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Maritain and the Future of Democratic Authority

The world today welcomes popular movements toward democracy and the widening demands for human rights, political, social, and economic freedom among Communist and other nations seeking to be rid of dictators. Although the Soviet Union is torn by the trauma of change, the response of its people to openness and reform raises hope for democracy there and in Eastern Europe. The popular 1989 uprising in Beijing, smothered by government terrorism, lamentably rescheduled the arrival of Chinese democracy. Hampered by class and tribal cleavages, economic misery, and inadequacies of political authorities, Third World nations struggle for democracy and more serious international attention.

Dramatic changes in Poland, Hungary and the Baltic states are in the early stages of liberalization. However, further advances in democracy there and elsewhere might be very difficult and might extend over many decades or longer. In particular, the tempo of democratic change might be delayed by internal ethnic dissension, economic crises, authoritarian resistance to freedom and a long-standing unwillingness to accept moral and spiritual values over purely political ones.

Since the last Great War democratic nations witnessed the triumph of benevolent technologies and higher levels of national economic prosperity along with a resurgence of the bourgeois ideal of wealth and power. The perils of modernized nuclear weapons and the onus of costly military outlays remain. A cluster of social ills--including poverty, drugs, violence, racism, pollution, and a decline in the quality of education--challenge the democratic authorities of the future.

The next century will soon inherit these problems. Meanwhile, our times await the beginnings of a moral and political revolution that will reconcile antagonisms between political freedom and political authority

and will inspire the vision of a new democracy. Such a vision draws more than ever on the latent resources of popular political aspirations, the wisdom and courage of elected political authorities and the promptings of spiritual life.

Maritain had such a vision. Building on the political wisdom of Aristotle and Aquinas and on the inherited experience of the free governments of his lifetime, he patiently developed a practical, historical, moral and spiritually inspired ideal of a new democracy capable of transforming democratic thought and practices. His contributions to political philosophy and to democracy are formidable. Henry Bars listed 35 of his books that in whole or in part relate to political thought and action.¹ His critical studies of modern moral and political philosophy enriched his political thinking. His genius discerned the connectedness of ideas and reality, of ideas and action which he expressed in *Les Degrés du Savoir* and in his wise applications of distinctions and analogies to political philosophy and practices. His personal involvement in the political events of the thirties and forties, especially during the Spanish Civil War and World War II, as well as his long sojourn in the United States and Canada, are significantly reflected in his political writings.

In this short paper I limit myself to certain salient problems of democratic authority particularly relevant to our world. The main topics are freedom and authority, political authority and power, the role of the people in democracy and Christian influences on the democratic ideal of civilized life. What I have to say here briefly cannot do justice to the richness and profundity of Maritain's political philosophy in which he dealt with basic related ideas as person, pluralism, equality, common good, virtues, natural and positive law, and sovereignty to mention a few.

The widely held ideology that democratic political authority must conflict with political freedom accounts for much of the confusion of democratic thinking. The fundamental premise of Maritain's personalist and pluralist philosophy of democracy holds that political authority is not morally and practically realizable in the absence of a spiritually oriented freedom of the persons who constitute the people of political

¹Henry Bars, *La Politique selon Jacques Maritain* (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1961), 20-21; Gerald McCool, "Maritain's Defense of Democracy," *Thought* 54 (June 1979): 132-142.

society. Equally such freedom cannot realistically be achieved without a morally committed political authority.² This interpretation recognizes that freedom, as an internal dynamism of persons, although of primary concern for their eternal destiny, also substantially influences their political future as a people. The external dynamism of political authority, that derives its character from natural law, serves the common good of political society and its people so long as people are free from authoritarian or Machiavellian rule.³

The modern world, Maritain observed, is dominated by three conflicting ideas of the political freedom of man. One freedom centered on "freedom of choice as an end in itself eclipses the social and political primacy of social justice and the common good."⁴ In reaction to the excesses of classical political liberalism a second philosophy of politics claimed the core of social and political life must focus on a freedom of autonomy that makes man the master of life.⁵ This idea in Hegelian form "sought its realization in history through the State understood to be the highest expression of the immanent forces of being." This idea ends up in dictatorship.⁶

²Jacques Maritain, "Démocratie et Autorité," *Annales de Philosophie Politique: Le Pouvoir*, vol. 2 (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1957), 34-36, 44-45; also Jacques Maritain, "Principles d'une politique humaniste" in *Jacques and Raïssa Maritain Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 8 (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires and Paris: Editions St. Paul, 1944), 207-244, and Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. Mortimer J. Adler (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1965), Chapter 2; Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), 126-129; see Yves R. Simon, *The Community of the Free* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), Chapter on "Freedom and Authority"; Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, Midway edition, 1989), 72-144.

³Jacques Maritain, *Du Régime Temporel et la Liberté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1933), 50-64; Maritain, *Man and the State*, 32; Jacques Maritain, *Some Reflections on Culture and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 18-20.

⁴Jacques Maritain, *Du Regime*, 47.

⁵*Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁶*Ibid.*, 49 footnote.

Maritain's third idea is that the essential purpose of political society is not the freedom of choice of each individual (which freedom man possesses as a reasonable being) but the political and common good of the people. The freedom "ordained to the good of the person" would aim at providing a truly human condition for all people. In such a good society "the dynamics of freedom will tend from the freedom of choice to the freedom of autonomy." The favorable conditions produced by the authority of that kind of political society would, in turn, foster the autonomy of persons known for their independence and generosity.⁷

Contemporary political authority is sometimes described in terms of minimal or maximal exercise of power. The minimal thesis favored by many conservatives includes a list of ideas borrowed from the book of classical economic liberalism. Maximal authority is a demand of communist ideology and of military dictators. Other standing views of authority include those so-called "realists" who see political power as a game of sophisticated political players. Its temporary successes are kept alive by the interventions of economic power brokers and with the aid of deftly managed propaganda programs which undermine democracy. From a similar perspective democratic authorities are tempted to concur with Machiavellians that the ambiguity of some evil means guaranteed success while respect for justice places an intolerable limit on reasons of State.

Democratic political authority for Maritain is neither minimal nor maximal, not a game, nor an end to be achieved by any technical means whatsoever. On the contrary, for him that authority is vested in a government or State with the right to act (under God's sovereignty) in accordance with the principles and processes of a popular Constitution, periodical popular elections, common action, and the common good.⁸

In the structure of democracy, Maritain held that the government or State occupies the highest level of political authority. It enacts and administers laws as the representatives of the people who are the immediate source of its right to rule.⁹ The people retain that capacity at all

⁷*Ibid.*, 50-54.

⁸*Ibid.*, Maritain, *Man and the State*, 24, 25, 133-136.

⁹*Ibid.*, 12, 13, 25.

times. It is in this sense of self-government that Maritain quotes the words of President Abraham Lincoln, "a government of, for and by the people."¹⁰

The right of representative government to rule is accompanied by its power to exercise that right. "Authority and Power are two different things. Power is the force by means of which you can oblige others to obey you. Authority requests Power. Power without authority is tyranny."¹¹ Power, therefore, is subject to the moral and political purposes of authority.

As the use of force by political authority poses a problem of ends and means, Maritain indicated that political means must be proportioned and appropriate to the end of political society—its common good. That good

is to better the condition of human life itself or to preserve the common good of the people...so that each concrete person... throughout the whole mass may truly reach a measure of independence proper to civilized life and is ensured alike by economic guarantees of work as property, political rights, civil virtues, and the cultivation of the mind.¹²

A second aspect of the problem of political means, Maritain notes, "relates to the means by which the people can supervise and control the State." Before taking up specific means of control the people may employ, the significance Maritain attributed to the idea of people is pertinent to their role as judicious evaluators of government actions. "The concept of the people," Maritain wrote, "is the highest and most noble of the concepts that we are analyzing. The people are the very substance, the living and free substance of the body politic. The people are above the State, the people are not the State, the State is for the people."¹³

His concept of the people includes all of the people but attaches particularly to the marginalized members of society and to manual workers. "Among the common people there is a huge variety of levels

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 126.

¹²*Ibid.*, 54.

¹³*Ibid.*, 26.

and degrees. Superficially they may be moved by the winds of opinion, passions and special interests, At a deeper level there is a will to live together and the obscure consciousness of a common destiny and vocation and finally the natural trend of human will, considered in its essence, toward the good.¹⁴

The political participation of people united under just laws in a democratic political society, Maritain stressed, is based on the principle that the development of society and civilization moves from the bottom upwards to the State. In today's non-democratic societies where authority reaches from the top downward the development of people is brutally limited.¹⁵

Aware that democracies have over time improved their methods of controlling governments, Maritain also saw the continuing need for more education in public understanding, greater respect for and enforcement of human rights, and a deeper appreciation of the value of pluralism. Regarding other ongoing means of controlling abuses or delinquencies of authority, Maritain strongly supported the freedom of privately owned communication media, in spite of their shortcomings. He commended the use of private pressure groups, although they sometimes engage in private warfare. They can be of service to the public good if they do not encourage violence or provoke it. Maritain greatly admired the Saul Alinsky model of small groups working at local levels to correct commonly occurring abuses of power by private or public organizations. He supported the use of Gandhian techniques of nonviolence as a means of spiritual warfare.¹⁶

Present day experience with political parties in democracies indicate that to the extent ideologies and technologies become a passion for sheer partisan success the progress of democracy is jeopardized. Maritain urged political parties as representatives of the people to attend more seriously to the practical principles and goals they propose to support. He was not sympathetic to the formation of religious political parties either because they have often proved divisive or have been unable to fulfill their mission.¹⁷

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 64-171.

¹⁷Jacques Maritain, "Lettre sur l'Indépendance" (*Oeuvres Complètes*,

One of the little appreciated ways that the people can prevent abuses of government or private group actions is by their dedication to civic friendship which recognizes the essential equality of all citizens and respects differences among fellow citizens with regard to religion, race, and status in life. Civic amity, a companion of justice, is greatly enhanced by good argument among informed and responsible persons to whom the people attend.¹⁸

Maritain's idea of a Democratic Charter can contribute importantly to a people's democracy. It provides a framework of a practical political faith in a democratic ideal. It is, Maritain said, a statement of a "civic or secular faith, not a religious one." A democracy has no right to impose the creed on citizens as a condition of citizenship. It has the right and duty to educate them in this set of "practical tenets which the human mind can try to justify from quite different philosophical outlooks." The Charter which includes such principles as human, political, and social rights and their corresponding duties, justice, civic amity, and religious freedom invite a conscious agreement among people to assist them in the advocacy and defense of democratic conduct.¹⁹

A democratic educational system would, among other challenges, teach people not only the principles of the Democratic Charter but also the making of judgments which apply principles to the changing realities of social and political life. These judgments are of two kinds: one supportive of the just actions of social and political authorities, the other, as if in service of a loyal opposition, enabling citizens to criticize laws, policies, and practices contrary to justice and the common good. Both types of judgments involve popular reflection on public information and debates which yield a basis for public cooperation. They also recognize that the legitimacy of democratic authority depends on the support of a public consensus.²⁰

Historically a moral conscience, that is a knowledge of political good

Vol. VI), 271-288: Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 261-264.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 203-204; Gerald B. Phelan, "Justice and Friendship," *The Thomist* (January, 1943), 152-160.

¹⁹Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*, 108-113.

²⁰Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1956), 56-59; also Bars, *La Politique*, 69-86.

and evil, aided by the energies of the Gospel, has slowly progressed among people during the past centuries.²¹ Beyond that progress, Maritain pointed out that people will from time to time need prophetic persons or minorities to "awaken people to something better than everyone's daily business."²²

The public virtues, an important qualification of persons holding public office, including political advisors, attest to the presence of a competence to judge well and of a conscience sensitive to the moral and political good. The moral conscience of political decision-makers has to be complemented by a religious conscience because the ethical nature a political society enjoins "the aid and comfort of religious faith" in order for political leaders to cope with the human condition.²³

Maritain once remarked that "the tragedy of modern democracies is that they have not succeeded in realizing democracy," and that "the causes of this block are numerous...The main cause is of the spiritual order." His observation is a reminder that the unresolved centuries-old problematic of the relations between religion and politics is a key element in the failure of democracies to realize themselves. Some democracies established the facade of a Church-State, others yielded to encounters with popular religious indifference or to a polite and bland acceptance of religious freedom. Contemporary democracies still do not understand the extent to which religious freedom, one of the acknowledged human rights, serves to enrich democratic life.²⁴ Meanwhile the world is aghast at the spectacle of the power politics of religious extremists who provoke and encourage participation in inhuman warfare.

Democracy for Maritain is more than a set of institutions and their immediate successes. It is a spirit and a way of life which lies in the common hope for freedom, respect for authority, human rights and duties of persons, and a large measure of civic friendship. These and

²¹Jacques Maritain, "Questions de Conscience" (*Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. VI), 648-651; Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and the Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 11-17.

²²Maritain, *Man and the State*, 142.

²³Jacques Maritain, *Principles d' une Politique Humaniste* (Paris: Hartmann, 1945). 182-183.

²⁴Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, 18-32.

other values are an integral part of the evangelical tradition which cautiously and confidently progresses in history in spite of interpretations of its ideas and practices.²⁵

The Christianly inspired democratic political ideal foreshadowed by Maritain is not a Churchy State, nor a Church-State, nor a *Res Publica Christiana*. It is a secular political society inspired by a personalist and pluralist political philosophy whose contribution includes its advocacy of religious freedom and of spiritual over material values. It is a broadly ecumenical ideal.²⁶ A secular political society where members are inspired to perfect their freedom would grant that each citizen would possess human rights whether or not they are members of a Church because all citizens are equal politically and faith cannot be inspired by force.²⁷

The Christianly influence on political society and its authority "is not automatic and necessary, it is menaced and contradicted. It is a heritage which is to be developed by the labor of all that is human and divine in man."²⁸

Maritain's historical ideal of democracy is not utopian, his vision does not seek to redeem the world but to salvage justice and the common good of political society and its people. His vision is a *long-range hope* for a new age which, as Monsignor George Higgins recently pointed out is a hope which "rests on the knowledge that God is at work in the world."²⁹

Do we rightly read the signs of the times--demand for political freedom in the world, a United Europe, a world order, a new age of democracy and, above all, a renaissance of religious faith?

²⁵Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*, 152-154, 167-171; re religious freedom in the United States see John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 27-142.

²⁶Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*, 159-161.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 161-162.

²⁸Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, 37.

²⁹Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*, 159; Msgr. George Higgins, *The New World* (Chicago), 30 June 1989.