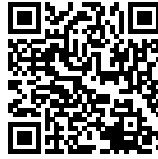




MARITAIN'S POLITICAL RELEVANCE

Posted on February 1, 2022 by Christophe Geffroy



The work of political philosophy of Maritain (1882-1973) is of the utmost importance and remains for us a sure guide to get our democracies out of the impasse in which they are engaged.

Our Western democracies are sick. The participation of citizens has decreased, because many no longer feel represented or think that elections do not change anything, regardless of the candidates elected, as the important decisions are taken elsewhere. This crisis in our political systems highlights the two historical versions of democracy. The first, which can be called "substantive democracy," recognizes the notion of the "good," with politics defined as the search for the common good. The second, "procedural democracy," sidesteps the question of the "good" by simply issuing rules so that each person, free to determine his or her own "good," pursues his or her own ends.

Maritain foresaw these two versions of democracy, but he died (in 1973) before "procedural democracy" could take hold, taking its own logic to its logical conclusion, which is what we are seeing today. If Maritain is known to be an ardent defender of the democratic regime, he is also an ardent defender of "substantial democracy," which is why this attachment did not prevent him from remaining throughout his life an assertive anti-modernist, in particular in that he never ceased to defend the classical philosophy inherited from Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose reception he contributed to widen—it is thus a misnomer to label him as a "Christian democrat." In order to understand this, let us briefly summarize Maritain's conception of democracy.

It is based first and foremost on a vision of society, of man and his freedom, which is rooted in the teachings of Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas. Man is a social animal and society a natural reality: the central question of politics is therefore to determine the conditions that allow man to live well, that is to say, according to virtue, which is acquired through education and asceticism, an exercise that requires effort but whose crowning achievement is the gaining of freedom, which alone allows for the mastery of passions. Thus, "man is not born free, except in the radical powers of his being: he becomes free," writes Maritain in *Principes d'une politique humaniste* (Principles of a Humanist Politics). The freedom that leads to a relative autonomy of the person does not consist, therefore, in emancipating oneself from all rules or in choosing those that suit us, but in conforming to a natural order willed by God that goes beyond us—man is not the primary source of meaning, he is part of a whole, in an ordered universe from which he cannot emancipate himself at will. This approach to society places at the center the notion of the good, the good of the person and the good of the community; the person being subordinated to society in the temporal order, and society to the person in the spiritual order (cf. *Du régime temporel et de la liberté*, *On the Temporal Regime and Freedom*), politics being defined as the

service of the common good.

This general framework having been established, Maritain takes note of the end of Christendom, that is to say of a religiously homogeneous Christian society governed according to Christian principles—"sacred Christendom" which Maritain admired in spite of certain excesses, such as the fact of putting force at the service of God in a context certainly different from ours. In short, the religious pluralism of our societies—religion no longer discriminates in terms of rights—imposes other relationships between the spiritual and the temporal. Starting from this inescapable observation, Maritain defends the idea of a communitarian and personalist democracy—its proper end is the common good, essentially the right earthly life of the multitude. It is thus at the same time material and moral; and it is opposed to individualism, the society not being a simple aggregate of independent individuals which ignores intermediary bodies and the notion of common good.

This organization presupposes an eminent respect for the dignity of the human person, which is why Maritain defends a demanding conception of human rights, whose philosophical foundation is the natural law, which is "a participation in the eternal law": "In reality," he writes, "if God does not exist, there is no obligatory power of the natural law" (*La loi naturelle ou loi non écrite*). Maritain was aware, however, that it is impossible to develop a common rational justification of these rights among beings of different cultural, philosophical and religious traditions. On the other hand, he thought, "men mutually opposed in their theoretical conceptions can arrive at a purely practical agreement on an enumeration of human rights" (*L'Homme et l'État*, *Man and the State*).

His substantive conception of democracy led him to distinguish the nation, which is a community generally created by nature, from the political body or political society, a human reality born of reason, of which the State is only a part, an instrument at the service of the whole. The appearance of the State was in itself a progress. Unfortunately, it developed at the same time as the modern absolutist conception, which led to the notion of absolute sovereignty, first of the king, then of the nation (or of the people), a notion that Maritain vigorously rejects. "In the eyes of a sound political philosophy," he writes, "there is no sovereignty, that is to say, no natural and inalienable right to a transcendent or separate supreme power, in political society. Neither the Prince, nor the King, nor the Emperor were really sovereign, although they bore the sword and the attributes of sovereignty. Neither is the State sovereign, nor even the people. God alone is sovereign. [Of the people as a political body we must say, not that it is sovereign, but that it has a natural right to full autonomy, or to govern itself" (*L'Homme et l'État*, *Man and the State*). And to do this, Maritain employs the notion of vicariance developed by St.

Thomas Aquinas, the leader being vicar of the multitude. He recognized the legitimacy of the diversity of regimes to designate this leader, far from a certain idolatry of democracy, however, "a state of civilization where men, as individual persons, designate by free choice the holders of authority, and where the nation controls the state, is of itself a more perfect state" (*Les droits de l'homme et la loi naturelle*, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*). Although the Enlightenment, Rousseau and Kant had permeated democratic thought, Maritain saw in the emergence of this regime a profound historical process of which the Gospel was a generating principle, as Bergson had noted.

Another Democracy

Today, the Maritainian conception of democracy has become suppressed. He himself did not see coming all the logical consequences of the modern thought which sought the complete emancipation of the human will from any limit imposed from the outside, whether it comes from God, nature, culture or tradition. The modern dogma is that man must be able to build himself alone and to decide alone what he is, even up to the choice of his sex. The natural law, unbearable limit to the desires of man—desires that are transforming quickly into rights today—was swept away in this movement amplified by the moral revolution of the 1960s. A profound distortion of human rights followed, diverted to the benefit of a blind egalitarianism in the name of an absurd fight against any "discrimination." Thus, human rights have undergone an indefinite extension of subjective rights that are more and more delirious and that have emptied themselves of all substance, making them even harmful to the common good and rendering any "purely practical agreement" between civilizations, as Maritain hoped, totally utopian.

In short, today a meaningless procedural democracy triumphs, subject to the tyranny of minorities well established in the circles of power and the media, which has led to the erasure of politics, already well undermined by the supremacy of economics in the context of liberal globalization. This democracy no longer offers an exciting common destiny to its citizens—it consecrates the fracture of the country between a privileged fringe and a declassed majority that no longer feels represented; it can only lead to a populist reaction in the best of cases, to chaos or to an authoritarian regime in the worst.

This is why it is urgent to rethink another version of democracy, the substantial one whose outlines Maritain has traced for us. In this sense, he has opened up a path towards which we must turn one day.

Christophe Geffroy publishes the journal [La Nef](#), through whose kind assistance we are publishing this article.

[Featured image](#): "The Rain It Raineth Every Day," by Norman Garstin, painted in 1889.

