

## *A Personal Memoir*

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To speak about Maritain and the Jews means for me to recall the two great reasons that drew me to Jacques Maritain and inspired me to become his faithful disciple. His views on Jewish issues were one attraction. The other was his commitment to peace during the terrible “uncivil” war in Spain.

In those crucial years 1937–1938, when a world war was being prepared before the frightened eyes of the democratic countries (which were willing to make any capitulations to appease the Nazi-Fascist monster), Maritain publicly took the most courageous and also riskiest position in his life as a philosopher and contemplative. In 1937 he published his essay “*L’Impossible antisémitisme*,” which later became “*Le Mystère d’Israël*,” and in 1938 he pronounced at the Théâtre des Ambassadeurs in Paris, his famous lecture “*Les Juifs parmi les nations*.” During the same years, he chaired the “*Comité français pour la paix civile en Espagne*” and wrote the preface (56 pages long) for Alfred Mendizabal’s book, *Aux origines d’une tragédie*,<sup>1</sup> where he demolishes definitively the myth of the “Holy War.”

His heartfelt appeals in favor of the people of Israel, persecuted by the Nazis and their collaborators, together with his stance in favor of the peace in Spain (at the time when the Fascists were feeling very close to victory) were the moral equivalent of stigmatizing the two

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred Mendizabal, *The Martyrdom of Spain: Origins of a Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938).

most prominent preliminary battles in the storm that was to inflame the world after September 1939.

Therefore, I can confess now, it was not metaphysics that made me know and love Maritain, but precisely his stepping outside of speculative philosophy and his commitment in the shifting terrain of politics. For him, this was nothing but an unavoidable continuation, the application to historical circumstances, of his only concern: the search for and defense of truth.

I have to provide another testimony here, in spite of myself: ten, fifteen years later, Maritain's same enemies continued to fight him, not because of his philosophy—they had never read it—but because he had been in favor of the Jews and had never been in favor of Franco's dictatorship. But let's come back to the years before the war. With him I campaigned for peace in Spain (I have described this period in two articles, which have appeared in *Notes et documents*). And it was after I started to read his philosophical works that I changed from being a partisan to being a "disciple," in the largest sense of the word.

Not long after, I married a half-Jew, fully a Jew in the eyes of Jewish law, as my children are also. My wife was a fervent Catholic, but all the members of her family were good German Jews—perfectly assimilated Jews, whose culture was absolutely "modern," even refined, to a point that made them forget the faith of their ancestors though not their Israelite roots. When they had to leave Germany, they established themselves in England and they made a superhuman effort to assimilate themselves also into English culture. The cult of Shakespeare replaced their devotion to Goethe. They were modern Jews especially because of the characteristic that Jacques Maritain pointed out—that is, their attachment to "business."<sup>2</sup> The consciousness of Jewish identity was rendered more acute by the deportation of other distant relatives, to Theresienstadt first and then to an extermination camp.

In this way my wife and I found ourselves vitally, existentially, confronted with the "Mystery of Israel," with this everlasting paradox of a nation that—even when its members do not practice their ancient rites—hope passionately for the coming of the Messiah, and attach themselves no less passionately to the goods of this world. The complex relationships between practicing Christians and agnostic Jews

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<sup>2</sup>Jacques Maritain, "Le Mystère d'Israël," 44–48.

became even more complicated by the reality of a very deep family love, the indelible sign, in turn, of the Jewish mentality.

And once again it is from the teachings of Maritain that light shines. *Le Mystère d'Israël*, as analyzed by the master, becomes clear and comprehensible to my eyes and to my heart. "A great love for the Jewish people"—he says<sup>3</sup>—"it is the principle of an independent judgment that one might make about." And it is with an extreme delicacy, with a perfect lucidity, that Maritain makes us understand the vocation of Israel among the nations, with its shadows and its lights. This same "exquisite refinement of sensitivity and spiritual delicacy"<sup>4</sup> that Maritain discovers among the sons of this chosen nation, was applied by him to his analysis of the mission of Israel from a Christian point of view. "Whatever economic, political and cultural forms that the Jewish question may superficially take, it remains a mystery of a sacred order."<sup>5</sup> The election of Israel remains, in spite of their refusal of Jesus. No other Catholic author had spoken until then with so much respect and comprehension of the Jews, with the exception of his great friend and future cardinal, the theologian from Fribourg, Charles Journet.

### *A Cry of Pain*

It is not necessary here to repeat the well-known theological and exegetical reasoning on Saint Paul's major text, in the Epistle to the Romans 9–11, through which Maritain discerns the mission given to the people of Israel within the divine plan of a Redemption that opens out to all the nations of the world. What I wish to recall, however, is Maritain's cry of pain faced with the persecution of the Jews in Europe—and elsewhere. He rejected this anti-Semitism, so often perpetrated, alas, in the name of Christianity. "No," he wrote in 1938, "no, it is not in this way that Christian civilization demands to be defended."<sup>6</sup> Anti-Semitism is a pathological phenomenon that reveals an alteration of Christian consciousness. And that demeans the executioners to an abjectness infinitely lower than their victims.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 240.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 60.

The practical philosopher, the philosopher in the city must ask himself today: "What can one do now?" Global solutions, valid for the entire Jewish nation, are not possible. (Let us not even speak of the horrible "final solution" of the Holocaust.) Even the migration, the establishment of all Jews in Palestine is a utopian solution. And in any case, these solutions could only be organized by the whole international community. But the Christian knows that there are partial solutions, in accordance with the spirit. In general, one has to wait until the juridical order respects human dignity. Then institutions of a pluralist type will create a historic climate where the Jewish question will find an adequate solution.<sup>8</sup> And above all the Christian knows that in human relations progress come about through our spiritual dispositions toward the other. Hatred can only be defeated by love. And love has, as a prior condition respect and comprehension. Thus to defeat anti-Semitism and to establish between Jews and Catholics a climate of reconciliation and a fruitful understanding, one must follow a spiritual road, independent of political or sociological situations. This means that it is necessary to establish a dialogue and, through this dialogue, to achieve a better mutual knowledge, because one cannot love what one does not know: *nihil volitum quin praecongnitum*—says the old scholastic adage.

At the end of the war, the bad conscience of all those who had merely looked on at the Nazi Holocaust had its uses. The climate was favorable for an understanding with Jews. A Jewish-Christian dialogue was finally established. In this way a group of men of good will, Christians of different confessions as well as Jews, decided to gather at Seelisberg, in Switzerland, in September 1947, for an "Extraordinary international conference to combat anti-Semitism." On the Catholic side, eminent personalities took part: Charles Journet, Jean de Manasse, O.P., and others. Jacques Maritain, at the time French ambassador in Rome, unfortunately could not be present. But he sent a letter to the general secretary of the conference, Pierre Visseur, whose echo had an effect upon the resolutions of the conference: "The battle against anti-Semitism is a fundamental obligation for the conscience and a primordial duty of moral health for what is left of our civilization." Three years earlier he had addressed a letter to Hayim

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 87s.

Greenberg, published in the review *Jewish Frontier* (August 1944). This letter, it seems to me, is the direct source of the most important of the “ten theses” of Seelisberg, the seventh, dealing with the way one should present to Christian children the history of Jesus’ Passion. Maritain says “Who put Christ to death? The Jews? The Romans? I myself. I put him to death, every day through my sins. There is no other Christian answer to this question. . . . This is what the Christian teachers should be teaching to their students.” He then added: “A Jew today is as innocent of the murder of Christ as a Catholic today is innocent of the murder of Jeanne d’Arc or of the imprisonment of Galileo.” In order that Jews and Christians may get together, the first condition is to abstain from an “infamous vocabulary” and the inexact exaggerations so often lightly used in religious instruction. The most striking examples: the “deicidal race” or the faulty translation of the “*perfidia judaica*,” in the ancient liturgy of Good Friday.

The ten theses of Seelisberg were still very modest. They could only present themselves as “a message to the churches” emanating from a group of Christians of good-will. It is beautiful and magnificent to notice that these same theses supplied Vatican II with the structure and often even the text of its decree “*Nostra Aetate*” in the section on the religion of Israel: the Jewish filiation of Jesus, son of David, of the apostles and their first disciples; the correct teaching concerning the Crucifixion; avoidance of the presentation of the Jews as God’s outcasts and cursed; remembering that the people of Israel are still loved by God, who does not repent of his promises. The council of Seelisberg, with all the weight of its authority, could add to this the recognition of the fact that the premises of the church’s faith were to be found in the Patriarchs, Moses, and the Prophets. And to conclude the declaration with the statement that “the Church deplores the hatreds, the persecutions, and every manifestation of anti-Semitism, whatever their times and their authors.”

### *Influence on Official Doctrine*

Maritain lived long enough to see his own ideas on the Jews acknowledged by the Second Vatican Council and become the official doctrine of the Church. Paul VI’s gesture at the closing ceremony of the council, by which he called Jacques Maritain in order to give him the message that the Fathers addressed to the intellectuals of the world, is a sparkling confirmation of the reception that his ideas

received in the conciliar documents. After centuries of what Jules Isaac rightly called the “teaching of contempt,” that was the hour not only of respect and comprehension, but of common testimony of Jews and Christians faced with the new paganism that surrounds them.

I would not know how to finish this brief memoir without alluding to the radical novelty of the state of Israel. For Maritain, the weight of his age and work toward the end of his life kept him from writing a “long chapter” on the state of Israel and its ceaseless struggles to assure its own existence and its flourishing. Nevertheless, numerous traces of a “meditation pursued for a long time” can be found throughout his *Mystère d’Israël*, which ends moreover with a short *post scriptum* on the matter, dated 1964.

The heart of the problem is that the state of Israel has an evident temporal destiny. It is a modern state, democratic and secular, but it also has spiritual mission in relation to the entire Jewish people. In fact, with the creation of an Israeli state, the condition of a chosen nation in the world has entered into a completely new phase.

This condition is bipolar: on one hand there is the political reality of an established Jewish state in this land that Israel always considered as promised to the Jewish people by divine decree (even for the Israelites that have abandoned all religious belief). On the other hand, there are the numerous Diaspora Jews, who are also a part of the people chosen to accomplish, among the gentiles, the mission of witness and fidelity in accordance with the providential designs of salvation for all men.

What matters to the Jews throughout the world, and to those of the state of Israel, as much as to those of the Diaspora, Maritain asserts strongly, is the maintenance of their spiritual identity as Jews and members of the chosen people of God. This is why Israel should not, in any case, become an “enactment of a sacral state,” but it should not either be, in spite of the inevitable temptations, a state just like all the others.<sup>9</sup>

My Jewish brothers forgive me: I do not pretend in any way to give you moral lessons. But with the same sincerity that I have spoken up to this point, I allow myself to say that often I do not agree with the politics—I insist on this term the temporal politics—practiced by the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 53, n. 1, and 246.

government of Israel. And I dare to presume that Maritain himself would probably not have either.

In order to express my fears, I would not know how to find better words than those which a great Jewish artist, Yehudi Menuhin, pronounced in front of the Knesset in May 1991, when he received the Wolf prize: "This devastating manner of governing by fear, scornful of the fundamental dignity of life, this continuous asphyxiation of a dependent nation should be the last methods adopted by those who, themselves, know too well the horrible significance and unforgettable suffering of such an existence. . . . This is not worthy of my great people, who have endeavored to model themselves on a moral code for some 5,000 years."

Like Maritain, I cannot end without evoking the community of hope among Jews and Christians, as radically different as their expectations might be. A mutual source of hope of each other during their journey on earth is that they both expect the coming of the Messiah at the end of time.