

**RAISSA, JACQUES, AND THE ABYSS OF
CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY:
THOUGHTS ON
"THE FACE OF GOD OR THE LOVE OF GOD
AND THE LAW."**

William Bush

In a paper given in Atlanta in 1985 and to appear in the forthcoming volume, *Understanding Maritain*, we examined Raissa's impact on her husband's spirituality, as well as what Jacques came to see as Vera's contribution to his spiritual evolution. What we present here therefore is a sort of long footnote to that previous paper, as it were the probing of a rather intriguing text of Raissa which, heretofore, we have pushed aside as being more philosophical than spiritual. It consists in fact of only a few undated pages and is entitled: *The Face of God or the Love of God and the Law*.

Let us begin by observing that not once, but twice after Raissa's death Jacques gave eloquent proof of attaching singular importance to these few undated pages. First of all, in 1963, he imposed them upon the reader as the final statement in *Raissa's Journal* as though they were in fact a summation of all she had said. And, though one may well observe that the placing of this undated text at the end of *Raissa's Journal* might not really be all that important in itself, the fact remains that three years later, in 1966, in summing up his thoughts on man, God and the Church in *The Peasant of the Garonne* Jacques again situated the very same text at the end of his own final chapter, as it were a veritable crowning of his long, closing section devoted to the affairs of the kingdom of God. He even actually integrates it into the last chapter of his own text. Must we not therefore try to see something more in this very special treatment of these few undated pages than a mere whim on Jacques' part to give the last word to Raissa?

In any case, an examination of this short text proves rewarding quite apart from any question of Jacques. Raissa broaches the subject of the divinisation of man in it, giving a very striking presentation of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his long-desired and only son, and citing this as an

example of the transmutation of our fleshly nature into a spiritual one, saying of this great Patriarch that "*he has revealed all the terrible demands of the divinisation of man.*"¹

Now this idea of the divinisation of man is of an impeccable orthodoxy, whether we view it as being the whole purpose of the Incarnation of God and a faithful continuation of the Johannine teaching that God become man in Jesus Christ that men might become sons of God, or from the great and unbroken tradition of Greek Christianity where the divinisation of man--that is, *theosis*--is not looked upon as being an optional goal, but indeed as the only purpose of the Christian life, the only abiding reality in man's mortal state where, apart from belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, man has no option open to him but doom, dust, decay, and oblivion. Could it be then the question of the divinisation of man in these pages which captured Jacques' attention and held it over the years?

Prolonged pondering of the contents of this short text have led me to conclude that such was not, in fact, the case. Indeed, I am convinced that other considerations touched upon by Raissa in these few pages were in the end much nearer Jacques' heart, and that once we have grasped these other considerations, we shall be better able to understand why the greatness of two of France's foremost Christian writers of the twentieth century, Charles Péguy and Georges Bernanos, both friends of Maritain, eluded the philosopher who, at best, regarded their Christianity with a cautious reserve and, at worst, with what one might best describe as a slightly Pharisaical superiority tainted with a bit of rather obtuse priggishness endemic to certain converts.

This observation may appear harsh, yet it is a hard, bitter fact with which I, as a literary critic, have long wrestled, and it has been rendered all the more difficult in that I am fully aware of Jacques' quite extraordinary intellectual gifts and of that far greater degree of Christian charity he and Raissa were capable of exercising toward Péguy and Bernanos than either of the latter two would ever have bothered to exercise towards the Maritains. In fact both Péguy and Bernanos passed quite severe judgements on Maritain. The problem is nonetheless before us. And, though I am not sure how popular the conclusions that we shall draw from Raissa's text may be, I would like to reassure Maritain specialists that my own apprehension in arriving at them--especially for me who am not a Maritain specialist--was no less than theirs may be.

Now a first reading of Raissa's pages leaves us with the impression that everything is fairly straightforward. She argues that, though God is love, man is submitted to the law which God, as the Creator of being, has made and which, in man's eyes, seems opposed to love. Yet, she argues, God could not change the law so he submitted Himself to it in Jesus Christ to show us men that He is with us when we suffer from the law, and that He is actually calling us beyond it into the new law of Christ which has been

spread abroad, born from the effusion of His blood. This sacrifice moreover serves as an example for His followers. Furthermore, Raissa maintains, this new law of Christ is much harder than the ancient law. Still, through the love of Christ, one has learned that before all things one must love God, knowing that He is love, and trusting in this love to the end. Finally, in Raissa's closing argument, we find a statement which, to the extent that it could be applied to her and Jacques' own spiritual lives, does indeed confirm their basic orthodoxy. Speaking of the law and of God, Raissa says: "insofar as He is our end and our beatitude, he calls us beyond it."²

The disquieting thing is that the very orthodoxy of this statement stands in sharp contrast with what Raissa actually does in this short article. For after such an orthodox statement a Péguy or a Bernanos would have lost themselves in what was well beyond the law where alone is found, they both knew, the dynamism of the ineffable mystery of God. Raissa Maritain however somehow seems to have got grounded by philosophical issues which, I suspect, found an echo within the aging Jacques' philosopher's heart as he compiled her *Journal* and put the finishing touches upon his own testament in *The Peasant of the Garonne*.

Indeed, these pages bear witness to Raissa's innate need to philosophize on questions which, as St. Paul was the first to remind us, can only prove the folly of philosophers when confronted with the cross of Jesus Christ. Raissa, however, resembling Jacques in her intellectuality, boldly forges ahead with her speculations, even talking about the *cause* of God.

Certainly one steeped in the Greek tradition of apophatic theology, whereby one knows that one can never arrive conceptually at what God is but only what He is not, can only tremble at the thought of a God whose cause might be understood. Would He not thereby be reduced to the grasp of man's mind? Respect for the ineffability of God is not however one of the more striking characteristics of philosophers of any ilk, nor is it a characteristic of western Christian thought as a whole after the twelfth century. And it is moreover a fact known to all that the Maritains prided themselves not only on being the most faithful of western Christians but even, more particularly, disciples of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Now if one can, while keeping in view the *whole* of Christianity, look at St. Thomas Aquinas objectively, how can one escape seeing that this great 13th century figure could have come about only in the west, being as it were a local, a regional manifestation? Indeed, Orthodox Christians in a country such as Greece with an apostolic tradition going back to St. Paul, might well ask why a Christian writer should even try to reconcile Christianity with--of all people--their own pre-Christian Aristotle? But such questions were far from Raissa's mind in writing this text where she boldly opposes the *cause* of God to the *cause* of the law. She even views God as being, as it were, trapped by Himself: "He cannot abolish any law inscribed in being,"³ she maintains.

Once again our Greek Christians might observe that proposing to say what the Creator can or cannot do is not only risky and dangerous, but also tends to show a certain intellectual pride in presuming to grasp God's utter ineffability. Indeed, have Christians, throughout the centuries, not always maintained that they know God not by intellectual speculation on His causes, but rather by personal encounter with the God-Man Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit? All Christian saints bear witness to this be they Catholic or Orthodox. Is this not as true of a great saint of our day such as Mother Theresa of Calcutta as it was in the last century of that other great Catholic witness, Thérèse of Lisieux? And is it not also true for the often-maligned evangelical fundamentalist? All of them speak a common and essentially Christian language about knowing God, about *experiencing* Him, though His incarnation in Jesus Christ.

This is not of course to imply, even for a minute, that the personal encounter with Christ was at all absent from Raissa Maritain's experience. As we had ample opportunity to point out in our earlier paper, quite the contrary is true, and is evident in many very moving examples. But such is nonetheless certainly not the great thrust in these few pages with which Jacques chose to end both *Raissa's Journal* and his *The Peasant of the Garonne*. Indeed, the mystery of one's encounters with Christ is singularly absent with Raissa pushing aside the mystery of the personal and particular in favour of the generalization of philosophical speculation, rooting it all in that old Maritainian imperative: "distinguish in order to unite". Mystery therefore, the fundamental, unseen, and unseeable mystery of how God works, and why God works, becomes in these pages a matter for philosophical speculation.

We thus arrive at the two most basic assumptions implicitly, if not always explicitly, behind Raissa's speculations which, I believe, could not fail to stir sympathetic vibrations in an aging Jacques' heart. The first assumption is far-reaching and the second is actually dependent upon it. Raissa speaks of "the meaning of all human history" as being the "inexorable Law of transmutation of a nature into a higher nature."⁴ She thus thrusts upon us, as though it were a generally accepted fact, the idea of *progress* as well as the idea of the *modern*. The whole business of *moving ahead*, of *going forward*, and to say it all, of *evolution towards something higher*, is thus proclaimed by Raissa as being history's essential meaning.

Now such a tenet seems to have been--alas!--basic to Maritain's own thought, being perhaps a reflection of his notable republican ancestry. Though the caustic anti-Maritain critic might remark that such ideas of progress and optimism might be deemed more appropriate coming from a Marxist or socialist than from a Christian awaiting the second coming of Christ and the judgement of the world by fire, Maritain did cling to this tenet which helps explain, I believe, that naiveté he displayed, for example, in his assessment of America. We realize thus that if, at moments in

reading *The Peasant of the Garonne*, one senses that the author has become aware of a few flaws in the rose-tinted pane through which he viewed the meaning of history, Raissa's essay at the end of this volume nonetheless serves as an antidote to any poison secreted by his pessimistic assessment of some of the fruits of Vatican II.

But a far more dangerous tenet still also lies hidden in these pages. This is Jacques and Raissa's failure to recognize the radical nature of the Fall since both seem to believe, as we have just said, that the meaning of "all human history" is to be found in the "inexorable law of transmutation of a nature into a higher nature," something neither Péguy nor Bernanos would ever have admitted under any circumstances. As their mature works show, neither Péguy nor Bernanos had any illusions concerning man's utter and total inability to speculate on the cause of God and the law, nor upon man's ineptitude to grasp the depths of his own mediocrity, destitution, and twisted nature since losing sight of the Face of God in Paradise.

Certainly the orientation of Péguy and Bernanos was already well defined in French literature not only by Pascal in the 17th century, but brilliantly by the great Baudelaire in the 19th century where, in *The Flowers of Evil*, we are given a panoramic view of man's fall. Péguy, singing in his long masterpiece, *Eve*, not only of man's cosmic destitution, but also of man's cosmic redemption, views Eve not only as the tragic, fallen and humiliated grandmother of the race of men, but also as ancestress of the most holy virgin Godbirthgiver who intercedes for the whole world. Péguy provides us in this most neglected of Christian masterpieces what may some day finally be recognized as the only valid reply not only to Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* but also to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Moreover in his very first novel Bernanos sees Satan's sun as being manifest whenever man finds his mental lust renewed in the midst of the destruction he has just wrought by his latest attempt to satisfy his intellectual concupiscence--something so frighteningly relevant for man today as he pigheadedly bashes on seeking salvation through the panacea of nuclear energy and erotic satisfaction in spite of the devastation already brought upon himself by both.

Whatever one may think of Bernanos' sun of Satan, Baudelaire's evil flowers, or Péguy's *Eve*, the fact remains that Jacques Maritain, by giving Raissa the last word in those pages of his own last testament, proved that he remained optimistic about the evolution of the human condition in spite of anything he might have said to the contrary in the rest of *The Peasant of the Garonne*. He moreover obviously agrees with her conclusion that people must be *told* what the difference is between the *cause* of the law and the *cause* of God so that they may be able to understand the love of God. Thus, he no less than she, bases the solution to man's problem upon the imperative of intellectual dissemination.

Of course, salvation by intellectual dissemination hardly startles us who are of a culture canonizing Rousseau and officially recognizing education as

the surest scale, after wealth, for measuring civil worth and social nobility. Nonetheless, is it not fair to observe that something quite other than intellectual dissemination must be regarded as the true measure for the abiding influence of the Maritains' Christian witness?

I am in fact convinced that the Maritain's remarkable impact has come far less from their intellectual witness in their writings than from their own very personal witness of what Jesus Christ was for them, a witness which touched all who came into contact with them. And this relevance of Christ to them was, let us never forget, something they themselves did not get from intellectual stimulation, or even from St. Thomas Aquinas, but rather from their encounter with Léon Bloy, that glorious yet terrible prophet whose soul burned with love for God's ineffable mystery. For the essential greatness of this old genius' personality proved for the Maritains, as for other Christian notables such as the painter, Georges Rouault, a witness to the uncreated Light of God. And Léon Bloy, that great lover of the Holy Trinity as revealed through the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, was by no means a philosopher--and most definitely not a Thomist.

The amazing thing is that there is in fact a great gulf separating Bloy's Christianity from the Maritain's and it becomes obvious to anyone who bothers to scratch the surface of their respective thought about God and man. For, in spite of Raissa and Jacques' touching fidelity to the memory of Bloy, the abyss separating them is as real as the abyss separating Maritain from Péguy, Bernanos and Baudelaire. And, indeed, is it not the same abyss--the abyss of orthodoxy? For Bloy, let us recall, honoured Baudelaire as a master and, like Baudelaire, he also refused belief in progress, being steeped in a sense of the human race's utter destitution since the Fall. In mourning the loss of his little son André, the devastated Bloy prayed that God might forgive us humans our idolatry in seeking Paradise in the face of our children since our exile is so ancient that we have forgotten the true splendour of the face of God, so deeply imprinted on our souls and so abiding in the residual memory of the race that we constantly attempt to replace its loss by the beauty of the face of beings created in God's own image and, more especially, in the faces of our own children.

Certainly it will be for the critics of the next century to assess Maritain's Christianity and compare his spiritual legacy with the legacy left by both Péguy and Bernanos. I suspect though that one will be in for some surprises for, in spite of being viewed in their lifetime as rather suspect Catholics by clerical officialdom, both the latter have left a rich and very orthodox Christian legacy to French literature, a legacy as rooted in the Fall and man's destitution as is the work of Baudelaire or the thought of Pascal, and holding the basic theological tenet that the only meaning to history is found in the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Yet, in spite of what we all know to be the Maritain's deep identity with Christ, these few undated pages of Raissa entitled *The True Face of God or*

the Love of God and the Law clearly demonstrate an implicit denial of the Fall since they hold man capable of reasoning on the *cause* of almighty God Himself, as well as also demonstrating a profound and almost naive optimism concerning human *progress*, maintaining a belief in the inexorability of the "law of transmutation of a nature into a higher nature" as constituting the basic meaning of history.

It is only to the extent that we can apply to Christ Himself what Raissa says about the Creator as "our end and our beatitude" that we can, in fact, implicitly, if not explicitly, bridge the abyss of Christian orthodoxy separating the Christian witness of Jacques and Raissa from that of Péguy, Bernanos, Baudelaire, Pascal and--ironic as it may seem--even from that of their own godfather, Léon Bloy.

University of Western Ontario

NOTES

1. *Raissa's Journal, presented by Jacques Maritain* (Albany, New York: 1974), p. 392.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 394.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 390.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 390.