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The Philosophy of Culture in Jacques Maritain

Throughout the writings of Jacques Maritain, particularly those works dealing with social and political philosophy, there runs like a *leitmotiv* the theme of cultural philosophy. For this reason I call him an outstanding and original philosopher of culture. I do not overlook the fact that I have hailed him, as distinct from a pure philosopher (who perhaps does not exist), the great Prophet-philosopher. I assimilate his cultural philosophy to his *prophetic philosophy* as an integral part thereof.

A rapid glance at the works of Maritain substantiates this view. In *The Twilight of Civilization* (along with other references to culture) he says that "in the dialectics of culture Communism is the final state of anthropocentric rationalism.¹ In *Integral Humanism*, in eloquent passages on *heroic humanism*, he calls for a cultural and temporal force of Christian inspiration able to act in history and come to the aid of men." In the same work, he opposes this heroic humanism (I call it his heroic humanistic culture) to the "zoological humanism of blood and race."² In *Science and Wisdom*, he refers to the studies contained in the volume, particularly those on "Science and Wisdom" and "The Philosophy of Faith" as touch-

¹Jacques Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), 23. This book appeared first in French in 1939.

²Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), "Heroism and Humanism, Introduction." See also Chapter VII. In *Religion and Culture*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1931), I, "Nature and Cul-

ing "on questions whose importance for the philosophy of culture is, in my opinion, vital."³

In *Saint Thomas Aquinas* and even in the early work, *Anti-Moderne*, there are overtones or perhaps anticipations of the philosophy of culture. In the philosophical work on St. Thomas, Common Doctor of the Church, Maritain emphasizes the truth that this philosophy aims to enlighten human beings in every walk of life and not simply the learned scholars. This I look upon as one of Jacques Maritain's great texts showing forth his all-embracing philosophy of culture.⁴

Jacques Maritain's book, *On the Use of Philosophy*, brief as it is, is a valuable contribution to his philosophy of culture. The essay "The Philosopher and Society" is especially pertinent here. Maritain brings out a theme dear to him in insisting that the philosopher should not dwell in an ivory tower but should be concerned with the role of sound moral philosophy for all of human society. Such a philosophy has to restore intellectual faith to society in the value of its ideals. Where there is so much emphasis on the *phenomenal*, there should be a recall to "the ontological mystery of personality and freedom."⁵

It is above all, as the very titles indicate, in *Religion and Culture* and in the short essay *Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty*, that Jacques Maritain develops at length his own thought on philosophy of culture. Again as the titles indicate, Maritain does not take *culture* as an isolated phenomenon; it is essential to see it in its dynamic relation to religion and liberty.

Although a short work, *Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty* is important for more than one reason. For one thing, this publication was issued by the University of Chicago and signaled his first voyage to the United States in 1933. For another, it bears directly on our topic.

ture," Maritain says that culture and civilization are interchangeable for him, although he recognizes a subtle nuance in the meaning of these two terms.

³Jacques Maritain, *Science and Wisdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), "Preface."

⁴Jacques Maritain, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Joseph W. Evans and Peter O'Reilly (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), Ch. I.

⁵Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), IX and 35.

The dialectic of modern culture displays three aspects or moments. These are: (1) an inversion of the order of ends; culture seeks its last end in itself and its end is domination over matter; (2) an almost demiurgic imperialism in regard to the forces of matter; culture proposes to change the conditions of nature so as to dominate it by a technical or artificial process; (3) the progressive driving back of the human by matter. All these *moments* involve matter and they show that the conditions of human life are becoming more and more inhuman.⁶ In my view *Integral Humanism* is the very opposite of these aspects of the dialectic of modern culture and presents the positive program of humanity over matter.

Religion and Culture is a short work of not quite one hundred pages. It is replete with quotations suitable for our purpose; one could indeed quote the entire book. Such procedure is otiose; I know *les amateurs de Maritain* are familiar with the contents. However, some quotation is unavoidable, given our objective.⁷ These are ordered so as to show the significance of philosophy of culture in our philosopher's thought.

For Jacques Maritain, true religion transcends every civilization or culture and is the *supreme beneficent* of all civilizations and cultures. At the present time, we are faced with an anthropocentric culture, which is dissociated from the Incarnation. This modern conception of culture displays three degrees or moments (note that these differ from the three moments presented in *Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty*, but they bear upon the same theme). These are: (1) the classical moment of our culture, marked by *Christian naturalism*; (2) the bourgeois moment, marked by rationalist optimism; (3) the revolutionary moment of our culture, marked by materialistic pessimism. These *moments* or conceptions misinterpret human nature. Radically opposed to this outlook, is the Christian conception, one truly human and humanist, ultimately the humanism of the Incarnation. Nevertheless, while the Christian view is opposed to the modern world (materialistic capitalism as well as Marxism), it recognizes that this culture involves historic growth and aims to incorporate this richness into itself.

⁶Jacques Maritain, *Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1933), Part I.

⁷Jacques Maritain, *Religion and Culture*. In these writings as well as others, there are references to culture too numerous to quote. I have selected ones bearing on my immediate theme.

Maritain's program for overthrowing the modern culture (a gigantic task!) and for installing in its place *integral humanism* is twofold and is staggering in its implications: the first point is that Catholicism vivify all aspects of culture, and the second point is that Catholics form sound cultural, philosophical, historical, social, political, economic, and artistic conceptions, and with them as guiding ideas enter history and make them real. For too many years, Catholics have been asleep. A Catholic should have written *Das Kapital* from the Christian standpoint. Maritain seems to cry out in his anguish at the sleepiness of Christians.

The consideration (brief as it is) of these two major texts leads us to an evaluation of the significance of the philosophy of culture in the total work of Jacques Maritain. To understand the importance of this cultural philosophy, it should be seen in relation to other vital elements in the philosopher's thought. I consider here three important examples, (1) his advocacy of appealing to those inexperienced as well as those expert in philosophy, (2) his advocacy of *integral humanism*, and (3) the relationship of this philosophy to his *strict but open* Thomism.

(1) Maritain sees culture as something no longer gathered as in the Middle Ages in a homogeneous body of civilization but as a reality scattered over the whole network of the globe. It is a living network of hearts of the Christian life disseminated among the nations within the great supra-cultural unity of the Church. Here we have Maritain's pervasive thought that the Church is not bound to any one culture but aims to vivify each and every one. Bound up with this idea is the guiding principle that the appeal should go forth not only to the philosophical scholar but to persons in every activity, from scientists and poets to those working with their hands; in short, to all human beings. Otherwise, the concrete ideal will never be attained.

(2) Again and again, Maritain relates his philosophy of culture to one of his most profound and original conceptions, that of *integral humanism*. As he views it, integral humanism has as its goal the restoration of the temporal order as a community of persons, but to be *efficacious* it needs supernatural aid. Hence it is rightly called the *Humanism of the Incarnation*. In this context, culture, as Maritain habitually regards it, is not something prized in itself or treated like a hot-house flower, but something in vital contact with the humanism of which it is a part.

Jacques Maritain does not hesitate to call himself a Thomistic philosopher. He rejects the appellation "Neo-Thomist." In his carefully elaborated structure of the *divisions* of philosophy (above all in *The Degrees of Knowledge*), philosophy of culture as we understand it belongs

to what he calls "speculative-practical" philosophy; it belongs with moral and political philosophy.

It is Thomistic philosophy which has the scope and the depth needed if we are to recover "the conditions of a truly human culture which assimilates the things of man to the things of the spirit." The Thomist renaissance, as he calls it, faces formidable obstacles. It irks whoever hates Christian culture. Maritain proclaims the necessity of two tasks which may seem inconsistent or at least are difficult to conjoin. He insists that the utmost speculative power is needed to provide the basis for the philosophy of integral humanism and of culture. At the same time, he envisions the wisdom of St. Thomas as "running along the highways of the world before the footsteps of God."⁸

In this twofold task, the insistence upon vigorous technical thought and the insistence upon the appeal to all human beings "on the highways of the world," I see the program of Jacques Maritain, the program to which he dedicated his life; I dare to discern Maritain's inmost self. The whole problem of culture and humanism presents itself to him; his answer is sanctity, the humanism of the Incarnation (and this in one of his early philosophical works!).⁹

Maritain invokes the role of Thomism (and its part, the philosophy of culture) in this great task of restoration. However, while Thomism is in the service of human aspirations and needs, he does not subordinate it to them. Thomism as a form of wisdom is above every particularization. There must be vital exchanges with any particular form of culture, but in essence it is vigorously independent of any and all forms.¹⁰ It forms civilization; it is not formed by it. (In a religious dimension, Jesus Christ is immanent in a given sound and flourishing culture and is yet absolutely transcendent in regard to it.)¹¹

The originality of Jacques Maritain consists in the according to the philosophy of culture a definite place in the structure of speculative-practical philosophy. In his thinking, philosophy of culture becomes aware of itself in the order of thought. In the order of action, as an integral

⁸Jacques Mariatin, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, "Preface."

⁹*Ibid.*, Ch. I.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, Preface.

¹¹See *Religion and Culture* (emphasis mine).

part of speculative-practical philosophy, it does not descend to the field of action itself but orientates those working in that field.¹²

We proceed to an important topic, namely the great obstacles facing Jacques Maritain's *philosophy of integral humanism and culture*. In Maritain's outlook, as we have indicated, culture is never alone. It is part of a total world-view; in the Middle Ages it was (in that "unselfconscious time") subordinated to religion and its values. In the modern age, culture is part and parcel of a society characterized by anthropocentric humanism, a society which either theoretically or practically excludes God or considers Him irrelevant. Modern culture glorifies or accepts as part of itself "the consumer crowned with science."¹³ Maritain's remarks (expressed in the 1930s) remind one of Pope John Paul II's severe excommunications of *consumerism* as the sad but typical note of modern times, particularly in the *advanced* countries. Is such a culture authentic or is it a sham?

In his day, Jacques Maritain considered that the modern age was passing away before our very eyes (perhaps he was speaking as a philosopher who dwells in the centuries). This modern age glorifies hate; it is the reign of absolute totalitarianism. Against this stands an age glorying in its dependence on God and the true independence of persons. The *modern age* has lasted perhaps longer than Maritain thought; it persists and appears even stronger than ever. The values Maritain championed and called for preserving or restoring are to a large extent deemed irrelevant (perhaps *irrelevance* is an even deadlier weapon than a direct onslaught on God, Truth, and Goodness).

Maritain says that in the realm of culture, science now holds sway over human civilization (he does not belittle or condemn science; he is thinking of the *use* to which it is put).¹⁴

¹²The philosophy of culture reflects a philosophical awareness of culture itself as well as the recognition of it as a vital part of human socio-cultural being.

¹³*Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty*, 9.

¹⁴*On the Use of Philosophy*, 49. Jacques Maritain lays stress on the fact that generations may pass before the New Christendom (a temporal society imbued with religious values) comes about. He also stresses that the reign of Christ, already present in the hearts of little flocks here and there, will grow in spite of the obstacles confronting it (see *Integral Humanism*, especially Ch. VI).

CONCLUSION

Let me now summarize rapidly the results of this study on the philosophy of culture of Jacques Maritain.

The *great idol of our time*, he affirms, is the titanism of human effort.¹⁵ This titanism makes use of rich temporal means. Against this formidable adversary, the integral humanist should use poor temporal means. Poor as they are, they should (believes Jacques Maritain) in the end prevail, as did David over Goliath.

Is it not appropriate to call *The Twilight of Civilization* the twilight of culture? For Maritain, as we have seen, the terms are interchangeable. Culture connotes to me the pervasiveness of ideas, the dynamism more than the structures. *The Twilight of Civilization* dwells on the evils menacing our culture. There is an unsound culture (I dare call it a *sham culture*) which glorifies *twilight* as though it were *dawn*, which glorifies hatred of *the enemy* over love of our fellow human beings, and which glorifies a murky hell as though it were heavenly (this language is not unlike Maritain's own use of strong figurative expressions).

More precisely, we are faced by a political totalitarianism which reduces the person to mere individuals marching-in-step and which ultimately obliterates every vestige of personality. In the economic order (more on the side of extreme or unmitigated capitalism), the productive person is reduced to a mere consumer of goods, goods often unneeded, which are, therefore, *sham goods*.

Against these powerful trends (in Maritain's time, *totalitarianism* was a fearful menace), integral humanism arises. Though like David against Goliath, it is fearless. This humanism is at one and the same time a true philosophy of the human person in the temporal order and a religious vivification called the Humanism of the Incarnation (Maritain holds that the *full* philosophical conception of integral humanism is realizable

¹⁵Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, 234. This work, written in Maritain's last period, is ostensibly one composed by an "old and inveterate" layman and not by a philosopher. It still bears the marks of philosophy. The *habitus* of sixty years is not easy to shed. I consider the work as important in the philosophy of culture as written for the educated person not well versed in philosophy.

when the philosopher, even as philosopher, is in vital union with the supernatural).

In opposition to the formidable trends of which we have spoken, involving as they do the insidious power of matter, Maritain's philosophy of culture brings out forcibly the idea that not only the political but every element of society is infected with "the dialectic of modern culture." To oppose such a dialectic, a comprehensive and integral humanism is demanded.

It is relevant to recall Maritain's observation that "in the realm of culture, science now holds sway over human civilization."¹⁶ The resultant is, to repeat, "consumerism crowned with science." When appetites are rendered unruly and are tempted by a multitude of *goods*, it is difficult from the natural point of view to lead them back to the one thing essential, to the asceticism which leads to The Good.

One of the appeals of Marxism (at least in its pristine phase) is its emphasis on the *basic productivity* of the worker. Maritain (and we may add, Pope John Paul II) stresses that productivity is part of the dignity of man the worker.

On the more philosophical or intellectual plane, Maritain argues that the crucial question for our age of culture is whether reality can be known not only *phenomenally* by science but also *ontologically* by philosophers.¹⁷ Here again he holds that an arduous task awaits him and his colleagues, for many philosophers (he calls them "ideosophers") as well as scientists (he calls them "exclusive scientists") are immersed in the phenomenal.

On the level of action, or on the level of the so-called "average person," the danger is that he or she suffers the loss of the sense of being and of the sense of truth. Truth is understood as mere verification, being is merely the passing scene. While the *average* individual does not put the matter in philosophic terms, his or her brain is steeped in these ideas. Against this basic attitude there must be an heroic effort to restore the sense of being and truth, not to mention goodness. This is ultimately a

¹⁶Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy*, 49. This theme is developed *ex professo* in *Science and Wisdom*. Maritain is at pains to show that he is not opposed to science. Far from it! He is showing that what he calls "exclusive scientists" often succumb to placing their science at the service of demiurgic imperialism

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 56.

philosophic task but it involves *protophilosophic* appeals to the *average* educated person. This is the task of philosophy of culture, a task not only aimed at philosophers but at people "along the highways of the world."

To understand the full dimensions of the philosophy of culture of Jacques Maritain, it is necessary, as we have attempted to show, to see it in its many relationships. It should be seen in its relation to all cultures and not merely our own Western one. It should be seen in its relation to the prevalent though deficient culture (the *modern age*) in which we live and have our being. It should be seen in its relation (a dynamic organic connection) with *integral humanism*. It should be seen in its relation to the basic dignity of the human person (this is really his integral humanism, but deserves emphasis here). It should be seen in its relation to the *freedom of fulfillment* to which persons aspire and which fulfill their personality. Above all, it should be seen in its relation to the Humanism of the Incarnation, which comprehends everything included in this passage.¹⁸

¹⁸I am aware that others have written on Maritain and his philosophy of culture, notably Charles O'Donnell, R. Falconer, and H. Robbins. However, I have drawn these reflections from my own meditation on the texts of Jacques Maritain.