

Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier On America: Two Catholic Views

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As Catholic intellectuals, Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier were part of that Catholic renaissance which took place in France in the early twentieth century. Drawing initial inspiration from Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *De Rerum Novarum* (1891), a generation of young French men and women devoted their intellectual powers to fashioning a rational Catholic response to the challenges of industrialism, materialism, and collectivism.¹ Others who dedicated themselves to giving Catholicism a new voice which would challenge the dominant ideologies of the late nineteenth century included Gabriel Marcel, Teilhard de Chardin, Simone Weil, and Charles Peguy. The Catholic reawakening in France stressed the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas's insistence on approaching the sensible world within a framework of rational thought struck both Maritain and Mounier as the perfect means of combating what they perceived as the materialist and irrational worldview against which Leo XIII had inveighed.

1. *Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII on the Condition of the Working Class (Rerum Novarum)*, New translation authorized by the Holy See (Washington, D.C.: Apostolate of the Press, 1942), p. 13. See also Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times*, 5th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), p. 287.

What is more, the partisans of the Catholic revival were not content simply to withdraw from a world gone mad with an unquenchable desire for material gain. In keeping with the papal encyclical, they believed themselves called upon to mount an offensive against the forces of scientism and positivism. They would make use of their considerable intellectual gifts and their ability to order their ideas in the form of the written word. Thus, the Catholic revival in France always had about it the quality of an active force; a dynamic counter thrust to joust with the spiritually dead conceits of the modern world.

The writings of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier are indicative of this spirit of intellectual activism. Both men sought to bring a vigorous exposition of the Catholic alternative to the *Weltschmerz* of twentieth-century life. In regard to Maritain, his writings are generally characterized by an aggressive explication of Thomistic philosophy, not as something out of the Middle Ages, but as a vibrant mode of ordering one's life. Maritain was perfectly willing—eager is a better word—to show the philosophy of St. Thomas as one which has immediate applications to human life in the age of science. As an example, there is his essay, *Court Traité de l'Existence et de l'Existant* (1947). Written at the height of the "Sartrean Revolution," when Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus brought the grimness of war-torn Europe into the realm of philosophy with their existentialist description of humanity, the *Court Traité* clearly—and forcefully—offers a salutary alternative. Maritain was not content simply to rail at the twentieth-century existentialists as godless nay-sayers. Rather, he offered his own version of existential philosophy that was founded on a Thomistic understanding of the human condition.

Maritain begins his consideration of existentialism by recalling St. Thomas's existential realism.² He then develops his views on human existence employing the ideas of St. Thomas, ideas which Maritain had "developed around some of the philosophic themes which he held closest to his heart and upon which he meditated for a long time...."³ Having established the basis for his consideration of existential thought, he proceeds to make his case for St. Thomas Aquinas as the only true exponent of existentialism. Describing the thought of St. Thomas as "... the only authentic existentialism ...,"⁴ he moves immediately to demonstrate that far from being a part

2. Jacques Maritain, *Court Traité de l'Existence et de l'Existant* (*Œuvres Complètes*) (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul/Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Suisse, 1990), vol. IX, p. 12.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

of history, the thirteenth-century Dominican speaks to the twentieth century as vigorously as ever. Noting that in the hands of twentieth-century thinkers, the term “existentialism” has been reduced to just another word, Maritain points to the durability of St. Thomas because of his avoidance of labels. “St. Thomas does not proclaim himself as either an existentialist or a realist; for that matter, he never called himself a Thomist. These terms are subsumed in his thought.”⁵ Maritain’s intent is not to offer St. Thomas Aquinas as a voice of authority beyond question, but to propose Thomism as a dynamic alternative to the erroneous thinking into which twentieth-century philosophy had fallen.

Beyond his critique of existentialism, Maritain applied his Thomistic insights to speculative philosophic matters as well as matters of practical affairs. In 1947 he rendered a critique of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The starting point for UNESCO’s declaration was the concept of human rights which had come out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The declaration depended heavily on the Enlightenment’s opposition to the divine right of kings and the theory that God had bestowed certain unquestionable powers on the Church.⁶ The *philosophes* of the eighteenth century constructed their doctrine of the rights of man in that curious sort of rationalist argument peculiar to the Age of Reason. To the eighteenth-century philosophers, human rights rested on natural law. Their natural law was similar to Newton’s mechanical laws; however, it existed outside of humanity and, like the law of gravity, exerted its effect. Maritain might just as well have thundered forth against the mechanistic perception of reality held by these Enlightenment thinkers. Yet, he did not. Rather, he offered a more flexible description of natural law, one that was based on St. Thomas’s understanding. Maritain described natural law as *interior* to human beings. It was not just another physical law to be applied. He pointed out that the Thomistic understanding of natural law considered it the wellspring from which all human laws emanated.⁷ He criticized the eighteenth-century thinkers; by glibly interpreting natural law as physical law, he insisted, they had granted human beings near god-like status. As the only rational creatures in the universe, humans were able to perceive natural law—physical laws included—and utilize them to their own desires.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6. Jacques Maritain, *Sur la Philosophie des Droits de l’Homme (Œuvres Complètes)* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul/Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Suisse, 1990), vol. IX, p. 1082n.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 1083.

No reactionary, Jacques Maritain gave the framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a gentle tug on the sleeve. "Do not be blind to the complexities of humanity or humanity's need for rational order," he seemed to be saying. Viewed through the lens of Thomistic rationality, the question of human rights took on the aspect of a multipurpose tool; a tool for the greater understanding of how laws might benefit the human condition. As Maritain expressed it, "... a sane notion of natural law allows us to understand the intrinsic differences which differentiate natural law itself from the law of man, positive law."⁸ This was his imaginative suggestion for UNESCO. Natural law, properly understood, could provide a meaningful expression of the world body's concern for human dignity and freedom. He was not content to take an intransigent stance in regard to the organization's identification of human rights with the eighteenth century. Maritain had no interest in pitting Thomist dogma against twentieth-century liberalism. His concern was to explore ways of improving upon modern concepts of justice by way of demonstrating the timelessness of Catholic philosophy.

Like Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier was part of the French-Catholic intelligentsia which took inspiration from the Catholic renaissance in the opening years of the twentieth century. Mounier, like his confreres, was convinced that the Catholic faith, reinvigorated, offered a saving alternative to the age of materialism. In Mounier's eyes, "the age of materialism" was a many-headed hydra; it was made up of a number of components, all of which he saw as threats to the human spirit. He was distrustful of those products of the modern era which he labeled "individualism" and "liberalism."⁹ For Mounier, these twin evils were at the heart of popular twentieth-century democracy. Certainly the French Third Republic had undergone a number of unsettling periods: the Dreyfus Affair, the Great War, and the Depression. Also, Mounier was keenly aware that much of the Third Republic was dedicated to that virulent anticlericalism which had grown out of the French Revolution. The nineteen-thirties must have been especially galling to him; it was a decade that brought both the Great Depression and the Popular Front Government of Léon Blum. The economic, social, and political turbulence of the time served as an indictment, in his view, of everything that was wrong with the materialist, liberal, and democratic regime in France.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 1084.

9. Seth D. Armus, "The Eternal Enemy: Emmanuel Mounier's *Esprit* and French anti-Americanism," *French Historical Studies* 24, no. 2 (Spring, 2001), p. 271.

Thus convinced, Mounier proceeded to organize a counter-movement through which he could arouse the faithful to the perils of liberal democracy. In 1932, he established a monthly journal, *Esprit*, which would serve as a forum for the dissemination of his ideas. During the thirties, *Esprit* became a well-respected intellectual journal in France.¹⁰ As the editor, he encouraged Catholic writers to weigh in with articles not only supportive of the Faith, but which were also critical of the whole range of evils that had arisen from the age of materialism. From the beginning, Mounier presented his agenda for moral reform with the trappings of a revolutionary movement. Even as the Catholic renaissance in France had always attracted young people, Jacques and Raissa Maritain were examples, Mounier sought to continue this trend and present his point of view as new and vigorous over against the decadence of the Third Republic.

At the heart of his “revolutionary movement,” was his philosophy of *personalism*. Personalism as Mounier used the term was a means by which the individual would maintain his individuality, but at the same time remain part of the body of Christ in the Catholic community. Such individuality was certainly not to be confused with that willfulness of the individual that Mounier identified as a legacy of the popular democratic movement. On the contrary, he saw what passed for the emphasis on the individual or the “person” in twentieth-century society as “... a variety and a vagueness which risk bringing to the metaphysics of the individual rather peculiar obligations. In fact, every day an unrepentant individualism renews itself in forms of a ‘personalism’ which is an easy consciousness of the self. We are thus able to see this inexhaustible ‘person’ stand out as a complaisant devil ...”¹¹ Mounier placed his understanding of the individual’s role in society on his reading of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure, both of whom he viewed as insisting on a direct connection (a “sort of spiritual short circuit”) between God and man.¹² Thus, his notion of the “person” as described in his philosophy of personalism was the traditional Catholic insistence on God’s unique relationship with every human being carried out through the good offices of the Church.

In his public utterances, in his writings, and in the pages of *Esprit*, Emmanuel Mounier called on Catholics to heed this unique relationship and to turn away from the evils of modernism. He called for a revolution of the spirit; a militant opposition not only to the Third Republic but also to all of

10. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

11. Emmanuel Mounier, *Liberté sous Conditions* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1946), p. 13.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

the modernist trappings associated with it and with the twentieth-century West as well. His call was for the rejection of "mass democracy" which was for its citizens "... the most cunning and cruel hoax of all."¹³

Though his personalism was couched in terms of the Catholic renaissance and he often spoke in the idiom of revolutionary change and moral revival for France, Mounier was an unregenerate reactionary. Taking inspiration from Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras, he despised the political and economic accomplishments which had taken place in France since 1789. The neo-Thomism which energized the thinking of Jacques Maritain after 1906 became a bludgeon to be used against modernism by Emmanuel Mounier. The moment that brought the full extent of his reactionary inclinations to light was the fall of France and the Occupation in 1940. Mounier and those close to him greeted the German victory as a beneficial purgative to the decadence of the Third Republic.¹⁴ In the months after the defeat, Mounier hailed the events of June 1940 as the overture to a new era of liberation from everything which he had abhorred about the Third Republic. It is not the purpose of this essay to indict Mounier as a collaborationist. Perhaps he was, perhaps he was not. Nonetheless, while Maritain was in the United States and Canada lending his talents to the Allied cause, Mounier was speaking and writing on behalf of the Catholic supporters of the Vichy Government.¹⁵

Yet, to label Emmanuel Mounier as a fascist is to fail to understand the complexity of his views on Catholicism and twentieth-century culture. Of *petite bourgeois* background, he was the son of a pharmacist's assistant from the provincial city of Grenoble. As a young man, he took up the study of medicine only to abandon it in favor of philosophy. His philosophy professor at the University of Grenoble was Jacques Chevalier, a prominent Catholic thinker with pronounced Bergsonian tendencies. Like his mentor, the young Mounier embraced a Catholicism predicated on action rather than contemplation. Before leaving Grenoble for the Sorbonne in Paris in 1927, he was active in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in which he performed charitable work among the region's depressed working class.

Once at the Sorbonne in pursuit of a university teaching degree, he found that the Bergsonian intellectual formation which he had received through Chevalier had inculcated in him an aversion to the idealist philosophy then dominant at that institution. For him philosophy was a mode of

13. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

14. Armus, "The Eternal Enemy," p. 272.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

action, not just an exercise in abstract thinking. By the time he had completed his studies in Paris, he had taken on an enduring realism which was driven by a keen sense of spirituality.¹⁶ As one of the founders of the journal *Esprit* in 1932, he strove to dedicate the new publication to a nonpolitical voice which would indict modernism's two dominant forces: Marxist socialism and capitalism.

Mounier's philosophy of personalism can be seen as existentialism baptized into the Church. Mounier's human being was a spiritual being; one that constantly struggled to know or experience the divine. Mounier, by decrying modern societal and political barriers to human spirituality, set himself the task of battling modernism by declaring his enmity to the ideologies which he identified as those fueling twentieth-century political and economic movements. By the time of the founding of *Esprit*, this meant opposition to capitalism and Marxism. Tormented by the Great Depression, the world seemed divided in its desire to embrace one or the other of these two credos as a means of cure. Mounier warned in the prospectus for the first issue of *Esprit* that relief from human misery was to be found in neither system.¹⁷ Both were materialist, both without spiritual content.

For Mounier, the great bastion of capitalism was the United States. Even before the founding of *Esprit*, Mounier had identified the United States as the modernist monster whose "... worship of the machine suffocates all life, spontaneity, initiative, [and] grace"¹⁸ At the heart of his distrust of the United States was his belief that its liberal heritage—as well as that of France—had come out of the Jacobin experience of the late eighteenth century. His critique went on. Mass democracy had grown out of the period of the French Revolution. Majority rule that is at the core of liberal democracy was, for Mounier, inimical to the spiritual robustness of the population. In fact, he went on, the rule of the majority had become the tyranny of the majority; more oppressive "than tyrants are,"¹⁹ the masses had become the new dictators. While he was careful not to appear as an apologist for the fascist dictatorships of Mussolini and Hitler, he insisted that the spirit-killing majority-rule of the United States was equally bad. Unlike Maritain, who was concerned with the matter of sincere, devout Catholics versus those who were casual and nominally Catholic, Mounier

16. Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les Non-Conformistes des Années 30* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), p.127.

17. Armus, "The Eternal Enemy," p. 272n.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

viewed *all* Catholics in *all* democracies, especially the United States, as victims. For him, the same materialist, individualist, and tyrannical societies against which he had set himself victimized them.²⁰

Esprit was suppressed in 1941 by the Vichy government. Mounier was arrested and briefly jailed as a subversive in 1942. Even so, he continued to insist that the Vichy government was the only legitimate voice of the National Revolution. The right wing was convinced that the defeat of 1940 was a new beginning for France. In 1944, he denounced the Americans for having invaded North Africa and General Henri Giraud, the Free-French leader, for cooperating with them.²¹

With the end of the war, Mounier published *Esprit* once again. Although most of the pre-war right wing in France had been dismantled, Mounier continued to fear American democracy and American capitalism. However, after 1945 his traditional anti-Americanism took on a different form. Before the war, Mounier and *Esprit* had been apolitical. His interests and energies had lain in the areas of philosophy and religion. After the end of hostilities, Mounier and his journal ventured into French Marxist politics!

While most French men and women celebrated the Liberation, Mounier complained that the Americans had prevented "the brilliant Free French" from scoring a final victory over Germany. Odd that he should have made this remark. Prior to his arrest by Vichy authorities in 1942, he had predicted that forces of the National Revolution would one day have to battle the Free French.²² Consistency of thought was not his objective. Rather, he was searching for a new method by which to rejuvenate his philosophy of personalism. He understood that the events of 1940-45 made it unwise to continue to be anti-republican. The right in France had been far too discredited. Yet he was still convinced of the efficacy of his personalist *melange* of spiritualism, action, and revolution. Articles in *Esprit* during the late forties seldom missed a chance at pillorying the United States for a broad range of sins—all having to do with American capitalism. In the issue published in April 1947, the journal took up the matter of Moroccan independence from France. While this was not a subject that occupied a major spot in American foreign policy, the editorial staff strongly suggested that a serious problem in French-Moroccan relations was the fact that the Americans

20. John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 197.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

22. Armus, "The Eternal Enemy," p. 293.

had occupied Morocco during the war. While in the French protectorate, according to *Esprit*, the Americans had attempted to inculcate the culture with their noxious brand of “yankee” commercial aggressiveness. This, according to the article, had an unsettling effect on the simple, yet ancient culture of Morocco. As the article expressed it

Here again, it is not for Morocco to be ruled by the basic measure of “time is money” which is [for Americans] the master, but by the humanist principle: “action is the only joy of the spirit” and this is the principle of the settler and the nationalist, it is the principle of initiative and responsibility which is not used to draw insane profits from an accelerated economy, but to regulate harmony and an economic tempo according to the guidance of human rhythm.”²³

This statement encapsulates *Esprit*'s post-war anti-Americanism. America was to be seen as the capitalist villain; the Americans' sole interest was material wealth and the by-product of this greed was the destruction of a spiritual and pastoral culture. Maintaining his pre-war commitment to personalism, Mounier sought to make of the United States a paradigm of everything which personalism loathed. In another *Esprit* article published after the war, the subject was the Allied occupation of Germany. In an otherwise thoughtful treatment of the problem of the de-nazification and rebuilding of Germany, the article took a gratuitous shot at the American occupation forces. The criticism was essentially a rehash of his earlier remarks. The piece contended that the American zone of occupation was characterized by “G.I. brutality, failure to understand Europeans, insolent luxury, etc. ...”²⁴ Noticeable in all of these articles is the absence of any pronouncements even mildly critical of the Soviet Union.

Beginning in June 1947, the state of European-American relations offered Mounier an opportunity to attack America and to present himself as a convert to the increasingly popular *Marxisant* impulse in French intellectual circles. This movement was related to but not part of the large communist party in post-war France. With the pre-war right wing in shambles, Mounier searched for some issue which would revitalize his journal and his philosophy of personalism. The post-war United States was made to order. It was still the perceived materialist, modernist monolith which Mounier had attacked during the thirties. Only now, French resentment of America began to take on a political cast which it had not formerly had. As the Allied powers divided into the mutually hostile camps of the capitalist west and

23. André de Peretti, “Maroc et France,” *Esprit*, N° 132 (April, 1947), p. 549.

24. J. Baur, “Complainte d’Occupé,” *Esprit*, N° 134 (June, 1947), p. 977.

the communist east, political forces in France mirrored world political tensions. The communist party emerged from the war more powerful than ever. Able to point to a major role in the resistance, the communists presented themselves as the true saviors of France and the only hope for a working class which had been treated poorly for over a century. The French communist party took its cue from Moscow and became more hostile to America as the Cold War deepened. Many members of the party in France were youthful and intellectual. Mounier's anti-Americanism seemed to have ready appeal for them. Certainly no communist himself, Mounier could, nonetheless, court those on the left by clothing his traditional anti-Americanism in revolutionary garments. He saw, and he was correct, that the issue of anti-Americanism in France had appeal to revolutionaries on the left as well as to reactionaries on the right. Latterly, he detected similarities between Marxist ideology and personalism. Both, he argued, pointed out the alienation which capitalism had brought to the human race; both called for a revolutionary counter thrust to the powers of industrial wealth.²⁵ This was the basis for his Marxist inclinations; he styled himself a revolutionary struggling for the same ends as the communists, but insisted on dedicating his revolution to God.

The summer of 1947 saw the advent of the Marshal Plan, an ambitious American program for the rebuilding of war-ravaged Europe. Immediately denounced by the Stalin regime, the French communist party took up the cudgels and also condemned it as American imperialism.²⁶ *Esprit* saw the American program as a sort of Trojan Horse. The Americans were willing to pay for the rebuilding of Western Europe, but included in their generous offer was a demand for a European commitment to rearm, with the Soviet Union as the target. Here was the catch, according to Mounier and the editorial staff at *Esprit*: the demand for French public expenditure for rearmament would offset the economic benefits of the Marshal Plan.

But it is on the economic level that is here introduced a new and deadly inconsistency. Even as I, André Véron, write this, the United States is training and equipping ten armored divisions in France including all the attendant expenses. Thus will the cost in tanks and guns crush under its heel that which we are trying to build. The inflationary gulf that will not fail to perpetuate inequality and place French industry in so dangerous a situation that without doubt it will be forced to call upon new investment funds from Wall Street and thus bring on its own economic subservience.²⁷

25. Armus, "The Eternal Enemy," p. 276.

26. Hellman; *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930-1950*, p. 211.

27. André Véron, "Visages Américains du Plan Marshall," *Esprit*, N° 144 (April, 1948), pp. 551-52.

From the distance of fifty-five years it seems incredible that someone with Mounier's intelligence could see anything but benefit for France in the Marshal Plan. Yet, that is to ignore his sense of history. During the thirties, he attacked the Third Republic unrelentingly; in 1940, he was convinced that the National Revolution had been effected. The years from 1940 to 1944 were both agonizing and disillusioning for him. At war's end, he was determined to be on the "right" side of history for a change. Ever the revolutionary (personalism had always called for a revolution of the spiritually active), he thought that he had spotted the ground swell of revolution in the left. He did not want to be left behind again.²⁸

Perhaps it is fair to say that Emmanuel Mounier was a thinker who found himself tossed by the tides of history. At one point in his career, he criticized Jacques Maritain for what he understood as Maritain's inflexible distrust of progress as evidenced in *Antimoderne* and *Trois Réformateurs*. At the heart of his reproof of Maritain was his conviction that Christianity had to express itself and act in the coin of the time. To Mounier, Maritain was hopelessly stationary in his thinking and unable to consider a Catholicism that would provide spiritual substance in a world which prized modernity.²⁹

But was Mounier correct in his reading of Maritain regarding his remarks on the matter of progress? True, *Antimoderne* is a critique of Cartesian and Kantian science. It is not a diatribe against either progress or modernity. As was his mode of instruction, Maritain offered a reminder of what modern science was. Unlike Descartes or Kant, Maritain refused to assign metaphysical weight to the physical sciences. His distrust of modernity as spoken through science lay in the demand of some proponents of the scientific method that they be given absolute freedom to interpret their findings in any way they pleased. Beneath the banner of freedom of thought, what they really were clamoring for was a freedom from *responsible* thought. "What they are asking for in reality is not the freedom of reason or the freedom to reason. It is freedom from reason, the freedom to reason without rule or measure, the freedom to deceive themselves as they wish, as much as they wish, wherever they wish without any control of themselves."³⁰

28. Paul A. Gagnon, *France Since 1789* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 488.

29. Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 87.

30. Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne (Œuvres Complètes)* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul/Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Suisse, 1990), vol. II, p. 950.

Maritain's quarrel with science did not arise from any distrust of progress or modernity in itself; rather, the conflict lay with his perception of science conducted without any rational guide. True to his Thomistic persuasion he insisted that physical science, like all other human endeavors, must be governed by rationalism. As he points out in *Antimoderne*,

"Science in general is as *historical* as *rational*. But science in its qualified sense, that is, physical and mathematical science, is primarily a part of *rational* science which concerns itself not with all of created nature, but with the lesser natures of the material world; that is, by an object that is not revelatory to us. In fact it ought to deal with a number of very limited truths. Secondly, it concerns itself with these natures not by attempting to penetrate the essence of their reality but with attempting to translate certain of their exterior relationships into a language, the language of mathematics. This is particularly serviceable for the human intellect and the convenience of man."³¹

In his *Trois Réformateurs*, Maritain taxed modern western culture for its self-centeredness and its nearly hysterical demands for the rights of the individual.³² In his denunciation of the culture of neuroses fostered by moderns such as Luther, Kant, Freud, and Nietzsche, it was as though he were attacking Mounier's philosophy of personalism directly. He was critical of the modern impulse to break away from the message of the Church.

Maritain was never blinded by what some Europeans denounced as American "materialism." In fact, he saw European criticism of American materialism as a handy fable by which participants in a culture with far too many of its own failings could shift their dissatisfaction to others. This was, as Maritain described it, "an old prejudice which confused spirituality with an 'aristocratic' misunderstanding of improvements which material life could bring (especially the material life of others)."³³ Maritain recognized the material accomplishments of the United States for what they were; a potential for the betterment of human existence. One of his intellectual strengths was his critical approach to any question. For Maritain, the matter of American materialism was no exception. It was not his intent to play the cheerleader for American material wealth. He remarked on Americans' tendency, like the populations of the other industrialized nations, to be seduced by "the corruption that emanates from

31. *Ibid.*, p. 951.

32. Jacques Maritain, *Trois Réformateurs (Œuvres Complètes)* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul/Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Suisse, 1990), vol. III, p. 451.

33. Jacques Maritain, *Réflexions sur l'Amérique* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1958), p. 30.

the framework and the liturgy of our modern civilization."³⁴ Here was neither an *apologia* for American materialism nor a recrimination of American worldliness. It was a comment on his conviction that human failings do not respect national boundaries.

Maritain's critique of the human condition was framed in his concern that man tended to search for facile alternatives to God's grace. In the United States, he observed that a common substitute for the God of Holy Scripture was the god of man and nature as gathered under the rubric of the Enlightenment. He noted that "with a remarkable frequency" Americans tended to cling to the eighteenth-century article of faith that if humanity followed nature's lead and its own inclinations, all would be in harmony.³⁵ The false prophecy of the Enlightenment was its denial that "in our nature there is not a hidden root of evil."³⁶

Yet, this does not brand Jacques Maritain as an opponent of modernity *qua* modernity. While he was censorious of the ideas of Luther, Descartes, and Rousseau, the thrust of *Trois Rèformateurs* can hardly be called a wholesale indictment of the modern age. This is evident in his approach to Blaise Pascal: "Saints have their empire, their glitter, their victory, their luster, and they have no need of fleshly or spiritual splendor for they neither acquire anything nor take it away: they are seen by God and the angels and not by carnal forms nor inquisitive spirits. God is their satisfaction."³⁷ The fact that Maritain would quote Blaise Pascal, like Descartes, a seventeenth-century figure—and a scientist, undermines Mounier's criticism regarding Maritain's distrust of progress. His referral to Pascal illustrates the importance he placed on devotion to God; for Maritain, the issue was not the era during which an individual lived, nor was it his or her activities during that period. Rather, that Maritain would look to the inventor of the calculating machine as a source of spiritual inspiration surely gives the lie to Mounier's contention that Maritain had difficulty accepting modernity.

However, unlike Mounier, who doggedly clung to the one and only idea he ever had, Maritain showed through his public utterances and his writing that he, in fact, did appreciate the historical forces that affected and shaped society. In *Man and the State*, it is clear that Maritain, far from seeing the United States as the contradiction of everything that championed the spirit

34. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

37. Maritain, *Trois Réformateurs*, p. 457.

and freed the human species, recognized the healthfulness of democratic principles in America:

It is a fact that in democratic nations, like France and the United States, which have had a harsh historical experience of struggles for freedom, each one would be ready to give its assent to all the articles of such a [democratic] charter. Having been given the virtue of universality with which they have been endowed, as [Arnold] Toynbee and others have reminded us, the civilization inherited from Christianity and its natural power of influence, there is good reason to hope that in all the areas of civilization the people (I say people as they are represented by their governments) would be well disposed to give a similar assent.³⁸

Written during his sojourn in the United States, *Man and the State* is Maritain's summation of his reflections on democracy and its role in the post-war world. As the passage above suggests, Maritain was a thoughtful admirer of American democracy. Moreover he believed that democracy as it had evolved in the United States and France could serve as a model to those parts of the world which had yet to experiment with democratic government.

Maritain and Mounier had much in common regarding their devotion to Catholicism, yet each saw in the twentieth century a different set of dynamics. Emmanuel Mounier was tortured and, in the end, defeated by his perception of modernity. Jacques Maritain founded his view of the modern age on his reading of the *philosophia perennis*. In so doing, he came to the conclusion that no culture in any era ought to be condemned by definition, but that all cultures can be burnished by striving to adhere to universal truth.

38. Jacques Maritain, *L'homme et l'Etat (Œuvres Complètes)* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul/Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Suisse, 1990), vol. IX, p. 613.