

# *Péguy, Dreyfus, Maritain*

Robert Royal

That line of descent, that carnal generation is so very simple in Matthew. . . . It's not only Solomon and David. *Ex ea quae fuit Uriae*, the honest Matthew does not hide the point from us. It must be acknowledged, the line of descent of Jesus is frightening. Few men, *other* men, have perhaps had so many ancestors who were criminals, and criminal to such an extent. Particularly so carnally criminal. That's in part what gives its value to the mystery of the Incarnation, its depth, its frightening drawing back.

—Charles Péguy  
Solvuntur Objecta<sup>1</sup>

I cite this passage from Péguy not for its hermeneutical astuteness, nor for the linkage it provides (however odd) between the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament for the present context, but for one simple reason: it brings us in contact with a man who, indisputably, always has something original to say, about Jews and Christians, the spiritual and the carnal, the temporal and eternal, and, even after almost a century, each one of us. The sheer force and uniqueness of Péguy's personality and thought, which comes through clearly even in these few words, could not help but have a powerful, if difficult to define, effect on the young Maritain.

The three names in my title evoke many large and complex issues that can only be touched upon in this brief essay. Furthermore, if we wish to discuss Péguy, Maritain, and the Jews, the three really should

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<sup>1</sup>All translations in this paper have been done, or revised from existing translations, by the author.

be four, or perhaps even five. Henri Bergson, both as a philosopher and a French Jew, must come into any discussion of Péguy and vice versa. After Péguy's death, Bergson paid him this generous and accurate tribute: "He had a marvelous gift for stepping beyond the materiality of beings, going beyond it and penetrating to the soul. Thus it is that he knew my most secret thought, such as I have never expressed it, such as I would have wished to express it."<sup>2</sup> In fact, one French literary critic has said that Péguy's living and original style was the one "Bergson should have had, but did not."<sup>3</sup>

It was Péguy who first introduced Jacques and a whole crowd of others to Bergson's Friday lectures at the Collège de France. Maritain, after an initial infatuation, would react against that philosophy; Péguy would see it, or at least certain parts of it,<sup>4</sup> as a metaphysical liberation from a reductivist intellectualism that was strangling what remained of the old France and producing the modern world (*le monde moderne*). For Péguy, the worst part of the modern world was not its impoverished metaphysics so much as what he called the modernism of heart, which had turned several flourishing French traditions into a single desert. One of the things that drove both Raïssa and Jacques to philosophy and, later, Catholicism was precisely the desire to escape this modern wasteland.

Péguy was not, strictly speaking, a philosopher though he had studied philosophy at the École Normale and Sorbonne. In fact, Bergson and perhaps Plato excepted, Péguy had little use for philosophical and scientific systems. All of them, he thought, were merely "true," not "real," a far more important category for him. Kant, for instance, was a serious moral guide who influenced the young Péguy deeply, but Péguy's final judgment about Kantianism was severe: "Kantianism has clean hands, because it has no hands." He thought Bergson had shown a greater fidelity—a key word in Péguy—to reality, and had exposed what was wrong about even trying to find solely logical unity and finality, particularly as it had been presented by sociologists like Durkheim or modern German philosophy in general. Hans

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<sup>2</sup>Cited in J.-J. Tharaud, *Notre cher Péguy* (Paris: Plon, 1926), vol. 1, 265–66.

<sup>3</sup>René Johannet, *Vie et mort de Péguy* (Paris: Flammarion, 1950), 374.

<sup>4</sup>Péguy did not like the incipient pantheism and abstract unity he detected in Bergson after 1907 with *Évolution Créatrice*. See A. E. Pilkington's *Bergson and His Influence: A Reassessment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Urs von Balthasar has said of Péguy that, as Kierkegaard did with Hegel, he tries to return us from a Germanic scientism to a more living reality. Or as Péguy put it more trenchantly: "Let us study the book of reality, one of the few books in France that are not written in German."<sup>5</sup>

Some of the same criticisms that have been directed towards Bergson's philosophy apply equally well to Péguy's thought. Both break up a false and deadening verbalism that obstructs our view of the real world, but both also show logical inconsistencies and have some difficulty accounting for the stabilities and virtues they value. Yet there are differences. As anyone who has ever read even a few pages by or about Péguy will instantly recognize, some overarching transcendence or grace makes up for even his worst sins and errors. For example, many ladies of high society attended Bergson's lectures because of his emphasis on spontaneity and his rejection of fixed ideas and rules. This accorded well with the inclinations of rich and romantic persons who wanted an easy mysticism and, they thought, philosophical license to do as they pleased. The same phenomenon occurs today with our own charismatic philosophical or spiritual figures. None of this, or course, necessarily detracts from Bergson's or Péguy's thought *per se*, but it indicates a danger.

In Péguy's case, this danger was faced and overcome with a kind of stubborn hold on fidelity that, perhaps, finds no sure place or explanation in the Bergsonian system. In 1909, Péguy suddenly found himself overwhelmed with a passionate love for a woman (a Jewish co-worker and a fifth Jewish figure to be reckoned with) whom he had known for years. Péguy was already married and could have made her his mistress. He could also have gotten his first marriage annulled since he had married outside the Church when he was still a lapsed Catholic. For most people, the sheer passion would have been enough to produce a rationalization. But for Péguy, this became an occasion for what can only be called a heroic fidelity. His late work, particularly the poetry, is filled with indications of what it cost him to remain faithful both to his family duties and to his love for Blanche Raphaël. And the result is characteristically Péguyan: universal fidelity—fidelity

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<sup>5</sup>Victor-Marie comte Hugo in *Oeuvres en Prose* (1909–1914) (Paris: Pleiade, 1957), 825. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), vol. 3, 422.

to promises made to a wife in a radical Republican context; fidelity to the Catholicism to which Péguy had returned; and, finally, fidelity to Blanche Raphaël in that no part of his affection is denied, though it remains physically unconsummated. Love, though, in these circumstances is seen not to be a superficial choice, but a profound rendering—a particularly Christian way of seeing things.

Here it is best to focus on Péguy himself as the best method to indicate how his example influenced Maritain. I do this for two principal reasons: first, the influence of Péguy on Maritain is just too vast a topic, deserving better treatment than it can get in a short paper. And influences are, after all, secondary matters: we prefer to know the source. But more importantly, I have the impression that many people, even students of Jacques Maritain, no longer know very much about Péguy. Even for those who have read some of his work, the three or four volumes of brief extracts that have appeared in English are good, but misleading about both style and substance. Péguy is not an aphorist like Chesterton or a creator of *pensées* like Pascal. His genius is expansive and you have to read him in large chunks to get to know him properly. Even such central concepts in Péguy as *mystique* and *politique* are not well understood, and I feel obliged to re-present them as a prelude to Péguy's thought about the Jews. In fact, I do not see how you can understand Péguy's thought properly without a certain minimum acquaintance with Péguy's highly original vision. While my approach cannot result in an exhaustive treatment, I think it the most fruitful, the least *sterile*, as Péguy might have said, because it will suggest some of the living waters that carried along Péguy and Maritain alike early in this century, and may have something to say to us near the end of that same century.

### *The French Mystique*

In his *Confession de foi* of 1941, Jacques Maritain writes, "Before being captured by Saint Thomas Aquinas, I underwent some great influences, Charles Péguy, Bergson, and Léon Bloy."<sup>6</sup> Péguy stands first in this list for good reason. In 1901, before he had even turned twenty, Maritain had met Péguy and begun working as a sort of

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<sup>6</sup>For this text, see *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain: Selected Readings*, ed. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 331.

copy editor on Péguy's journal *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*. So close was this relationship that Péguy considered Maritain at that time one of the three younger men (*les trois dauphins*) who would succeed him and carry on his work. The commonality at this stage was a passionate drive towards justice, but a drive that sought the living truth—the *mystique* as Péguy later called it—in each of the *politiques*, the political factions, Catholic and lay, Royalist and Republican, then contending in France. Neither Péguy nor Maritain were Catholics at this time.

In fact, up until the last few decades, Péguy was a common rallying point for Frenchmen in twentieth-century France. Up until well past the end of World War I, France was deeply divided between Catholic and secular factions. It was the example of Péguy with his parallel affirmations of the Republic and Catholicism that played no small role in overcoming those conflicts. A recent biography of Charles de Gaulle, for example, begins and ends with references to Péguy,<sup>7</sup> an appropriate way of putting in parenthesis de Gaulle's integral vision of France. Since de Gaulle, however, the French are less divided but have clearly also moved away from their identification with that ancient and ample France, which it had been Péguy's role to keep alive amid the bitter controversies of the early twentieth century.

Maritain's work honors, even as it continues, that role in many places. Péguy was killed, struck by a bullet in the forehead, on the first day of the Battle of the Marne in 1914. He was barely forty, but he left behind him a legacy of prose and verse that he predicted would bear fruit twenty years later. And he was right. For instance, when Maritain is looking for an inspiring image as he concludes his *Twilight of Civilization* in 1939 at the very moment when Nazi tyranny threatens, he thinks of Péguy: "France, regain consciousness of yourself, of your carnal and spiritual existence—o land, ancient land of Joan of Arc and of Péguy, ancient land of justice, of honor, and of liberty."<sup>8</sup> In 1941, in a message from New York, Maritain salutes those still in France, "Companions of Joinville and Péguy, people of Joan of Arc, sweet humiliated France, France whom God will raise."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle: I. Le Rebelle 1890–1944* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 9 and 838.

<sup>8</sup>*Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 7, 48.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 8, 386.

This is exalted but appropriate company, and typical of one side of Maritain's view of Péguy. Some scholars, unaware of Maritain's and others' sense of Péguy as a timeless and quintessentially French figure, have mistakenly thought Péguy a precursor of national socialism because of his strong identification with France. In part, this misperception stemmed from efforts by French Nazi collaborators to co-opt Péguy. The French Fascist Drieu la Rochelle, for example, published carefully excerpted—and therefore misleading—passages from Péguy when the Germans made him editor of the collaborationist *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1940. Even earlier, Julien Benda, once Péguy's friend, had wrongly classed him with figures like Barrès and Maurras. Alain Finkielkraut has recently demonstrated the simple, and profound, misunderstanding of Péguy that all this represents.<sup>10</sup>

But there was something about Péguy, as many people have noticed in his writing, and those who knew him personally have recorded about his living presence, that suggested eternal categories, particularly the eternal dimensions of France as both a political and religious entity. Péguy often seems to move in the eternal and had some of the *gravitas* of an Old Testament prophet speaking to a chosen people.<sup>11</sup>

This trait appears early in Péguy. Born the son of basically peasant stock in Orléans, he had encountered first-hand what was still left of the old France in the 1870s and was able to evoke it marvelously in his prose:

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<sup>10</sup>Finkielkraut's *Le Mécontemporain: Péguy, lecteur du monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) is the most brilliant recent reading of Péguy by a noted French intellectual. Because of his historical researches on the Holocaust and its meaning for Jews and Gentiles alike, Finkielkraut is able to see that the position Péguy takes toward the Jews and the French nation is very different from figures with whom he is often linked.

<sup>11</sup>The reference to the "carnal and spiritual existence" of France in Maritain is a clear echo of Péguy, whose most famous verses were retroactively applied to him after his death in battle:

*Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour une terre charnelle  
 Pourvu que ce soit dans une juste guerre.  
 Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour quatre coins de terre.  
 Heureux ceux qui sont morts d'une morte solennelle.*

*Éve*

This quatrain along with several others on the same theme appears in the middle of an immense poem of several thousand lines. The passage was marked off by Péguy with a heavy line before and after. No other break occurs in the entire work. Many readers have seen something very like prophetic self-knowledge and prediction of his own death in these lines.

We have known, we have touched the ancient France and we have known her still intact. We have been her offspring. . . . We will try, if we can, to present this. The world has changed less since Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years. There was the age of antiquity (and of the Bible). There was the Christian age. There is the modern age. Even after the war [i.e., the Franco-Prussian War of 1870] a farm in the Beauce country resembled a farm of the Gallo-Roman age infinitely more than this same farm resembles itself today. Or rather this farm was like its Gallo-Roman self, as far as customs, regulations, seriousness, gravity, in structure itself, in institution and in dignity. And even at bottom it was close to a farm of Xenophon. We will try to explain this. We have known a time when, if a simple woman uttered a word, it was her race itself, her being, her people, which spoke, which came out. And when a workman lit his cigarette, what he was about to tell you was not what a journalist had said in that morning's paper. The freethinkers of that time were more Christian than are our devout people of today.<sup>12</sup>

Or how about this, in which God speaks in Péguy's verse:

Our Frenchmen—They are my favorite witnesses  
 They go ahead by themselves more than the others  
 They go ahead and are themselves more than the others.  
 Among all men they are free and among all gratuitous.  
 You don't have to tell them the same thing twenty times over.  
 Before you are through talking, they are on their way.  
 Intelligent people.  
 Before you are through talking, they are on their way.  
 Intelligent people.  
 Before you are through talking, they have understood.  
 Hard working people,  
 Before you are through talking, the work is done.  
 Military people,  
 Before you are through talking, the battle is begun—  
 It is very annoying, says God. When there are no more Frenchmen,  
 There are some things that I do, and there will be no one any longer  
 to understand them.

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<sup>12</sup>*L'Argent*, 1913.

O people who invented the cathedral, I have not found you wanting in faith.

O people who invented the crusade, I have not found you wanting in charity.

As for hope, it might be better not to mention that, because there isn't any except for them.

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Now those French men, just as they are, are my best servants.

They have been and always will be my best soldiers in the crusade.

And there will always be a crusade.

In short, they please me. That's all there is to say.

*Saint Innocents XIII, 12*

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Péguy's vision of France (besides the humor he puts into the mouth of God Himself) is that unlike many of those who also valued this ancient France—a Barrès or a Maurras, for example—Péguy did not think this attachment grounds for a pugnacious nationalism, militarism, xenophobia, or anti-Semitism. He regarded himself as “*exactement inter-nationale*,” which is to say, that just as he loved his own country without prejudice to others, he expected others to love *their* countries. In this, too, perhaps Maritain learned from Péguy; despite Jacques's own love of France and closeness to *Action Française*, from the time of his conversion up until the papal condemnation of the movement in 1926 he never shows the narrow nationalism of many of his contemporaries.

### *The Idealist and L'Affaire*

We know from the testimony of Péguy's schoolmates that he was a charismatic figure who early began working for the poor and for those he thought had been treated unjustly. But the event that most shaped his public life occurred in 1894, the infamous Dreyfus case. For most people, then as today, Dreyfus was merely a French army captain falsely accused of treason owing to an ambiguous note (*bordereau*) found in a wastebasket at the German Embassy in Paris. Dreyfus's handwriting compared to that of the *bordereau* and his whereabouts at the time of discovery made his involvement in this instance of espionage for Germany highly unlikely. But he was a useful scapegoat for several parties. Dreyfus was a Jew, and the various factions then competing in France tended to line up on the Dreyfus case in partisan fashion, just as they might have in any other typical political imbroglio.

Most Catholics, for example, thought Dreyfus guilty and supported the army (one of the few refuges in government for Catholics who had been discriminated against by the new “secular” administration). Pope Leo XIII and, perhaps as a result, the French hierarchy were closer to Péguy’s views. Since it is broadly believed that almost all Catholics condemned Dreyfus, it is worth noting here that Leo XIII, in an interview with a reporter from *Le Figaro*, wondered at the time, if “looking beyond the prisoner at the bar, it was not the Republic itself that was standing trial.”<sup>13</sup>

Socialists and other secularists saw the incident as an opportunity to discredit the army and the established order.

For Péguy, however, this apparently everyday political scandal was a profound and mystical crisis, actually a crisis in three histories: “the history of Israel, the history of France, and the history of Christendom.” As odd as it may seem from the standpoint of our usual secular assumptions about politics, Péguy convinces you, as he convinced Maritain and many others, that whatever our final judgments about temporal events, their true import can be understood from within something that must be called the eternal.

Not to do so is to fall into the clutches of what Péguy called the “*parti intellectuelle*,” the so-called scientific historians and others whose thin account of what motivates persons and nations becomes easy prey for the type of political partisanship characteristic of most states, democracies and non-democracies alike. Péguy was one of the first to notice that the modern university—the Sorbonne of his time—had become the primary purveyor of this narrow view of life. Even his old Socialist comrades were not above coercive reduction of truth. Péguy founded his review *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* and the bookshop that distributed it precisely to combat that reduction of human life by any party. As Raïssa Maritain has written: “One fact is sure, the conflict between Péguy’s bookshop and the Sorbonne was one of the most important spiritual events in France in the days before the first World War.”<sup>14</sup> Anyone who has ever stood in the rue de la Sorbonne and seen the massive facade of the university looming over

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<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Margaret Villiers, *Charles Péguy, A Study in Integrity* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1965), 58. Leo, too, was a supporter of the Republic through his *Ralliement*.

<sup>14</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together: The Memoirs of Raïssa Maritain* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1961), 55.

Péguy's front window at number four, gets a sense of precisely what she meant.

Péguy never tired of—in fact grew quite energetic—denouncing the *parti intellectuelle*, the professors at the Sorbonne along with their counterparts in political life. In his view, these people did not seek either life or truth or justice, but collaborated to form an intellectual tyranny over what was left of ancient and Republican France. Part of the tyranny derived from dogmatic atheism and materialism, producing intellectuals who despised the saints. However, Péguy also discerned similar scleroses among Catholic intellectuals and political leaders who despised secular heroes and preferred safe intellectual systems to living Faith, Hope, and Charity. Péguy says, “The debate is not between the heroes and the saints [that is, between those who believe in a Republican *mystique* and those who believe in a Catholic *mystique*]; the combat is against the intellectuals, against those who scorn equally the heroes and the saints.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Péguy saw the oppositions in terms of those in whatever party who have fallen prey to what Bergson called the *tout fait*. In this view, adherence to a party line is more than just stupidity: “To take your ticket at departure, in a party, in a faction, and to never look again at how the train is rolling and above all on what the train is rolling, is for a man to place himself resolutely in the best way to become a criminal.” This is a lovely sentiment that could be repeated at regular intervals in any political context. The creative, tolerant members of these same parties he ranges among the followers of what Bergson called the *se faisant*. But they, as we shall see, have not let their *politique* devour their *mystique*.

### *The Treason of the Intellectuals*

Péguy always manifested a horror of abstractions and partisan programs of any kind. He denounces Aristotle and Euripides alone among the ancients, whom he generally revered, as *modernes* because of their rationalism. Scholasticism, too, perhaps on little acquaintance, he finds equally lifeless. (In the notes to the 1957 Pleiade edition, Péguy's son Marcel asserts that when Péguy criticizes scholasticism his target is Jacques Maritain above all others—a doubtful extrapolation not borne

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<sup>15</sup>*Notre Jeunesse* in *Oeuvres en Prose* (1909–1914), 519.

out by any text with which I am familiar.) In any case, the depth of Péguy's dislike for the timid intellectual crowd that sought its own material advantages, while belittling sainthood, heroism, and genius may be gauged from one of his religious practices: when he returned to the Church, he became a fervid devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary, particularly of Our Lady of Chartres. Yet he refused for a long time to say the Litany of Our Lady because he "could not bear to address her as the Queen of Doctors."<sup>16</sup>

Péguy's well-known saying in *Notre Jeunesse*: "Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics" ("*Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique*"), literally cannot be understood except in the context of his abhorrence of the lifeless intellectualism coupled with intellectual tyranny of the Sorbonne on the one hand and the dual defence of Bergson and Dreyfus on the other. From Bergson, Péguy had learned that the profound springs of historical events lie much deeper than what may be reached by the categories of sociology and scientific history. Some might think, for example, that the bustling life of politics as reflected in the papers represents the movement of social life. Péguy always turns us from the surface to a connection with a *mystique* or to some equally deep reality: "Homer is new this morning, and nothing is perhaps as old as today's newspaper." The *mystique* of Catholicism, or Republicanism, or even Dreyfusism conforms to no explanation by interests, or by deterministic and reductionist frameworks of "*race, moment, milieu*."<sup>17</sup> A *mystique* is not an empty ideal, but a living source perceivable only by prophetic vision; the *mystique* of monarchism, or Catholicism, or socialism, or Dreyfusism need not be opposed to each other, as are their *politiques*. They are noble, parallel realms that can even value one another. In fact, Péguy says that "One *mystique* can go against all the *politiques* at the same time."<sup>18</sup>

*Politiques* are inevitable consequences of a *mystique*, but should be pursued in mutual respect as well as in careful attention:

Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics. The interest, the questions, the essential is that in each order, in each system, the *mystique* not be devoured by the *politique* which gave it birth.

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<sup>16</sup>Villiers, *Péguy*, 313.

<sup>17</sup>These were Hippolyte Taine's terms for explaining all thought in terms of sociological determinism.

<sup>18</sup>*Notre Jeunesse*, 549.

Politicians laugh at the *mystique*, but still it's the *mystique* that nourishes politics itself.

Perhaps an example will help here. From his early youth Péguy described himself as a Socialist, but he was an odd type of Socialist that even those who dislike socialism would find hard to criticize entirely. To begin with, his socialism was entirely non-ideological, a fact that led quickly to a break with the official Socialist party at the time. The occasion of this break came at the first National Congress of the Socialist party in December 1899 when Péguy was only twenty-five; it was an event that changed the course of his life for good. Where earlier he had found it possible to work with a variety of persons with various points of view that might be generally termed socialist, now he found that this company was as authoritarian as the groups he had previously fought. In a pre-Soviet instance of democratic centralism, the congress announced that while there was to be freedom of discussion on doctrine and method when it came to action the press "must conform strictly to the decisions taken by congress as interpreted by the general committee. In addition, the press will refrain from all polemics and all communications which could injure the organization."<sup>19</sup>

### *A Singular Socialist*

Throughout his life, any restraint of this sort on thought struck him as an intolerable infringement on the mind of man. Before he returned to the Church, socialism meant for him a universal drive towards complete human dignity. In reaction to Socialist censorship, he decided to found a *journal vrai* that would allow complete liberty for all contributors. The *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* in fact would occupy him for the rest of his life. One of his old associates commented: "I see what you want, you intend to publish a paper for idiots." Others called him an anarchist and promised to attack him with all their strength. And they did. But for the rest of his life, as Socialist or later as a Catholic, Péguy insisted on complete liberty in the journal he edited, for his contributors and for himself in a double sense: as a contributor in his own right and as a writer prepared to rebut contributions he had allowed to be published. In the process he discovered a principle that

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<sup>19</sup>Villiers, *Péguy*, 126.

might be amusing to see practiced by some contemporary journal: “A review only continues to have life in it so long as each issue annoys at least a fifth of its subscribers. Justice, however, lies in making sure that it is not always the same fifth.”<sup>20</sup>

In his socialism, there were other profound differences with official socialism then and now. For example, instead of the organized envy that often marks Socialist calls for equality, Péguy thought that after political equality the task is not to equalize people economically, only to keep people from destitution. Destitution (*misère*), he says, is to be distinguished from poverty. Someone may be poor but assured of continued existence and, therefore, after a fashion live humanly. But destitution—living in fear of lacking the basic necessities of life—threatened a person with falling outside the human community altogether: “A city is not founded so long as it admits of an individual destitution.”

Péguy, as many other traditional thinkers, worried over the precarious position of the industrial worker in the modern world. Some of the most moving passages in his work describe a different France, one that he thought existed up until the 1870s or 1880s, in which French peasants still had the Christian and Republican virtues and an integrated existence. By contrast, the industrial worker in France in the early part of this century, he thought, had not only lost his ancient connection to the land (a problem, by the way, that Péguy unlike G. K. Chesterton never tried to solve by advocating an abandonment of the factories for the farms). Socialist organizers had further corrupted the workers with their “bourgeois” class struggles and strikes. Solidarity for the sake of justice was one thing, he thought. Negotiations to do the least work possible and direct action that destroyed tools he found so alien to the hard-working virtues of an earlier France that he could only blame the intellectuals for having led astray a hardy people. Péguy, in truth, probably did not know much about practical economics, but he touched a living nerve here.

He also parted company with the Socialist politicians over questions of war and peace. Typically, a modern nation breaks down into, on the one hand, a more nationalist wing shading off into fascism that asserts the value of the nation against foreign nationalities; on the other hand,

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 311.

there are more internationalist currents that deplore the natural loyalty to land, language, and national culture.

Péguy differs sharply from both camps sharply in his attitude towards the army. Though an ardent Dreyfusard and critic of the cowardices of the French high command, he recognized that warfare was an inevitable aspect of human life. Towards the end of his life—an end he made on the battlefield—he wrote that the armed forces were “the temporal cradle where customs, laws, arts, religion even, tongue and race can, once it is ensured and then only, be said to grow.” Ten years earlier, after Germany had first shown its intentions in the Tangiers incident, he had already noticed that Socialists and progressives had taken an opposite line:

The people want to insult and abuse the army, because today this is a good line. . . . In fact, at all political demonstrations it is a necessary theme. If one didn't take that line one would not look sufficiently progressive. . . . and it will never be known what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of looking insufficiently progressive.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, his former Socialist colleagues could only recommend organizing workers' movements and international peace campaigns. Péguy always regarded this as making peace an absolute value, “peace at any price.” He asked instead that any move towards war simply be just, and once that condition was satisfied that the war be fought without mental reserve. As he put it, “There is one Lady in the world who has caused more wars than injustice; and that is justice.” Charity itself, he thought, “is a source of war. Such is the lot of man in the world.” It is no wonder that Maritain thought it proper to invoke Péguy along with Jeanne d'Arc when the situation demanded the martial virtues from the French to throw off the Nazi yoke.

### *Péguy and the Jews*

It is only against this background that we can understand Péguy's views of the Dreyfus case and the particular role of the people of Israel in the world. None of the other major figures in the French Catholic Renaissance—not Claudel or Bernanos or even Bloy—had anything remotely resembling Péguy's understanding of the fairness that the

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<sup>21</sup>Charles Péguy, *Notre Patrie, Oeuvre en Prose* (1898–1909), 834.

French and Catholic traditions themselves demanded towards Jews in France. In fact, Péguy puts that kind of justice toward the Jews in terms of the honor and even the “temporal salvation” of the French.

Dreyfus and Dreyfusism mean several things in Péguy that might best be recalled in his words about his great Jewish friend Bernard-Lazare. Bernard-Lazare was a journalist hired by the Dreyfus family to argue Alfred’s innocence in public. Like Péguy, he ruined his health and prospects in that just cause, and when it was over he was more or less dismissed by the family like a hired hand. For Péguy, all this was part of the mystique of the Dreyfus case, in which even the good and the just ended up suffering. When Dreyfus came back for his appeals, hearings, and—later—his release, many Dreyfusards were disappointed that the man for whom many had ruined themselves—some had even died and many would have died—was not heroic himself. Dreyfus’s mediocrity, however, according to Péguy was the last touch needed to make the demand for French justice perfect. Had he been a hero, of course, it would have been a great triumph and tribute to his nobility to release him. The fact that he was so paltry a figure made the search for justice that much purer. Bernard-Lazare said to Péguy, cutting short the grumbling about the wronged man, “He’s innocent: that’s enough” (“*Il est innocent, c’est déjà beaucoup*”).

Dreyfusism, however, went through several metamorphoses. The Socialists initially thought the case a distraction from the class struggle and refused to get involved. Eventually, however, they supported Dreyfus. The support, however, was for a *politique* not a *mystique*, and it soon showed. The parliamentarian Jean Jaurès, an old friend of Péguy’s, and other Socialists had defended Dreyfus, but they did not content themselves with making the proper case. They wanted to use Dreyfus for several attacks: on the army, on the Church, on political opponents. Péguy gave place to no one in his outrage against individuals and parties that continued the injustice against Dreyfus, but he did not think injustice against Dreyfus should be a pretext for perpetrating other injustices. The Socialists, for instance, used the sentiment raised against the Church by the widespread opposition of the lower clergy and the average Catholic to Dreyfus to help pass the laws against the congregations under the Waldeck-Rousseau government, and to carry out the closing of a large number of Catholic schools and other institutions under Combes. Socialists and other former Dreyfusards had even approved of the identification of Catholic officers within the military who were then held back from promotion, regardless of merit.

For Péguy as for Bernard-Lazare, this showed a betrayal of the spirit of Dreyfusism by the Dreyfusards themselves. Anti-Semitism in one party had been replaced by anti-Catholicism in another. Socialists did not seem to care about justice for opponents and for Péguy this showed that they were neither true Dreyfusards nor true Socialists. In his great *Cahier* of 1910, *Notre Jeunesse*, he lays out the indictment. Some people directly chose to betray the *mystique*, but others fell prey to a *parti pris*:

Through the play, through the history of events, through the baseness and sin of man, the *mystique* has become *politique*, or rather the action of the *mystique* has become the action of the *politique*, the *politique* has devoured the *mystique*. . . . The same action that was legitimate becomes illegitimate. The same action that was due becomes undue. The same action that had become such and such, departing from that point of discernment, becomes not only other, it becomes generally its contrary, its very contrary. And it is thus that one becomes innocently criminal . . . perhaps the most dangerous of all.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the anti-Semites at the time of the Dreyfus affair attributed the public controversy to Jewish political, journalistic, and economic interests. Following France's loss in 1870 of Alsace-Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian War, anti-Jewish sentiment increased partly out of frustration over France's humiliation. Various parties were blamed, particularly the Jews, for the loss of *esprit* in the French people. Anti-Semitism had been growing all over Europe in the late nineteenth century. The reasons for this are complex and obscure. In France, however, the accusations against Dreyfus gave rabid figures like Edouard Drumont, the author of the vile *La France Juive* and editor of *La Libre parole*, an occasion to stir up anti-Jewish sentiment. In short order, this anti-Semitism became very virulent indeed. By the time Dreyfus was publicly stripped of his commission, thousands lined the streets shouting, "Death to the Jews, death to traitors, death to Judas."<sup>23</sup>

Péguy, with penetrating justice and *justesse* in *Notre Jeunesse* replies to several of the usual slanders:

You are always making reproaches of them that are contradictory. When their wealthy do not support them, when their wealthy are hard-hearted you

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<sup>22</sup>*Notre Jeunesse*, 524.

<sup>23</sup>Villiers, *Péguy*, 55.

say: *That's not surprising, they are Jews.* When their wealthy do support them, you say: *That's not surprising, they are Jews.*

Some of these charges are repeated even today and this passage from Péguy could apply to some current voices:

When they remain unmoved by the appeals of their brothers, to the cries of their persecuted, to the complaints, to the lamentations of their brothers battered all over the world, you say: *They are bad Jews.* And just let them even open their ears to the lamentations that rise from the Danube or from the Dnieper and you say: They are betraying us. They are bad Frenchmen.

With prophetic insight Péguy concludes, "At bottom, what you'd like is for them not to exist."

There was no question for Péguy that the anti-Semites were right that there was a Jewish *politique* at work before, during, and after the Dreyfus affair. What he disputed was that this *politique* was of central importance to the case. The Jewish *politique* was "stupid, like all *politiques*. It . . . performs Israel's business, as Republican politicians perform the Republic's business. Like most *politiques*, it is above all busy stifling, devouring, and suppressing its own *mystique*, the *mystique* from which it sprang. And it scarcely succeeds in anything but that."

What was that Jewish *mystique* according to Péguy? One of the things it was not was the merely sentimental opposite of anti-Semitism. Jacques Petit has argued that of the great Catholic writers at the beginning of this century—Bloy, Claudel, Bernanos, and Péguy—only Péguy never indulges some aspect of the anti-Semites. But even Péguy, according to Petit, concedes something to anti-Semitism in his adoption of certain images to rebut.<sup>24</sup> I find this straining for a seamless anti-Semitism ultimately off target. Should Péguy not have replied to specific charges? Péguy asserts that the great majority of the Jews are like the great majority of other people: they do not want trouble and would be happy to deliver up a scapegoat, as had many non-Jews in the Dreyfus affair, to keep a certain tranquillity. This strikes me as hardly accepting the anti-Semitic images, some of which have been briefly mentioned earlier.

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<sup>24</sup>Jacques Petit, *Bernanos, Bloy, Claudel, Péguy: quatre écrivains Catholiques face à Israël* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1972).

But then there are the Jewish prophets. Most Jews, thought Péguy, would have preferred to avoid “giving the prophets grounds for prophecy” for good historical reasons:

The Pyramids and the Champs Elysées, the kings of Egypt and the kings of the Orient, the whip of eunuchs and the Roman lance, the Temple destroyed and not rebuilt, an unattonable dispersion tell them the price of this for all eternity. They know the cost of being the voice of the flesh and the temporal body. They know the cost of bearing God and His agents the prophets. . . . But the whole of Israel’s *mystique* demands that Israel should pursue its resounding and painful mission throughout the world. Hence extraordinary lacerations, the most painful of inner antagonisms ever known between *mystique* and *politique*. A people of merchants; the same people, a people of prophets.

It is for this reason that Israel itself often persecuted and tried to ignore its prophets. Péguy sees in the Dreyfus case not a political maneuvering, but “*une explosion du mystique juive.*”

#### *Multiple Modern Mystiques*

The Dreyfus case was won but it took the Holocaust for the Jewish *mystique* and *politique* to find a workable balance in the modern world. The Republican *mystique* and *politique* seem to have settled down in France, with perhaps a nod to their royalist counterparts in the respect paid figures such as Mitterrand. By and large, though, the *politiques* have prevailed with all the attendant corruptions and silliness and inattention to the eternal Péguy anticipated.

But what of the Catholic or Christian *mystique*? Significantly, Péguy had not yet straightened out his marriage or returned to the sacraments—except for a single Mass—before he died. *Entre les deux guerres* he was the single most important inspiration for the Catholic renaissance. You still meet people in France who have walked the pilgrimage route he created between Notre Dame de Paris and Notre Dame de Chartres, but he is not known much to Catholics any longer, particularly outside France. Perhaps much of his idea of an authentic catholic *mystique* has been fulfilled in the recent social teaching of the Church and its support for religious liberty within democratic structures.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>On this point see Jean Basteire, *Péguy l'inchrétien* (Paris: Desclée/essai, 1991).

If there is one place where Péguy seems to have exerted a tacit but definite influence on Maritain's thought, it is, I believe, in Maritain's vision of an integral humanism. When Maritain writes of the distinction of planes, and the difference between the reduced secular role of a "Christian acting" and the much more comprehensive religious role of the "Christian acting as such," he seems to have in the back of his mind a vague memory of *politique* and *mystique*.<sup>26</sup> Much of Maritain's thought, of course, refines and extends those concepts such that a real politics—something that does not exist in Péguy's vast *oeuvre*—becomes possible for the Christian in a secular state.

All arguments need perpetual renewal and repetition because all arguments are constantly falling into decay. Perhaps it is time for us to dust off and extend yet further some of Péguy's insights. Many of us who read and are inspired by him in the original French think he lives on. But a fuller sign of his survival would be if some of us, while defending democratic institutions, freedom of thought, and our Jewish brethren were to carry on his work in other realms as well. As a beginning, we might recognize that the terrestrial goods we value cannot defend themselves. Only a *mystique*—one or several—active and recognized as such even by the secular world can keep our earthly pursuits from devouring us. There's a price to be paid for such work, a heavy price, and Péguy paid it all his life up until he fell to a German bullet on a beet field in the Marne valley.

There have been many tributes, by Maritain and others, to Péguy's passionate devotion to the temporal and eternal dimensions of human existence. In one of the most recent, the contemporary British poet Geoffrey Hill in his *Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* has expanded one of Péguy's verses thus:

Happy are they who, under the gaze of God,  
die for the 'terre charnelle', marry her blood  
to theirs, and, in strange Christian hope, go down  
into the darkness of resurrections,

into sap ragwort, melancholy thistle,  
almondy meadowsweet, the freshest brook

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<sup>26</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 291–308.

rising and running through small wilds of oak,  
past the elder-tump that is the child's castle.

Inevitable high summer, richly scarred  
with furze and grief; winds drumming the fame  
of the tin legions lost in haystack and stream.  
Here the lost are blest, the scarred most sacred.