

CAN JACQUES MARITAIN SAVE LIBERAL DEMOCRACY FROM ITSELF?¹

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Maritain enthusiastically supported liberal democracy with all its pluralism. He also vigorously argued that democracy depends on society's acceptance of several truths about God and the human person. Practically speaking, how compatible are these two positions, the one requiring society's affirmation of specific truths, the other guaranteeing its members as much freedom of thought, conscience, speech, and behavior as is consistent with the maintenance of democratic institutions? This essay inquires into this question by addressing the following topics: (1) Maritain's enthusiasm for liberal democracy; 2) the challenge of liberal democracy; (3) Maritain's two fundamental proposals for simultaneously preserving truth and liberal democracy: the "Concrete Historical Ideal" and the "Democratic Secular Faith;" and (4) an evaluation of those proposals in relation to current movements in the United States.

1. I use the term "liberal democracy" here in its broadest sense to mean a society committed to allowing its members as much personal freedom as is consistent with the maintenance of democratic institutions. I accordingly stay clear of the admittedly crucial but, for my purposes, irrelevant Marxist claim that there is another sense of "liberal democracy"—"the democracy of a capitalist market society"—that is inconsistent with my use of the term. For the Marxist view see C. B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 1.

Maritain's Enthusiasm for Liberal Democracy

Two basic reasons fueled Maritain's enthusiasm for liberal democracy. First, he regarded it as testimony to the dignity of the human person, especially as that dignity pertained to freedom of conscience; second, he saw liberal democracy's separation of Church and State as the embodiment of the distinction drawn in the Gospels between "the things that are God's" and "the things that are Caesar's."² Yet it is important to note that this enthusiasm was for the *idea* of democracy rather than for any existing democracy. Even the lavish praise he bestowed on American democracy and its people, a praise bordering on hagiography, springs from the promise held by existing institutions and traditions, not their reality.³ The attributes that he identifies as the components of democracy—personalist, communal, pluralist, and Christian or theist⁴—are not descriptive properties but normative criteria: a political society is democratic *if* it embodies them. The question is, what are the odds of it embodying them?

The Challenge of Liberal Democracy

If these four criteria are essential to democracy, how does Maritain propose to defend the truths they embody when confronted by the dynamism of the freedom of thought, speech, and action that liberal democracy espouses? For example, Maritain clearly regards the requirement that society be theist or Christian as primary; it suffuses the other three with the distinctive meanings that allowed the emergence of democracy in the modern world.⁵ Besides being non-negotiable, these truths are seminal to what Maritain calls the "democratic secular faith."⁶ This faith embraces a "moral charter, a code of social and political morality ... the validity of which is implied by the fundamental compact of a society of free men...."⁷

Because liberal democracy is committed to allowing its members as much freedom of belief, speech, and action as is consistent with the public

2. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 108.

3. Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958); see the book's final chapter, "America Is Promise," pp. 193-200.

4. Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris M. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), pp. 20-22.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-24.

6. Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 108f.

7. *Ibid.* p. 112.

welfare, its greatest challenge is the reconciliation of pluralism with unity. However, the commitment to pluralism is more than a commitment to tolerate viewpoints that are merely divergent. As John Courtney Murray observed, pluralism acknowledges "... the coexistence within the one political community of groups who hold divergent and incompatible views with regard to religious questions—those ultimate questions that concern the nature and destiny of man within a universe that stands under the reign of God. Pluralism therefore implies disagreement and dissension within the community."⁸ John Rawls cast the problem in starker terms when he wrote that no one of these "incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines ... is affirmed by citizens generally."⁹ The imperatives of pluralism notwithstanding, however, there can be no political community without unity;¹⁰ colliding viewpoints pose a problem just because they exist in a community. This means that beneath all the "incompatible comprehensive doctrines," there must be (*pace* Rawls) some commonly held truths regarding fundamental propositions. Otherwise the public discourse that makes democracy work will be impossible since such discourse or "argument" will be constructive only if grounded in shared truths.¹¹

Richard Rorty advances a pragmatic principle of unity, agreeing with Rawls that "democracy precedes philosophy." As a philosophical relativist who insists that an incorrigible ethnocentrism excludes the possibility of objective truth, Rorty would appeal to majority opinion on all civil issues: the members of a democratic society vote on the principles and institutions they think should be in place. Rorty echoes Rawls in advocating that people, such as Ignatius of Loyola and Nietzsche, who are unwilling to compromise their principles, should be banished from the political community. He thus locates the heart of democracy in majority opinion.¹² In contrast, Ronald Dworkin rejects "the majoritarian premise" "and with it the majoritarian conception of democracy. It is not a defensible conception of what true democracy is, and it is not America's conception."¹³ Dworkin appeals instead to a "moral reading of the Constitution," that, briefly stated, is a

8. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. x.

9. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. xvi.

10. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, p. x.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-23.

12. Richard Rorty, "The priority of democracy to philosophy," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 175-96.

13. Ronald Dworkin, *Freedom's Law* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 31.

consistent application of legal precedents as seen, for example, in the Supreme Court's movement from decisions pertaining to sterilization and contraception to abortion.¹⁴

Clearly, Maritain would not accept the principles of public unity defended by Rawls, Rorty, or Dworkin. Instead, Maritain offers two theories for preserving truths while allowing for maximum personal freedom, and reconciling plurality with unity. The first is his "concrete historical ideal,"¹⁵ and the second is the "democratic secular faith."¹⁶

Maritain's Proposals for Saving Democracy

THE CONCRETE HISTORICAL IDEAL

Maritain's adoption of Sorel's "concrete historical ideal" serves as a brilliant model for displaying how the fundamental truths of Christendom analogously apply to modern secular culture. Although remaining essentially unchanged despite its incarnation in the institutions and sensibilities of a given culture in the latter's historical setting, the concrete historical ideal allows for progress.¹⁷ Implicit in this use of the concrete historical ideal is a metaphysics of progress. Change in itself is no guarantee of progress. Progress presupposes both permanence and change. The concept of change is broader than the concept of progress in that while all progress is change, not all change is progress. Aging, for example, constitutes change, but from a biological standpoint, it is regress; equally regressive is the change from a democratic to a tyrannical government. Thus progress occurs when change builds upon and perfects what already exists, as the unfolding of a rose seed into a rose bush. Here we have a harmony of both permanence and change. In an important sense the rose bush is in the seed. No constitutive part from the outside has been added to the process; the blossoming of the roses is but the actualization of the seed's natural potentialities.¹⁸ Thus it is crucial to the concrete historical ideal that it expresses the truths it embodies *analogically*, not univocally or equivocally: truths remain the same while expressing themselves differently according to each historical situation.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

15. Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, trans Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), pp. 121ff.

16. Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 108.

17. Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, pp. 127-32.

18. Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Books for Libraries, 1979), pp. 2-3 and 12-14.

In contrast, reactionaries entertain a univocal conception of the truths essential to culture, a conception that leads them to condemn significant changes in social, economic, or political institutions as an erosion of those truths. For example, during the 1920s and 30s Maritain's critiques of traditional socio-economic institutions put him in bad odor with conservatives who believed that institutional change threatened order. His riposte appears in early editions of his book, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*,¹⁹ which bore the motto on its frontispiece, "There is order even among the demons." And it is eminently plausible that Maritain's socio-political theories halted Brazil's movement toward Fascism in the 1930s as the entrenched privileged classes sought increased authoritarian political rule to thwart the masses' march towards socialism in their demand for justice. Maritain's theories halted this polarization by offering a rationale for progressive change in society while preserving traditional cultural and socio-economic truths.²⁰

THE DEMOCRATIC SECULAR FAITH

Not a religious faith, the democratic secular faith rather consists of a set of truths that the majority of the members of society must hold if democracy is to endure. Unlike the sacral world of the West in the Middle Ages, a world unified by a Catholic Christianity, the modern world is secular. This wrecks any realistic hope of finding philosophical or theological agreement on the theoretical level. Maritain's solution to the problem of finding consensus lies in what he calls "practical points of convergence:"²¹ people can agree on a law or public policy while entertaining differing theoretical justifications for doing so. Given the pluralistic environment, Maritain is persuaded that this practical approach is the only way to preserve freedom of thought, discussion, and conscience, all of which are at the heart of democracy.²² Some writers balefully regard the open society of liberal democracy, especially its free press and electronic media, as a fatal weakness,²³ whereas Maritain, as though taking a page from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, regards "the freedom of expression and criticism" as the mainstay of the people's political liberties.²⁴

19. Jacques Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, trans. J. F. Scanlon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931).

20. Ibid.

21. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 108-11 and 176-78.

22. Ibid., p. 112.

23. Jean-Francois Revel, *How Democracies Perish*, trans. William Byron (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday, 1984).

24. Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 146.

Maritain emphasizes, however, that, despite the centrality of that particular freedom, the democratic faith must nevertheless be handed down and inculcated. The family is primarily responsible for doing that, but, because it lacks the resources needed to complete the task, the public schools must take over at an early stage: "the educational system and the State have to provide the future citizens not only with a treasure of skills, knowledge, and wisdom—liberal education for all—but also with a genuine and reasoned out belief in the common democratic charter, such as is required for the very unity of the body politic."²⁵ The fulfillment of this project demands personal conviction and commitment from teachers: "Those who teach the democratic charter must believe in it with their whole hearts, and stake on it their personal convictions, their consciences, and the depths of their moral life. They must therefore explain and justify its articles in the light of the philosophical or religious faith to which they cling and which quickens their belief in the common charter."²⁶ The teachers sign an oath to the effect that if they arrive at the stage where they no longer believe in what they are teaching, they will ask to be reassigned to other teaching duties without incurring any professional penalty.

Maritain warns that democracy must remain vigilant for, and ready to act against, intellectual subversives, those who advocate doctrines and practices inimical to democracy. Maritain denominates them "political heretics."²⁷ Because he regards freedom of conscience as the indispensable mark of human progress, he insists that it must be preserved. At all events, he tells us, it is not the government's job to impose truth on the members of society.²⁸ So what to do in the face of the "political heretics? Maritain finds the answer in what he calls the "prophetic shock-minorities." Its members are not "*the people*" but those he designates as the "*inspired servants or prophets of the people*."²⁹ They are not the rulers or elected representatives—although that is the ideal—but instead consist of "small dynamic groups freely organized and multiple in nature, which would not be concerned with electoral success but with devoting themselves entirely to great social and political ideas and which would act as a ferment either inside or outside the political parties."³⁰ The "prophetic shock-minorities" are called upon to exert their greatest influence in times of "crisis, birth, or transformation."³¹

25. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-18.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Examples of such people that Maritain cites are the fathers of the French or the American constitutions, men such as Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine or John Brown.³²

The primary task of the “inspired servant of the people is to *awaken* the people, to awaken them to something better than everyone’s daily business, to the sense of a supra-individual task to be performed.”³³ Maritain’s use of the word, “shock” is appropriate, for the prophetic shock minorities must rouse the people from a somnambulistic state: “The people are to be awakened—that means that the people are asleep. People as a rule prefer to sleep. Awakenings are always bitter. Insofar as their interests are involved, what people would like is business as usual: everyday misery and humiliation as usual. People would like not to know that they are *the* people.”³⁴ “Shocked,” “awakened,” but not disrespected. In a democracy, the first precept is to trust the people “even ... while awakening them.” This is to respect their human dignity and to foster the growth of the democratic mind. The Rousseauist principle “to force the people to be free” impeded the growth of the democratic mind and fed the illusion “of the mission of the self-styled enlightened minorities.”³⁵

The Fragility of Maritain’s Proposals

It was noted at the outset of this essay that Maritain’s enthusiasm for liberal democracy must be understood as an enthusiasm for its *idea*; it is an enthusiasm for a possibility rather than for an any assurance that it would be realized. How great the distance between the idea and its realization reveals itself in the following considerations.

First, the concrete historical ideal, although a brilliant model for explaining how the essential truths of democracy may be preserved while assuming diverse historical and cultural incarnations, relies on the analogical nature of the truths the ideal asserts. Were the assertions of those truths *equivocal* rather than *analogical*, the model would collapse. But this is

31. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 142; It seems that Maritain himself had a bit of the shock-troop in him. He published his first article, “La Science Moderne et la Raison,” in June, 1910 in the *Revue de Philosophie*. According to his wife, his intention was to “‘break window-panes’ and annoy the reader.” Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace: The Memoirs of Raïssa Maritain*, trans. Julie Kernan (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1961), p. 335.

35. Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 143.

exactly what Maritain's theory of liberal democracy must confront when he writes that democracy is open to people of diverse philosophical and religious outlooks, including atheism, as long as they accept the values of freedom, rights, justice, and human dignity.

This accommodation is laudable for its generosity but it fails to take into account the mercurial nature of terms such as "liberty," "justice," and "rights," all of which require specification if they are to avoid equivocation and persuasive manipulation. "Freedom" lends itself to uses that are mutually contradictory.³⁶ For example, proponents of negative freedom construe "freedom" as the absence of external restraint whereas proponents of positive freedom construe it as the capacity to attain one's self-perfection by acting in accordance with some objective standard whether it be the law of human nature, society, or the State.³⁷ Maritain, on the contrary, entertains a specific understanding of "freedom," as is clear in a number of his writings.³⁸ He rejects interpretations of freedom, such as Rousseau's, which hold that humans enjoyed an idyllic freedom in the state of nature, only to have that freedom corrupted by civilization; Maritain argues, on the contrary, that freedom must be conquered and the conquest can occur only in political society.³⁹ This view of freedom embraces both the negative and the positive versions but gives pride of place to the latter. The freedom to choose is a necessary condition of the higher "freedom of independence or autonomy," which is the freedom of self-perfection attained by actualizing the potencies of human nature as one identifies oneself increasingly with the Absolute.⁴⁰

Accordingly, if the democratic secular faith requires acceptance of the freedom of the person, the question of which notion of freedom one embraces becomes paramount. Clearly, the social and political structures presupposed by freedom construed as "The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we

36. See Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

37. For the *locus classicus* of negative freedom, see John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1956), pp. 16-17; for positive liberty, see T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1960), pp. 2-3, 8.

38. "Spontanéité et Indépendance," *Mediaeval Studies*, vol. 4, 1942; *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. and ed. Mortimer J. Adler (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), chap. 5; "The Conquest of Freedom" *Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. James L. Jarrett and Sterling M. Murrin (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1957) p. 509.

39. Maritain, "The Conquest of Freedom."

40. Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, p. 136.

do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it"⁴¹ are different from those, such as Maritain's, which construe such a notion of freedom as only the necessary condition of a higher freedom that is based on objective, universal standards.

If the notion of "freedom" runs the constant risk of becoming a merely persuasive term, the notion of "right or rights" fares no better. The meaning of rights has changed radically since the start of our nation, going from the moral claims of the people against the government to a subjective moral claim, a belief that rights are a kind of aesthetic license to live one's life according to subjective assessments.⁴² Maritain himself observed "a tendency to inflate and make absolute, limitless, unrestricted in every respect, the rights of which we are aware, thus blinding ourselves to any other right which would counterbalance them."⁴³

Such understandings of "freedom" and "right" nullify the concrete historical ideal. If the univocal allows of no change and the analogical allows of change while keeping permanent the essential nature of the truths in question, the *equivocal* represents complete change. The materializing of the human person, the subversion of freedom as subjective option, the State as the final arbiter of human life and destiny, the denial of God's existence, either in theory or practice, all are devolutions that are inimical to the concrete historical ideal.

But the more serious concern about the efficacy of Maritain's democratic secular faith is its wellspring. For him such problems as cited above can be ameliorated significantly and thus the democratic secular faith more perfectly realized to the extent that the people are "imbued with Christian convictions and [are] aware of the *religious* faith which inspires it..." All along Maritain has insisted that democracy approaches its fulfillment only as it becomes more Christian.⁴⁴ As noted earlier, this does not mean that he thereby advocates a theocracy or that the Church should be permitted to rule political society.⁴⁵ Rather, he means that the ideals of modern democracy are Christian in origin and, hence, that the values of Christendom must energize its social and political institutions: "This world was born of

41. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Currin V. Shields (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 16-17.

42. Russell Hittinger, "Liberalism and the Natural Law Tradition," *Wake Forest Law Review*, (1990), pp. 429, 486-99; see also, Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: the Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

43. Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 103.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 109.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-14.

Christendom and owed its deepest living strength to the Christian tradition.... Its ultimate error lay in believing that man is saved by his own strength alone, and that human history is made without God."⁴⁶ Maritain is persuaded that the chief characteristics of modern democracy—respect for the dignity and rights of the person, universal suffrage, the equality of all human beings, etc.—were inspired, and thus became cultural forces, in the West by the Gospels.⁴⁷

The cash value of Christianity's influence on democracy expresses itself in the crucial notion of freedom. Christianity brought to light the person's transcendence over political society by calling attention to his ultimate destiny—union with God.⁴⁸ Absent this theological ground of social and political freedom, no argument for the freedom of innocent men and women from social or state control can be absolutely binding. Given that the classic utilitarian defense of that freedom is based on "the greatest good for the greatest number of people," it should not be surprising that a prominent utilitarian, Peter Singer, takes the position that "an infant with severe disabilities should be killed."⁴⁹ The moral of this story is clear: an ethic devoid of a metaphysical or theological grounding in the nature of the human person is incapable of offering any philosophical or theological defense of democracy insofar as it lacks ontological grounding in the nature and finality of the human person. Unlike Christian ethics, an ethic without content does not originate in the notion of Creation,⁵⁰ but rather in the self-interest of the individuals and the groups that control them.

Despite the reasonableness of Maritain's argument for democracy's origin and dependence on Christian doctrine, the process of secularization in our society since the eighteenth century when the Continental Congress "called upon the fledgling nation to observe days of 'publick (*sic*) humiliation, fasting and prayer, as well as days of 'thanksgiving'"⁵¹ has proceeded unabated. Consider the view of Rawls, which construes Christianity as only one of several conditions for the formation of the modern West rather than as the most important cause sustaining force. He confines the influ-

46. Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1944), p. 21.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

48. Maritain, *Man and the State*, pp. 148-49.

49. Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. v.

50. St. Paul, *Epistle to the Romans*, chap 1.

51. Ellis Sandoz, *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 87.

ence of the Christian religion to “the Reformation and its consequent religious pluralism.”⁵²

The above considerations force one to wonder how feasible is Maritain’s reliance on the public school teachers to transmit the democratic secular faith. Given the widespread influence of “political heretics,” such as Rawls, Rorty, Dworkin, and Singer, on today’s academic culture, one has to ask how many public school teachers can be found to teach, with conviction, the democratic charter? The universities and colleges from which they graduate abound with professors and required readings that propose a view of democracy quite different from that espoused by Maritain or the Founding Fathers. Postmodernist rejections and various neo-Marxist critiques of the presuppositions of objective knowledge presented in the Declaration of Independence exert great influence in the university classrooms. Thus in the current climate, public school teachers cannot be counted upon to share Maritain’s vision of the democratic charter. Indeed, many of them hold philosophies that contradict it.

This concern about the dependability of the public school teachers to transmit and defend the democratic secular faith only intensifies the dubiety about the efficacy of Maritain’s notion of the “practical points of convergence.” It is one thing to persuade people of differing theoretical views on matters of shared practical concern to come together; it is quite another to try to persuade people whose differing theoretical views demand practical policies and laws that are mutually incompatible.⁵³ Consider, for example, the current “hot-button” topic of abortion. Pro-abortion advocates, supported by the U.S. Supreme Court, argue that the Constitution demands abortion’s legalization; opponents argue that this legalization strikes at the very heart of the Constitution, which document is an affirmation of the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of all human beings. What happens to the “practical points of convergence” when the number of people who are against abortion, if only even for practical reasons, becomes a minority?

These points of concern reveal the vulnerability of Maritain’s democratic secular faith to the political heretics. Because he regards freedom of conscience as the indispensable mark of human progress, he argues, as noted earlier, that government must not try to impose truth on the members of society. This confronts the “prophetic shock-minorities” with a Herculean demand to defend the truths on which democracy rests. The contemporary American scene displays a new diversity, one that confers a dramatically

52. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

53. See, for example, R. M. Dworkin, *Life’s Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

different reference and hence meaning on the term "pluralism" as well as demanding a more urgent need to formulate a common theological and philosophical viewpoint that can serve as a foundation for a democratic community. Non-Christian religions, a secular philosophy that repudiates the need for any advertence to God and personal immortality,⁵⁴ the postmodernist challenge to the objectivity of knowledge that underpins the Enlightenment philosophy embraced by the framers of American democracy,⁵⁵ a demand for a multicultural curriculum in the schools, a revisiting of the question "Who is an American?,"⁵⁶ freedom of speech vs. pornography, hate-speech, and campus speech codes, the right to life vs. the death penalty, abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and human cloning, not to mention, the traditional, legal understanding of marriage as a union of male and female vs. the demand for legalized same-sex marriages, all these, and more, come together, with the mounting force of a river fed by tributaries, to collide with the traditional understanding of the public philosophy.

Still, the prospects are not all dark. Somewhere, now lost to my memory, Maritain speaks of the "spiritual power" of truth and justice, using the example of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. King's assassination did not defeat the movement, just as Ghandi's did not defeat his nationalist movement. But the spiritual power of the prophetic shock-troops can continue to exert its influence for centuries afterwards without having saved the societies in which its shock-troops lived. The power-brokers of Athens brought Socrates to trial on trumped-up charges that led to his execution. To be sure, the power of his public witness lived on. Almost no one can now recite the names of his murderers: whatever celebrity Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon enjoyed went into the grave with them, whereas today, 2500 hundred years later, the example of Socrates continues to inspire college students the world over. Socrates won by the superior power of truth and justice, but that is the verdict of a long history. The Athens of his day, a first-rate power, continued to thrash about in its moral and intellectual confusion until, by the third century B.C., it had declined to become a fifth-rate power.

The lesson to be drawn from the above examples is that truth unifies, but not until it first divides. In Gethsemane, Christ prayed to the Father that

54. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1934); Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism* (New York: Ungar, 1965), pp. 12-13.

55. *The Debate on Modernity*, ed. Claude Geffre and Jean-Vierre Jossua (Glen Rock, New Jersey: Concilium Press, 1992).

56. See Michael J. Sandel, "America's Search for a New Public Philosophy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1996, pp. 57-74.

all men might be one; yet on another occasion he warned that truth is divisive: indeed, He had entered human history to bring the sword, so that brother would fight brother, father, son, and mother, daughter; he warned the apostles that people would hate them because they hated him. In our country, the Civil War is perhaps the greatest and most dramatic example of this. The hatred and loss of human life and property were enormous. But in the end, the house divided became the house unified. Is it reasonable to count on this happening again, especially in light of the aforementioned contemporary challenges? America's success in abolishing slavery offers reasonable hope, but what are the odds? After all, how many profound crises can a nation survive? One can agree that Maritain was correct in holding that (1) given the secularization of culture, liberal democracy is the only form of government worthy of the human person and his freedom; 2) the notions of the "concrete historical ideal" and "democratic secular faith" are the correct models for liberal democracy; and that 3) the "prophetic shock-minorities" are the only hope for defending that model against the "political heretics" and thereby saving liberal democracy. But one must not forget that these three positions are *criteria* for the existence and survival of democratic society, and not descriptions of an existing democracy. Can Maritain's enthusiasm for liberal democracy be translated into a realizable, sustainable political society? One recalls Socrates' answer to the question about where the ideal Republic was to be found: "It is only an idea," he replies, "and exists nowhere."⁵⁷

57. Plato, *Republic*, IX, 592a; see also Maritain, *Reflections on America*, for Maritain's application of the concrete historical ideal to American democracy.