
William Bush

Bernanosian Barbs and Maritain's Marigny Lecture

Though also a Parisian, Georges Bernanos was not, like Jacques Maritain, born into the upper Parisian bourgeois with an illustrious maternal grandfather such as Jules Favre to emulate. Six years younger than the philosopher, his birth in 1888 was to a peasant mother from Berry, married to a highly successful, self-made interior decorator, whose father had been a humble cobbler from Lorraine, reduced to becoming a mere day-laborer in the capital. Nonetheless, in the apartment above his father's interior decorating shop, it was the traditional values of a Christian, monarchist France which were maintained. Thus, unlike Maritain, Bernanos did not drink in eighteenth century republican idealism with his mother's milk. His successful father, moreover, sent his only son to be educated by the Jesuits, along with the sons of the Parisian aristocracy.

When Bernanos met Maritain in 1926, he was 38 years of age, Maritain, 44. His first novel, *Under the Sun of Satan*, was about to become the all-time best-seller in Maritain's new, prestigious series, *Le Roseau d'or*. Bernanos, a modest regional inspector for an insurance company, was virtually unknown.

In contrast, Maritain's prestige could not have been higher. Convert of Léon Bloy, Professor at the *Institut Catholique*, well-known and honored at Rome, founder of the Thomist Study Circle, and philosophical editor of Charles Maurras's *Action Française* organ, *La Revue universelle*, Maritain's success at literary conversions in 1926 was legendary. Bernanos's naive wonder at finding himself catapulted into professional intimacy with such a notable Catholic figure was to prove disastrous however. He was constrained by Maritain to tone down his first novel so as not to risk, as Maritain put it, "wounding any Catholic conscience." This Maritain-inspired censorship of Bernanos's very Christian under-

standing of evil and sanctity provides irrefutable evidence of the limitations of Maritain's understanding of Christianity in 1926.

Ironically, both men lived World War II in exile. Unlike Maritain, who found himself stranded in North America on a lecture tour, Bernanos, with his wife and six children, had embarked from Marseilles for Paraguay in July of 1938, seeking that remote Eden where, Bernanos naively hoped, there would be no serpent lurking to seduce his six offspring. Two and a half years in Spanish Majorca from 1934 to 1937 had given him cause to worry about acceptable outlets for the very Bernanosian exuberance of his three older children, now aged 21, 19, and 17. In any case, a South American Eden—with or without the serpent—was an old dream, carried over from Bernanos's pre-World War I youth, when two friends had brought back reports of easy living in Paraguay, and the possibility of founding a French colony there to preserve the Christian values of old France.

That Bernanos immediately discovered life impossible in Paraguay, and that he opted for Brazil rather than Argentina, where Maritain's circle had warmly received him on his way to Paraguay, need not concern us here. What is more important is that his private humiliation as father of a noisy tribe of offspring upon having his youthful dream of Paraguay shattered, cruelly coincided with a yet more public humiliation as a Frenchman at France's signing the Munich Pact.

Installed in Brazil he thus began writing a long apology for the French entitled "We French," interrupting it, however, for the composition of a burning denunciation of the pro-Munich stance of Charles Maurras, just elected to the French Academy. In writing this little volume, published as "The Scandal of Truth" just prior to the war, Bernanos actually had the text of Maritain's 1937 *Ambassadeurs* lecture on Jews, "*Les Juifs Parmi les Nations*," before him. He thus in this text launched a number of barbs, still censored out of all editions, at Maritain's explanations of the role of Jews in modern society.

Wartime exile in the Western Hemisphere allowed both Bernanos and Maritain to soar to lyrical heights about civilization being saved by eternal France. Bernanos believed firmly in the predominant role France would be called upon to play in the modern world, insisting until his death in 1948 that the spiritual revolution he proclaimed as necessary to save western civilization from technology—a preoccupation he shared with Simone Weil—could come from France alone.

Maritain and Bernanos thus shared much more than just a common-period in history. It was in fact usually their mutual Christian preoccu-

pations which gave rise to those frequent barbs which, directly or indirectly, consciously or subconsciously Bernanos could not resist aiming in Maritain's direction from even before their first meeting in 1926; and, even twenty-one years later in his last lecture in October 1947, just nine months before his death, Bernanos was still aiming barbs at Maritain.

What concerns us here, however, is the fact that it was Bernanos's stance as a Christian which inevitably caused him to aim barbs at Maritain, and, more specifically, to take exception to all three of the dominant themes of Maritain's *The Twilight of Civilization*. This text, given in 1938 as a lecture at the Marigny theatre in Paris, does indeed dwell upon three basic Maritainian concepts, any one of which was capable of sending Bernanos into a prophetic rage--that is, progress, racism, and Christian democracy.

I

Certainly Maritain gives a very large place in his lecture to human progress, an idea in which he had been conceived and which he did not renounce at his conversion to Christianity. This idea was of course totally anathema to Bernanos as a Christian. Bernanos insisted, even from his youth, that belief in human progress allows its partisans to forget both "original sin and man's great dilemma"--that is, our common fall as a race from Paradise--indeed, our common status as human creatures who have fallen into a state of sin and mortality.

Thought about man's great and common dilemma seems far removed from Maritain, however, when, at the end of the first section of his Marigny lecture he speaks of "the horizontal movement through which is progressively revealed the substance and creative strengths of man in history."¹ This "progressively revealed" "horizontal movement," according to Maritain, "prepares the kingdom of God in history."² In the last section he even speaks of "the slow and difficult march towards an historical ideal of fraternal friendship amongst the poor, wounded

¹Jacques Maritain, *Le Crépuscule de la Civilisation* (Montreal: Editions de l'Arbre, 1941), 27.

²*Ibid.*, 28-29.

children of an unhappy species made for absolute happiness."³ That Maritain chose to believe in such an "historical ideal" is further implied in the middle of his lecture where he speaks of a "humanism of the Incarnation which seems to me invoked by our period in history as the only thing capable of coming to the aid of a world's sufferings."⁴

The idea of some such special application of Christianity being destined for a particular period in history is, of course, very far removed from Bernanos's more timeless view; for his application of Christianity was, I believe it fair to say, somewhat less parochial than Maritain's. He could never forget that according to unbroken Christian tradition the reign of the Prince of this World can be overcome finally on this fallen planet only by the coming again in glory of Jesus Christ.

Bernanos thus refused to be seduced by the demonic illusion that the Church of God could ever possibly manage to turn this world into a realm of fraternal charity. What he did allow—and this is an historic element I find singularly lacking in Maritain's thought on France and Christianity—was that in 496 France had entered into a national pact with the Christian God at the baptism of Clovis by St. Remi as first Christian King of France. This pact had resulted in the glory of French civilization without which we should all be the poorer.

A truly Christian culture for Bernanos is thus not to be derived from intellectuals and philosophers such as ourselves trying to shape a future by heady ideals, but rather from the humble, daily living of a whole baptized people where a common allegiance to the crucified and resurrected God-Man, Jesus Christ, determines the common man's attitudes as to what is and what is not of God, as to what is and what is not to be loved and honoured.

Certainly Maritain has a sense of this personal involvement with Christ when he speaks of the difference between the "anti-Christian spirit" and the "spirit which is against Christ Himself."⁵ Even so, his highly intellectual bent tends to take the upper hand, prevailing even perhaps until *The Peasant of the Garonne*. For, whatever we may think of it, Maritain was unable not to take being a philosopher terribly seriously.

Bernanos, on the other hand, never wrote to prove his quite excep-

³*Ibid.*, 84.

⁴*Ibid.*, 44.

⁵*Ibid.*, 33.

tional intellectualism. Rather did he write from a profound personal need to exorcise his inner struggle, hoping thereby to lessen that terrible anguish of soul, that hideous inner pain caused by his visionary grasp of people and events. A tearing sense of urgency thus often disturbs Bernanos's disconcerted reader who, for the first time in his life, finds himself encountering an author who dares expose the depths of his heart before God.

Bernanos's writings, however, represent far more than the visceral ventings of a visionary. They are, in fact, rooted in an unusually keen knowledge of history, revealing the author's noble, but not always successful attempt at a truly cosmic application of the one Truth he prized above all others: God had become Man in Jesus Christ. Given that that one, unique, and time-severing Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity had taken place through the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary to save man from sin and death, how, afterward, could the human race be said to progress? Only to the extent that Jesus Christ became all in all could there be any real progress for the Christian.

II

As for Maritain's treatment of racism, I believe that it was this Marigny lecture, even more than his 1937 lecture on the Jews, which weighed heavily on Bernanos in early 1940 as he wrote his own long article entitled "Race Against Nation."

In the first part of his Marigny text, Maritain speaks of racism as an example of that tidal wave of irrationality he identifies as trying to sweep away his perennial ideal of integral humanism.⁶ In the second section, he ties racism to a demonic pseudo-theism;⁷ in the third he maintains that racism is attached to "hatred of the God of Calvary and of the God of Sinai."⁸

Certainly Maritain's use of "racism" sounds familiar. Is it not similar to the use that still prevails today? A half-century following the attempted genocide of European Jewry, the thought and speech-patterns of European culture have become so completely conditioned by those

⁶*Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁷*Ibid.*, 37.

⁸*Ibid.*, 61.

tragic events that the word "racism," unless it have to do with the tension between blacks and whites, almost automatically invokes in us images of Jewish persecution.

Bernanos's use of "racism" in his article "Race Against Nation" is thus startling for us, being more thorough going, far more nuanced, and much less subject to recent linguistic conditioning. Racism, he allowed, was quite natural to man, just as are tribal allegiances, constituting a sort of basic natural virtue. As for the Jews, Bernanos always maintained, with remarkable lucidity, that they are certainly the world's foremost racists. Do they not insist on retaining their identity, regardless of the cost? This was moreover something which Bernanos sincerely respected, holding it in very high honour for he was aware of the sacrifices necessary to maintain such a feat of identity over three millennia of migrations, conflicts and persecutions, repeated exiles and dispersions; but, being Christian, Bernanos stated simply that such racism is historically totally against Christian tradition.

Unlike Maritain, Bernanos did not over-simplify, denouncing racism because he thought it to be irrational. Rather does he appeal to history where he saw the Christian genius as always being against it. Had that Christian genius not given birth to the glory of French civilization? Had it not shaped the blending of numerous European races into a single nation where, though a Breton was not a Norman, a common belief that God became flesh in Jesus Christ and calls man to become a partaker in His divinity was nonetheless shared—even among fighting factions?

The big thrust in Bernanos's "Race Against Nation" is, moreover, provided by observations on Hitler's belief in the superiority of the Germanic races—which includes the Franks, of course. This belief, Bernanos insisted, was actually a spiritual rebirth of paganism. It was, hence, completely contrary to the whole tradition of baptized Europe. Was Christianity's historic role not that of effecting a coming together, a spiritual blending, a mystical fusion of men in the humanity of Christ whereby they might become something none of them were before: sons of God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit?

Apart from Hitlerian racism's representing a spiritual rebirth of paganism, Bernanos would undoubtedly also have mercilessly mocked Maritain's ill-begotten idea of coupling his accurate statement that racism was contrary to the love of the post-Incarnation God of Calvary with that much more questionable statement of its being equally contrary to

the pre-Incarnation God of Sinai.⁹ Historically, how could Maritain get around the cruel fact that the servants of the God of Sinai massacred the native inhabitants of the Promised Land (an attitude of racial superiority which, regardless of its cause, still mysteriously, disquietingly, persists in our headlines today)?

Certainly, Bernanos, just as Maritain, was concerned about those too-numerous French Catholics who welcomed Hitler's racist regime since it promised to rid society of Jews and Free Masons. Yet, for Bernanos, the great tragedy taking place was that French Christians had abandoned their pact made with the Christian God in 496 with the baptism of Clovis. Thus the very heart, the very soul of France was being swept aside by the rebirth of pagan racism which, of necessity, must always be totalitarian and, thereby, always at war with all other races, something confirmed by the Nazi's clashes not only with the Jews, but also with the Slavs and the Gypsies. Bernanos puts it thus:

The Church made Europe into a community of nations. Often divided among themselves, often enemies, they nonetheless remained conscious of their original fraternity. Through what is now happening, and through a change of spirit in their consciences, Christians now stand by, watching the destruction of one of History's most precious concepts.¹⁰

Then, in a typically acerbic Bernanosian thrust at his fellow-countrymen who, under guise of Christianity, welcomed a racist regime, he added:

But then maybe Christians, through some clever manoeuvre, still hope to profit from this rising paganism by letting it get on with exterminating the Jews and the Free Masons? Such a tactic is like setting your house on fire to get rid of a burglar!¹¹

Bernanos's use of the word "racism" thus stretches well beyond Maritain's limited and rather emotional use of the word.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Georges Bernanos, *Le Chemin de la Croix des Ames* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 18.

¹¹*Ibid.*

III

The real and most abiding difference between Maritain and Bernanos, however, has to do with "Christian Democracy." Like a sign-off tune, this topic surges up in the last pages of the Marigny lecture, reminding us that it was ever sweet to the ears of the son of Paul Maritain and Geneviève Favre. The slightest mention of Christian democracy however, sufficed to send Bernanos into a paroxysm of vituperation—he who at eighteen had written a priest-friend regarding Christian democrats: "They take equality, liberty and fraternity for theology.... Scratch a democrat and you'll get a theologian."¹²

Before we try to explain why Bernanos was so dead-set against Christian democracy's pretenses, let us note that Maritain does indeed attempt, in the last section of his Marigny lecture, to fuse his idea of Christian democracy with the witness of the Church of God. He quotes a statement made in October 1937 by the American Catholic episcopate in regard to Pope Leo XIII's use of the term "Christian democracy":

His Holiness summons us to the defense of our democratic institutions, governed by a constitution protecting the inalienable rights of man... The accomplishment of this order of the Holy Father requires that our people, from childhood through maturity, be instructed in a more thorough manner in the true nature of Christian democracy...¹³

In addition to citing this pro-democratic text, Maritain also praises the American Catholic episcopate for re-introducing the term "Christian democracy" into its ecclesiastical vocabulary. Moreover, as a sort of trump card, he throws in the fact that the non-Catholic President Roosevelt himself had viewed democracy, with its respect of the human person, its liberty, and its good faith, as being rooted in religion, something Walter Lippmann saw as a complete break with past history where religion had not been regarded as the source of American democracy.

It is, nonetheless, striking—not to say actually peculiar—that after all

¹²Georges Bernanos, *Oeuvres Romanesque. Dialogues des Carmélites* (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade: Gallimard, 1961), 1736.

¹³Jacques Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization*, 76.

these bouquets thrown at America in general, and at the American Catholic episcopate in particular, Maritain, at the end, suddenly does an about face, pirouetting away from the key role the United States is to play in saving Western civilization. Instead, we find him suddenly fixing a mystical gaze on eternal France as that civilization's real leader, citing as evidence what a desperate Cardinal Verdier in January 1939 had feebly called a *new axis*.¹⁴

What sort of deep and psychic Maritainian dichotomy are we confronting in this initial idealization of American democracy's fusion with Catholicism on one hand, and, on the other, the final parting gesture of praise and confidence in France? I do not ask this question lightly. Like it or not, it reminds me of a bizarre, but rather fascinating after-dinner story I was told in 1981 in the chateau of Kolbsheim by Maritain's own devoted God-daughter, the gracious Baroness Grunelius, who, with her wonted kindness, had offered me over night hospitality. It was from her own lips that I learned of how, after Raïssa's burial at Kolbsheim and the resulting necessity that Jacques too be buried in France, Maritain had expressed his desire that at his death his heart be cut from his body to be enshrined in America's heartland at Notre Dame University whither, following his burial in France, the Baroness Grunelius, a most reluctant emissary, was to convey it. In a tone nuanced by considerable relief, Madame Grunelius reported to me that her happy discovery of a French law forbidding international transport of parts of the human body had alone saved her from that distasteful and lugubrious trans-Atlantic journey.

As a literary critic, I cannot but relate this rather uncommon story to Maritain's literary about-face in the last pages of *The Twilight of Civilization*. In passing from an American-oriented hope to a French one is Maritain not actually reflecting that same deep-seated dichotomy which dictated that his heart be buried in America and his body in France?

Be that as it may, Maritain was not alone in being seduced by the idea of Christian democracy in America. The normal American reader, indeed, I would venture that most of us here, would tend to find optimism about the future of democracy something uplifting.

Bernanos took a more pessimistic view. With a certain accuracy he

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 89.

regarded democracy as being as good a school for totalitarian dictatorship as any other, something which may perhaps explain his lack of success in English-speaking countries. For Bernanos lucidly maintained that democracy can succeed only if there is some sort of economic success, a hard fact the idealists tend to gloss over as they abstract the democratic ideal from its basic lifeline of selfish economic gain. In an article from November 1944, Bernanos, no doubt thinking of Maritain, observes:

... naive persons don't seem to realize that the existence of the democracy of their dreams in a world such as ours is no less conceivable than the existence of a XVI. century army in modern warfare, and that it is as ridiculous to hope for the inauguration of true democracy as for me to wait for the restoration of the monarchy of St. Louis.

Then, as if echoing Maritain, he says he hears them saying, "Democracy will be this; democracy will be that. Churchill said; Roosevelt stated,"¹⁵ before concluding:

What difference is made by the definition? Even an idiot ought to understand that in a capitalist regime universal suffrage must become just another business, just like the others, while in a socialist regime with totalitarian tendencies, it becomes just what it was in Germany—a powerful, state-serving instrument. A plebiscite made Hitler. Hitler emerged from the womb of the people, for the people also produce monsters and no doubt only they are capable of producing them.¹⁶

Bernanos's conviction that it is usually economic concerns which dictate the popular vote and that democracies can thrive only from economic progress thus led him to understand that the trump card of the economic world can only be the treacherous concept of efficiency. Nor did he count on rank and file Christians as being in any way immune to

¹⁵Georges Bernanos, *La France Contre les Robots, Suivi de Texts Inédits. Présentation et Notes de Georges Bernanos* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 218.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 218-19.

the hard fact that in spite of being created in the image of God and, through the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, made sons of God, they also, since efficiency is vital for the success of democracy, infallibly would be constrained with the non-Christians to become equally enslaved to machines. This is, in fact, the basic argument of Bernanos's last book written in Brazil, *France Against the Robots*.

Thus, unlike Maritain, Bernanos would never look to the United States to provide an answer. He was, indeed, not convinced that after less than two centuries of existence the young American phenomenon had really yet proven itself as a pinnacle of either freedom or democracy.

Bernanos's theology, based on his analysis of man's basic fallen nature and rejecting the illusion of human progress, thus proves much finer and more comprehensive than Maritain's highly intellectual view. I believe that it might even be demonstrated quite convincingly by some young theologian more adept at such tasks than myself, that Bernanos's Christianity was always much more thorough going and solid than Maritain's. Certainly it was freed from all Maritainian illusions regarding humanism, rationalism, and, need I say, Thomism.... Just as the faith of Péguy, it was the Christianity of old France before the rise of the universities, professional intellectuals, and scholasticism, the Christianity of a St. Hilary of Poitiers, a St. Martin of Tours, a St. Germain, or a St. Geneviève, not that travesty of Christianity offered us by those learned doctors in theology of the Sorbonne who condemned the anointed of God, Joan of Arc, as a relapsed heretic, sorceress, and witch.

V

As for Bernanosian barbs, let us close by observing that when *Under the Sun of Satan* was about to appear, Bernanos, mindful of the much-publicized but short-lived conversions of Jean Cocteau and Maurice Sachs, launched his first barb at Maritain in filling out the author's information form for his publisher. Under "Religion" he wrote, terminating with an exclamation point: "Christian since his baptism. Not even converted!" Obviously he assumed that Maritain, whom he had not yet met, would read this form, for he also used a Léon Bloy quote to explain his purpose in writing, explicitly naming its source: "A horrible complaint about sin, but orthodox and of an uncompromising veracity, with neither bitterness nor solemnity (Léon Bloy)." Moreover, even in his last lecture nine months before his death, Bernanos was still comparing Maritain's literary conversions to works of high fashion, to garments of *haute couture*,

signed by their author; and, regarding those short-lived conversions of Cocteau and Sachs, Bernanos observed in that same lecture that ironically they were like rare, exotic hot-house flowers. They had been forced into bloom by Maritain in the rarefied, climate-controlled greenhouse of Raïssa's salon at Meudon, but, alas! were totally incapable of survival in the world outside...

Behind all Bernanos's barbs, however, lies a great and touching irony, bitter even if one be a disciple of Maritain. It was he, Bernanos, and not Maritain who was the true disciple of Léon Bloy whether by his unpredictable behavior, his visionary gifts, or his all-encompassing Christianity where no philosophy was needed to justify it. Certainly, just as it would be hard to have imagined Bloy on a Sunday afternoon at Meudon amidst the faithful of the Thomist Study Circle, chatting about spirituality in hushed tone over tea, even so did Bernanos's rare presence there prove an uncomfortable one.

Dare we allow ourselves to imagine Bernanos there on some rare Sunday afternoon—as, indeed, he was, in fact. Certainly I have no difficulty in conjuring up such a fantasy, full of explosive possibilities. How not imagine Bernanos rather uncomfortably ensconced beside the most attractive female present, engaging her in animated conversation? Realizing that in spite of herself, his neighbor is fascinated by his great charm and wit, Bernanos sets down his cup of tea and, with great and characteristic gesticulations starts to pooh-pooh, with irresistible, good-natured mockery, the naive pomposity of the Thomist Study Circle's having categorically enshrined St. Thomas Aquinas as "leader and guide in the knowledge of truth." Throwing his hands wide in despair, his face full of astonishment, Bernanos asks rhetorically, in much too loud a voice, how all those unfortunate Christians in the twelve centuries before St. Thomas Aquinas had managed to get by without such a leader and guide to truth! How deprived they must have felt! At the very absurdity of such a ridiculous idea Bernanos erupts with his famous great laugh, shattering the reverent, hushed gentility of Raïssa's semi-monastic salon. Yet, alas! Bernanos being Bernanos, he's only started, for he's going farther still. Pouring forth his deepest Christian convictions, much to the now-obvious delight of his attractive blonde neighbor's adoring gaze, he decides that the moment has come for him to make himself heard by everyone present in a propitious quote from Léon Bloy.

One can imagine Vera, having just poured a cup of tea for a bearded Russian emigré, looking up, alarmed and scandalized. Jacques too, who had just quietly bent forward to present a new American convert to

Raïssa on her corner of the sofa, also looks up uneasily. As for Raïssa, she jerks around in defiant disbelief, glaring in the direction of Bernanos and his blonde neighbor, her eyes flashing, visibly pierced to the heart by such an affront as that quote.

Indeed, all three of these Benedictine oblate Godchildren of Léon Bloy have recognized that quote; for it is, indeed, a quote of their incorrigible and so conveniently dead old master. It is, moreover, alas! one of those very awkward, impossible, best-to-be-forgotten quotes which he was ever wont to make; and now, for the very first time, it has been uttered in the salon of Meudon, challenging all Meudon stood for! Who, but that indelicate, semi-barbarian, and wild Bernanos, would have had the effrontery to utter it here, of all places?

Worse still, it was much more than a mere utterance. In the twilight of that afternoon, itself so poignantly a part of the twilight of pre-World War II French Catholic social idealism, Bernanos had shouted his challenging quote. Indeed, he had proclaimed it; and it resonated like the voice of doom as he uncompromisingly announced not only for the benefit of his blonde neighbor, but especially for Maritain, his and Léon Bloy's preferences where Christianity was concerned: "I'm for UN-civilized Christianity!"