Maritain, Jacques (1882 - 1973)

Summary Article: Maritain, Jacques (1882-1973)
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Maritain's mother, a lapsed Catholic (like the libertine husband she eventually divorced), had Jacques baptized a Lutheran, but brought him up in a Parisian environment of liberal Protestantism. While studying natural science at the Sorbonne he met his future wife, Raïssa, who along with her Jewish family had been forced to flee Russia because of anti-Semitic persecution. His initial confidence in the ability of science to explain everything soon dissipated, and following the advice of Charles Peguy, he and Raïssa started attending the lectures of Henri Bergson. This, Maritain claimed, awakened their sense of the absolute, and several years after marrying in 1904, both he and his wife converted to Catholicism, being baptized in a Montmartre church, with Leon Bloy, who had influenced them to make the move, serving as their godfather. Soon thereafter, their spiritual adviser, a Dominican monk named Humbert Clérissac, persuaded them to take up the study of Thomas Aquinas. Maritain was enthused by his reading of Thomas’ Summa Theologiae, and for the remainder of his life, while writing over sixty books and holding various professorial positions at the Institute Catholique, the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto, Princeton University, and elsewhere, became a major advocate for the revival of Thomism.

During several post-World War II years he served as France’s ambassador to the Vatican. He was a close friend and mentor of Pope Paul VI. Raïssa, who in the meantime had become a respectable poet, and who had, by Maritain's own account, been a major inspiration in his life and thought, died in 1960. Maritain thereupon decided to live with the Little Brothers of Jesus in Toulouse, a contemplative religious congregation inspired by the ideals of de Foucault to live out the Christian message among members of the working class. Maritain had associated with them from the beginning of their foundation in France. He later became a Little Brother himself.

While living with the Brothers, he continued writing about many subjects relevant to his Catholic faith, including the controversial book entitled The Peasant of the Garonne, in which he gave expression to some of his misgivings about the direction being taken by the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council. Before dying in the spring of 1973 he received Communion and the last rites of the Catholic Church.

Maritain on Religion. There is a prephilosophical natural knowledge which, starting from a primordial intuition of existence and the possibility of not being, perceives the necessary existence of Being-without-nothingness as the cause of all beings. Such knowledge was at the heart of the "primitive tradition" which came to be incorporated in primitive religion, and notwithstanding its corruption by the more degraded forms of religion (polytheism, animism, totemism, etc.) or its subsequent rationalistic distortion by Zoroastrian dualism, Hindu pessimism, Brahmanic pantheistic idealism, Buddha’s atheistic evolutionism, Lao Tze’s illusory wisdom, and Confucius’ ethical positivism, carried over into the best of
Greek philosophy (i.e., Aristotle), and later, when elevated by Christian revelation, was woven by the likes of Thomas Aquinas into the fabric of the highest wisdom, the wisdom of man deified by grace.

Thomas’ ways of demonstrating the existence and nature of God analogically were simply a development of this natural knowledge. It reaches its climax in the experience of supernatural mysticism, in which the soul enters into the ever-mysterious, unfathomable depths of God and experiences the cognitive union of love. By virtue of this experience of the intimate life of God, Christianity, unlike the pagan religions of antiquity, transcends every civilization and every culture, and rightly subordinates the temporal goals of the latter to the eternal, supernatural life which is the end of true religion. The theocentric, integral humanism resulting therefrom can help cultivate a democratic society in which complete fidelity to truth and fervent love of unity combine to create a fellowship of friendship between humans—Christians, non-Christians, or even atheists—who think very differently on essential matters, but who recognize that beliefs other than their own can include elements of truth and value, and on that account share invisible membership in the visible Church of Christ.

Sources


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