, and expressed it in grim and famous words: "Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back

¹²Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, 12.

¹³Quoted in Joachim Wach, "The Role of Religion in the Social Philosophy of Alexis de Tocqueville," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 7 (January 1947): 76.

¹⁴Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, 45.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 5.

¹⁶Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, 70.

forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart."¹⁷

Upon close investigation, one can scarcely fail to notice that the characteristics which Tocqueville ascribes to Americans are almost exactly the same as those Maritain ascribes to Descartes in the searing pages of *Three Reformers*. It should be clear, from the title of this article, at least, that my own conclusion on the question is close to Tocqueville's; but the question remains, as it should, an open one; and it cannot be answered merely by citing Robert Bellah or Christopher Lasch, as probing and wise as their own analyses have been.

One further question remains. What explains Maritain's illusion, if, indeed, we are justified in calling it so? I can only suggest an approach to the question. During the Second World War, Maritain's political involvements reached a new level of intensity. Just as intellectuals everywhere among Allied nations, he was convinced that only a postwar society committed to social justice could begin to redeem the suffering of the world's peoples. At the same time, the war years were the time of Maritain's enforced exile in the United States. Here he was presented daily with acts of generosity, with kindnesses small and large. Moreover, he naturally contrasted Americans to his own people--a people who, he thought, were more individualistic than Americans. Perhaps these two factors--his enforced exile and the intensification of his call for integrally human democracy--worked synergistically. America became for him (though only potentially, and with many qualifications) the seedbed of an integrally human, rather than a bourgeois, form of democracy. Like European intellectuals since the Renaissance, then--like Montaigne, like Locke, like Tocqueville himself--Jacques Maritain could not keep from projecting his own best hopes onto the New World.

¹⁷Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 106.