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Étienne Gilson's Early Social and Political Thought

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Abstract

The recent resurrection and rediscovery of Gilson's early political writings broaden the traditional view of Gilson by allowing us to see him as a serious, engaged, political thinker. This essay traces the background of Gilson's early political thought, the beginnings of a dramatic change both in Gilson's activity and writings in the late 1920s, possible reasons for that change, and focuses on Gilson's *Pour un ordre catholique* (*For the Establishment of a Catholic Order*). This emblematic work of Gilson's early political thought, which is a practical application of his Christian philosophy, remains relevant to addressing serious religious and political issues confronting Catholics today.

Keywords

Éienne Gilson, Catholic Political Thought, *Sept*, *Pour un ordre catholique*, 'Woke' Ideology

Étienne Gilson (1884-1978) is internationally recognized as one of the great philosophers and historians of the twentieth century. Recent French scholarship has resurrected and is rediscovering Gilson's early social and political thought, despite its having been buried in out-of-print books and difficult-to-access journals, newspapers, courses, conferences, correspondence, and archival material.[1] This development has broadened the traditional portrait of Gilson from one of an

[1] More than 115 texts, with the original pagination shown in the margins, have been collected in Étienne Gilson, *Oeuvres complètes I, Un philosophe dans la cité 1908-1943*, ed. Florian Michel, hereafter abbreviated as *O.C., I* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2019). All translations of these and other French texts in this article are the author's. See also Florian Michel, *Étienne Gilson, une biographie intellectuelle et politique* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2018) and Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, O.P., 'Étienne Gilson et la politique', *Revue thomiste* 114, 2 (2014), pp. 227-287. Due to the inaccessibility of Gilson's early articles and speeches, scholars such as Desmond FitzGerald considered Gilson's political activity to have begun late in 1944 with the liberation of Paris; see FitzGerald, 'Maritain and Gilson on the Challenge of Political Democracy', *Reassessing the Liberal State: Reading Maritain's Man and the State*, ed. Timothy Fuller &

academic who, for the most part, avoided political action and even reflection, to one of an academic who also was a engaged, Catholic, political thinker.[2] Gilson's political interventions have been characterized as episodic. Depending upon need and his own choice, Gilson, the professor, could also be a committed intellectual, essayist, and pamphleteer. This paper focuses on Gilson's first political 'episode' that occurred during the years 1934–1935,[3] particularly on his emblematic work of this period, *Pour un ordre catholique* (*For the Establishment of a Catholic Order*)[4] as a practical application of his Christian philosophy.

I. Background

Gilson volunteered for, or was called to action by, a number of events and experiences that shaped his political reflections: serving in the French army during World War I training new recruits (1914) and machine gunners (1915), spending almost three years in Germany as a prisoner of war (1915-1918), heading the Association for Aid to Russian Children's mission to help those suffering from famine in Russia and Ukraine (1925), experiencing World War II in France and refusing to collaborate with the Vichy regime (1940-1944), accepting appointments by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to delegations aimed at developing the charter for the United Nations and the constitution of UNESCO (1945), being appointed to a two-year term as senator in the French Conseil de la République (1947-1949), weathering attacks as an accused traitor for advocating French neutralism in the event of a hot war between Russia and the United States (1951), and provoking controversy in Catholic circles with his views on Vatican II and its aftermath (1967).

Having grown up during some of the most difficult years of France's Third Republic (1870-1940), Gilson experienced the interconnection of politics and religion. He came to know and understand the regime, secularization, and education. The challenge confronting the Third Republic was to persuade Catholics, who were almost all hostile to the Republic, to surrender their monarchical sympathies and accept the existing government, and, at the same time, convince Republican

John P. Hittinger (Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association: Distributed by Catholic University of America Press, 2001), pp. 61, 63.

[2] Rowan Williams, 'Atlantic Intellectual: The Life of an Extraordinary French Scholar', *The Times Literary Supplement*, January 17, 2020. pp. 34-35.

[3] Paul Vignaux, 'Étienne Gilson', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 84 (1979), p. 291.

[4] Étienne Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934), reprinted in Gilson, *O.C., I*, and the re-edited version of Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, O.P. (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2013).

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authorities to halt and rescind their anti-clerical legislation. Hostility towards the Catholic Church in France took many forms. It included: the elimination of the religious component in education; the reservation to the state of the monopoly to confer academic degrees; the suppression of university rights for Catholic establishments of higher education; the elimination of faculties of Catholic theology at the Sorbonne; the prohibition of teaching catechism in elementary and secondary schools; the curtailment of religious services in prisons; the banishment of religious Sisters from hospitals; the prohibition of religious ceremonies in public places; the abrogation in workshops and factories of the law of Sunday rest; the reduction of salaries for clergy and funding for seminaries and church repairs; and legal changes so that marital separation lasting three years could, on the demand of one of the parties, be changed into absolute divorce.[5]

Raised Catholic, Gilson attended the parish school of Sainte Clotilde (1890–1895) and an elite, Catholic secondary school, Le Petit Séminaire de Notre-Dame-des-Champs (1895–1902). He completed his undergraduate education at public institutions—the well-known Lycée Henri IV (1902-1903) and the Université de Paris (Sorbonne) (1904-1907).[6] Many of Gilson's philosophy professors at the Sorbonne were turning into sociologists who emphasized the collection of data that could be easily manipulated to mirror the natural sciences in a positivist manner. The widespread, materialistic, social positivism taught at the Sorbonne had little effect on Gilson's Catholic faith; as a student, he attended Mass regularly. Given the fierce struggle between the Catholic Church and the Third Republic over the role of Christianity in France, and especially in the French educational system, Gilson's adherence to Catholicism as a brilliant student and later as a famous professor was significant.[7]

Despite the unsettling political situation in France and Gilson's extraordinary academic productivity during his first two decades of teaching (1908-1928)—over 300 publications including books—virtually no

[5] GlobalSecurity, '1871-1914 - Third Republic and the Catholic Church' https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/fr-religion-3rd-republic.htm (accessed March 13, 2021).

[6] The Petit Séminaire de Notre-Dame-des-Champs was closed in 1904 as a result of the anti-congregationist laws preventing religious congregations from teaching. See Étienne Gilson, '*Discours de M. Étienne Gilson, Notre-Dame-des-Champs*', *Association fraternelle des anciens élèves de Notre-Dame-des-Champs*, (Paris: Louis de Soye, 1934), pp. 16-21, reprinted in Gilson, *O. C., I*, pp. 293-299, at p. 293, n.1.

[7] 'Brought up in the Catholic faith, I profess it explicitly' (Étienne Gilson, '*Lettre à l'éditeur, Pour travailler tranquille*', *La vie catholique*, Paris, Nov. 1, 1924, reprinted in Gilson, *O. C., I*, p. 395). Fr. de Lubac characterized Gilson's faith as 'very strong and simple' and appreciated his 'open and forthright acknowledgement of his Catholicism' (Laurence K. Shook, Notes from his visit with Fr. de Lubac at Les Fontaines on May 11, 1975, University of St Michael's College Archives, Toronto, abbreviated SMCA). See, Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 17.

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evidence appears of any public political writing or activity. In 1906, Gilson's friend and philosophical advisor (and his wife's spiritual advisor), P. Lucien Laberthonnière, experienced problems with ecclesiastical authorities for several political and religious positions driven by his fierce hatred of Aristotelian scholasticism. When a few of his works were placed on the *Index of Prohibited Books* along with a 'cruel interdiction to teach and publish', Gilson wrote him to express his sadness, sympathy, and support.[8] In 1919, Gilson published reviews of two books by the Catholic dissident Alfred Loisy whose books were condemned by the Vatican for subjectivism, historicism, and fideism; Loisy was excommunicated by Pope Pius X in 1908. Both of Gilson's reviews were 'sympathetic towards Loisy's weary attempts at scholarship in face of the Imprimatur, the Index, and rampant authoritarianism'.[9] On the side of democracy, Gilson believed scholars had the right to examine and critique social issues. He did think that the Catholic Church could be overly harsh and that the science of theology should be permeated with scientific history and philosophical speculation. He became critical of Pope Pius X failing to understand enthusiastic attempts of Republicans and scholars to tailor presentations of Church doctrine to scientific discoveries.[10] Many years after the events occurred, Gilson also recounted being 'deeply affected' by the Church's condemnation in 1920 of Le Sillon ('The Furrow'), a French political and religious movement founded by Marc Sangnier (1873–1950). Le Sillon attempted to plough up the soil of French unbelief and sow seeds of faith to bring Catholicism into a greater conformity with French Republican and socialist ideals, in order to provide an alternative to Marxism and other anticlerical labor movements.[11]

Even though the philosophy of Fr. Laberthonnière and the politics of Sangnier had nothing in common, they had the same adversaries. Most of them claimed to be Thomists and all sided with the far-right monarchists of Action Française. Led by Charles Maurras, the atheist theorist of the movement, Action Française believed that if French society were to prosper as it had in the past, it must return to both the political form and the religious practices of earlier times. The 'Thomists' held that Maurras and St. Thomas agreed on the notion of the best political regime. Gilson could not understand how such an erroneous

[8] Étienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 56 and Letter of Étienne Gilson to P. Lucien Laberthonnière, April 12, 1906, in Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 325-326. This is the earliest document by Gilson found addressed to someone outside of his family or school circles.

[9] Étienne Gilson, '*Compte rendu de deux ouvrages d'Alfred Loisy*', *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 88, July-December 1919, pp. 129-131, reprinted in Gilson, *O.C. I*, pp. 757-760; see Laurence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), p. 89.

[10] Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 32, 66-67, 115.

[11] Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, pp. 56-57.

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interpretation of St. Thomas could be justified, but understood the immense political gain from trying to link Maurras' political theory with that of the Common Doctor of the Church. Fr. Laberthonnière was concerned about the nature of authority in the Catholic Church being clearly at odds with Maurras' idea of the Church as an instrument for implementing his cry of 'La Politique d'abord', or 'Politics First!' Maurras viewed Catholicism in a functional and sociological manner rather than in religious terms; he saw it as a force to serve the state and guarantee order, Latin civilization, and national unity.[12]

Action Française's influence over some of the French clergy and faithful laity quickly became a major concern to the Church. In 1914, due to complaints from French bishops, the Holy Office prepared a prohibition of seven books by Maurras, but Action Française's combat against anticlerical Republicans and its struggle for a conservative type of Catholicism (then in favor at the Vatican) caused interventions on its behalf in Rome and Pope Pius X (1903–14) suspended publication of the decree. Due to new complaints and increasing youth membership in Action Française, a decree of the Holy Office (Dec. 29, 1926) published the text of the 1914 condemnation and included Action Française's newspaper. All of this left Gilson in the early stage of his teaching career with the following questions: If one 'did not want to be a royalist, what other party could a French Catholic still join? If there was one, where was it?'[13] It is interesting to note that none of these events resulted in any overt political action on Gilson's part.

II. Political Engagement

The beginnings of a dramatic change both in Gilson's activity and in the nature and style of some of his writings began to emerge in 1929 when he published two articles in *L'Européen*, a new French journal focused on European thought. These became the first of hundreds of serious but popular writings in a journalistic style that Gilson would eventually submit to daily, weekly, and monthly publications. Gilson soon 'came to regard this form of journalism as his duty, both as a Republican and as a man who regarded himself as temperamentally

[12] Ibid., pp. 58-59; Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 15-16; Lucien Laberthonnière, *Autour de 'l'Action Française'* (Paris: Bloud, 1911) and his *Positivisme et Catholicisme: À propos de l'Action Française* (Paris: Bloud, 1911). See Étienne Gilson, '*En Marge de l 'Action Française*, *Sept*, 71, July 5, 1935, p. 4, reprinted in Gilson, *O.C. I*, pp. 625-631.

[13] Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, p. 57. The measures taken under Pope Pius X against the modernists such as Loisy and Laberthonnière along with the condemnation of *Action Française* almost caused Gilson to leave 'the Church (but from the faith, not for a second)' (Letter of Étienne Gilson to Henri Gouhier, January 30, 1962, *Revue thomiste*, 94, 3, p. 473). See Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 66-67.

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close to the ordinary citizen'.[14] His initial article was triggered by the short book, *La Trahison des Clercs* (*The Treason of the Intellectuals*) by the French philosopher and novelist Julien Benda (1867–1956).[15] Benda denounced scholars and intellectuals for having lost sight of the philosopher's vocation to seek and love the truth—universal and necessary knowledge—and for contributing to nationalist propaganda. Their treason or betrayal consisted in allowing political commitment to infiltrate their understanding of the intellectual vocation. Politics became entangled with their work as men of learning. It abased the value of knowledge before the value of action and led to the position that when human will is successful it takes on a moral value. In other words, politics decides morality.[16] Gilson applauded Benda as defending the idea of absolute truth and assisting the French public to rediscover the meaning of the word 'philosophy'. Gilson's second article presented a serious attack on French scholarship by an unnamed German interlocutor who criticized the positivist method adopted by the French academic community which systematically used index cards to gather and classify listing facts, but went no further to synthesize facts; such thinking cuts one off from half the truth.[17] Both articles showed that Gilson's high regard for the philosophy of St. Thomas did not separate him from contemporary issues such as the sociological ones arising in current trends in scholarship. In his own way, Gilson was bringing Thomism to bear light on those consequential issues.

During this same period, Gilson's actions became more political. In March/April of 1933, Gilson signed a petition by the Collège de France supporting victims of German anti-Semitism. And in March 1934, after the extreme right's nearly successful *coup d'état* following the February 6, 1934 riots coupled with fears of a fascist takeover in France, Gilson joined other Catholic intellectuals and signed a second petition declaring their positions as Catholics in defense of the common good.[18]

[14] Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 185. Three years earlier, Gilson had encouraged Gouhier to do a series of articles for a literary and artistic newspaper: 'I do not see either why you should not accept writing serials for *Les Nouvelles littéraires* by desorbonnizing French philosophy, which is an urgent task. If you have no objection in principle against newspapers (I think we have a duty to be journalists in 1926, when we are asked to be), I see no reason why you should refuse' (Letter of Étienne Gilson to Henri Gouier, November 11, 1926, Archives of Mme. Marie-Louise Gouhier).

[15] Étienne Gilson, '*Autour de Benda, La mare aux clercs*', *L'Européen*, Paris, May 29, 1929, p. 4, reprinted in Gilson, *O.C. I*, pp. 431-435.

[16] Roger Kimball, 'The Treason of the Intellectuals & "The Undoing of Thought"', *The New Criterion*, Vol. 11, No. 4, December, 1992 https://newcriterion.com/issues/1992/12/the-treason-of-the-intellectuals-ldquothe-undoing-of-thoughtrdquo (accessed March 20, 2021).

[17] Étienne Gilson, '*Vues prises de Marburg*', *L'Européen*, Paris, June 19, 1929, pp. 1-2, reprinted in *Gilson, O.C., I*, pp. 435-440.

[18] *Pour le bien commun, les responsabilités du Chrétien et le moment présent* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et Cie, avril 1934). Florian Michel, 'Introduction', Gilson, *O.C., 1*, pp. 12-13. Michel sees Gilson's signing of the second petition in 1934 and the launching

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The 1930s also saw a deepening sense of the spiritual in Gilson's courses at the Mediaeval Institute in Toronto. These included: 'An Introduction to Christian Philosophy' and 'Christian Moral Philosophy' (1931), as well as a course, in collaboration with Fr. Gerard Phelan, on 'Christian Social Philosophy' (1933) which explored how the Christian faith was a factor of social unity, but without defending any particular political theory.[19] Later that year, Gilson summarized the course in a series of lectures given in Montreal on 'La Société Chrétienne Universelle'. For the inability to achieve a universal society throughout history, Gilson blamed Averroism's tenet that reason and philosophy are superior to faith and knowledge founded on faith, along with the principle of treating faith and reason as irreconcilable. Gilson thought that a Christian social order in which faith illuminated reason was possible. This social order may be an ideal, but Gilson stressed that the ideal was now being realized because of the efforts by some to make it an actuality—a theme he would develop further in his articles published in *Sept*.[20]

A number of reasons might explain Gilson's limited activity in politics, particularly within Catholic circles, prior to 1929. This includes having a full calendar of academic commitments in France—teaching in lycées (1908-1913) and universities (Lille [1913-1914], Strasbourg [1919-1921], Paris [1921-1951])—and spending a semester abroad annually from 1926 on, and consequently, not being up to date on what was transpiring in France. One might also cite Gilson's solitary temperament or his being considered an outsider by some Catholics. The clerical faculty at the Institut Catholique de Paris, for instance, considered Gilson's teaching at secular institutions such as the Sorbonne and

of the Catholic weekly review *Sept* that same month as a 'break' in Gilson's activities and 'the debut of his intellectual engagement in the affairs of the city' (Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 94-95). Fr. Humbrecht ('*Étienne Gilson et la politique*', p. 243) agrees. One may quibble as to when exactly Gilson became politically active, but it is clear that during the early to mid-1930s Gilson as a professor at the Collège de France, newspaper man, editorial writer, and engaged ecclesiastical and socio-political figure fully assumed his status as a Catholic intellectual who, as he characterized it in 1936, placed his 'intelligence in the service of Christ the King'. See Étienne Gilson, '*L'intelligence au service du Christ-Roi*', *La vie intellectuelle*, 41, pp. 181-203; 'The intelligence in the service of Christ the King', *Christianity and Philosophy*, Eng. Tr. R. M. McDonald, C.S.B. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939), pp. 103-125.

[19] Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 212-213; Gilson, *O. C., I*, pp. 209-292. These important lectures, unique for their political purpose and very successful format, constituted Gilson's first draft of *Les Métamorphoses de la Cité de Dieu* (Paris: J. Vrin and Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 1952).

[20] Gilson, *O. C., I*, p. 292. On October 6, 1933, for a possible course at the Angelicum in Rome, Gilson suggested the title 'Christian Philosophy and Religious Unity of the Earth' or 'Christian Philosophy as the Philosophy of Society'. Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, *Correspondance 1923-1971: Deux approches de l'être*, ed. Géry Prouvost (Paris: J. Vrin, 1991), pp. 104, 107.

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the École Pratique des Hautes Études as suspect and out of step with their clerical Thomism.[21]

Similarly, one can speculate on what might have caused changes in Gilson's interest and activity beginning in the late 1920s. Was it regret over his inactivity in the past? Was it for not voicing an opinion on the 1905 law separating Church and state in France? Did he feel like one of those intellectual traitors described by Benda for not writing anything when Action Française was banned by the Pope in 1926? Or was it due to Gilson's having gained impressive teaching appointments during 1926–1932 at the Sorbonne and the École Pratique des Hautes Études? Or the prestige of having founded an Institute for Mediaeval Studies at the University of Toronto in 1929? Did being elected to the Collège de France in 1932 reduce his concern about the intrigues of academic politics and make him less reticent about expressing his political views? Or did his experience of the less inhibited North America culture lead him to manifest a robust Catholicism and a preoccupation with ecclesial matters?[22] Did one or a combination of these reasons come into play? The question remains open; we simply do not know. In a 1927 letter, Gilson noted: 'Once again in my life I sense that I am not acting but acted upon by God. […] I always do things of which I am perfectly oblivious and for which I am thanked afterwards. I now believe that this is exactly what we, Christian idiots, call Providence'.[23]

Fr. Shook, Gilson's authoritative biographer, put forth two main reasons that contributed to explaining the changes that began in 1929 and culminated in his political 'episode' of 1934–1935: first, his involvement in Catholic Action, a movement started in the latter part of the 19th century designed to increase lay participation in the Church's apostolate and, second, strengthening his friendships with the Dominicans.[24] We know that Gilson participated in *Ad Lucem*, an association of lay university Catholics and missionaries and one of Catholic Action's many groups which attempted to promote a Catholic influence on society to counteract a rise in anti-clerical sentiment, especially in Europe. We also know that Gilson became *Ad Lucem*'s ephemeral Vice President in 1932 and seems to have held that office into the second half of that decade.[25]

Gilson's friendships with people from Le Saulchoir, the Dominican school of theology in the order's French province established in 1904, included Fr. Marie-Vincent Bernadot. In 1928, he launched *La vie*

[21] Guillaume de Thieulloy, *Le chevalier de l'absolu: Jacques Maritain entre mystique et politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 50.

[22] Humbrecht, '*Étienne Gilson et la politique*', p. 270.

[23] Letter of Étienne Gilson to Fr. McCorkell, November 21, 1927, SMCA.

[24] Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 216.

[25] Michel*, Étienne Gilson*, p. 13; Étienne Gilson, 'The Layman and Society', *New Blackfriars*, 16, 182, Oxford, May 1935, p. 377, reprinted in Gilson, *O. C., I*, pp. 597-98.

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intellectuelle, an excellent journal which attracted prominent Catholic authors and favorably mentioned a paper that Gilson presented at an international meeting of philosophers.[26] Gilson appreciated being able to reach elite Christian intellectuals through the journal, and, when Fr. Bernadot invited him to republish or pre-publish planned articles, Gilson responded enthusiastically and submitted 17 articles.[27]

III. *Sept*: 'The Meteor'

It came as no surprise in March 1934, when Fr. Bernadot replaced *La vie intellectuelle* with *Sept*, a new weekly and much more popular and circumspect journal, that Gilson agreed to be a contributor and 'spared no pain nor his own name for the newspaper'.[28] *Sept* had a list of contributors comprised of approximately forty of the most prominent Catholic writers of the day. These included Jacques Maritain, François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, Gabriel Marcel, and Henri Daniel-Rops, among others. They all had the task of comparing popular political, social, and economic issues with the Catholic Church's teachings and drawing conclusions to guide the political choices of readers. *Sept* represented no particular or specialized point of view. As its inaugural editorial stated: 'Neither of the right, nor of the left, independent of politics to better serve the city, praising good, denouncing evil, we are accountable only to the truth'.[29]

According to Fr. Pierre Boisselot, Fr. Bernadot's lieutenant, Gilson's articles 'really launched *Sept*'. According to the same source, Gilson's contributions to *Sept* that suddenly came to a halt in August-September 1935 were linked with his position on the Italian-Ethiopian War that favored Italy and placed him out of step with his friends at *Sept*.[30] But the details of Gilson's collaboration—how exactly was he recruited by the Dominicans, did he serve on *Sept*'s editorial board, did he choose the topics for his articles—remain unknown. The documents surrounding Gilson's involvement either have been lost or not yet found. We know that Gilson wrote Fr. Bernadot's policy statement for *Sept*. It had

[26] Étienne Gilson, '*La spécificité de la philosophie d'après August Comte*, *Congrès des Sociétés américaine, anglaise, belge, italienne et de la Société Française de Philosophie* (Paris: 1921), pp. 382-386; R. Dalbiez, 'Souvenir d'un Congrès de Philosophie', *La vie intellectuelle*, 9 (1929), pp. 1015-1016.

[27] Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 216-217, 221.

[28] Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 214.

[29] Editorial of *Sept*, March 14, 1934 cited by T. Cavalin, '*Sept*', in J. Julliard, M. Winock, *Dictionnaire des intellectuels français. Les personnes, les lieux, les moments* (Paris: Seuil, 1996, 2002).

[30] Extracts from P. Pierre Boisselot, '*Notes sur l'histoire du Cerf*', 1943, Cahier II, pp. 83-87, '*Fonds Boisselot, Archives de la Province Dominicaine de France* (Paris)', cited in Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 341-343.

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as its objective to be 'the newspaper of the present time', to bring decision and unity into the divided ranks of French Catholics, and to induce the French Republic to abandon its secular educational policy.

During its short life, *Sept* became the most respected and influential Catholic periodical in France. It had a considerable circulation of no less than 25,000 subscribers and an average printing of 50,000 copies. Its readership extended well beyond its denominational horizon.[31] Its treatment of controversial subjects and its editorial position which did not always correspond with official Catholic positions caused its ultimate demise. In July/August 1937, Gilson was greatly saddened when the Holy See revived an old charge against the Dominicans as being friendly to communism and intervened to have *Sept* cease publication.[32]

Gilson's submissions to *Sept* constituted a fundamental contribution to the Church's understanding of Catholic Action by endowing it with a kind of doctrine, a theoretical-practical charter defining the context of legitimate action, its ends, and its limits. Between March 3, 1934, and August 16, 1935, Gilson published 61 articles in *Sept*. Subsequently, he selected 26 of them to be published, more or less in chronological order, as *Pour un ordre catholique*.[33] The remarkable breadth, density, and relative brevity of Gilson's collection of articles flashed across the French religious and political scene like a meteor. Given Gilson's social and political interests and sense of the spiritual in both his writings and activities from 1929 on, the timing of the meteor's arrival could not have been a complete surprise. But the composition of the meteor—encapsulations of straightforward views on practical Catholic social issues in brief articles with inviting titles—propelled by the power and clarity of Gilson's thought and strong rhetorical, journalistic style revealed, or unveiled, a new and unexpected side of the man. Gilson confided to Fr. Marie-Dominique Chenu his apprehension about his venture with *Sept*: 'I know I'm outside my métier […] and do not know if I'm obeying an interior counsel or simply being foolish. […] [P]erhaps I have a task there to fulfill, a duty. What bothers me the most is the blinding evidence with which I think I see what needs to be done along with the need to say it'.[34]

[31] Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 95.

[32] See M. Della Sudda, '*La suppression de l'hebdomadaire dominicain Sept. Immixtion du Vatican dans les affaires françaises* (1936-1937)', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 104, 4 (209), pp. 29-44.

[33] Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique* (henceforth double pagination refers to two editions of this work: the first to the original edition (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934) as reprinted in Gilson, *O.C., I* / the second to Fr. Hembrecht's edition published in 2013.

[34] Letter of Étienne Gilson to Marie-Dominique Chenu, May 6, 1934, Francesca A. Murphy '*Correspondance entre Marie-Dominique Chenu et Étienne Gilson. Un choix de lettres* (1923-1969)', *Revue thomiste* 105 (2005), pp. 35-36, Gilson & Maritain, *Correspondance*, p. 117, note.

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IV. Pour un ordre catholique

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, *Pour un ordre catholique*'s four sections outline the primary areas of Gilson's concentration: 'The Pagan State', 'Catholics First!', 'The Education Problem', and 'For a Catholic School'. As Gilson saw it, no one could deny the rights of the republican state, of secularism, but neither could one deny the concrete and visible rights of the spiritual. There was never a question in Gilson's mind of not accepting the separation of Church and state, but rather of establishing a Catholic order to ensure

> the realization of Catholic aims for which the state does not assume responsibility. […] The means are the sum total of institutions to be created, or coordinated, so that these needs may be fully satisfied. Once this order exists, although in itself it will be entirely apolitical, we will not have to wait long before noticing, even without looking for it, that the presence of such an order will weigh heavily on the life of the various parties. In the absence of this order, Catholics have nothing to say and can do nothing. […] [They] have had enough of being treated as second-class citizens.[35]

What are these institutions? Schools, charitable institutions and hospitals, syndicates, and analogous organizations created and run by Catholics. Gilson devotes a great deal of attention to showing the importance of establishing truly private, 'free' from state control, schools (*les écoles libres*). Such institutions will serve as the fundamental lever for the construction of a Catholic social order, but

> this in no way means that Catholics aspire or should aspire to form a state within the state. Insofar as they are Catholics, they neither form nor can form any state: they are a Church. The bond which unites them, because of its spiritual and religious nature, constitutes a duty for them to form among themselves the temporal societies required for the full development of their spiritual life, but it forbids them to transform themselves, *as Catholics*, into a temporal society that would replace the nation or the state.[36]

[35] Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique*, pp. 71-72, 58/pp. 88-89, 69.

[36] Ibid., p. 29/pp. 28-29. Some directors of the journal feared that Gilson's use of the term *ordre catholique* and focus on institutions could be interpreted as fostering a caste system and even 'ghettos' cut off from the rest of the world. For this reason, they preferred Maritain. See Aline Coutrot, *'Sept': un journal, un combat (mars 1934-aout 1937)*, Preface de René Rémond (Paris: Cana, 1982), p. 76; Bernard Doering, *Jacques Martain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 79. Although Gilson addressed this fear in one of his articles ('Ordre catholique et unité nationale', *Sept*, January 18, 1935, p. 3, reprinted in Gilson, *O.C., I*, pp. 569-572; see Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 222), he ceased using the term *ordre catholique* and afterwards used the term *chrétiente* (Christendom).

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For Gilson, the challenge was to put order within a state that masks its authoritarian secularism with a claim of neutrality, introduce as much of Christian social life as allowed. and progressively Christianize society itself as though by persuasion.[37]

Gilson realized that some Catholics cling to 'an old dream that refuses to die: the baptism of Clovis', who, on that very same day had 3,000 of his soldiers baptized. Now, 'with the technical means at the disposal of modern civilization, they are convinced that we could do better and do it more quickly. Let a Clovis be found for us and he will send all the French to Mass'. Gilson is not saying they would not go but denies that this would result in there being 'even one more Catholic'. As in the past, an institutionalization of Catholicism by the state leads only to 'the ruination of the faith'.[38]

> Perhaps we would have a minister, offices, officials, rules and bookkeeping, but we would not gain an atom of Catholic life and the Catholic order for which we are hoping because an order set up under the charge and guardianship of a government would always be relegated to the realm of dreams. There would be no hope of ever seeing it exist. […] [If Catholicism] is established or exists only as an institution, it is condemned to death as a religion. […] The Church does not win hearts through institutions, but rather institutions through hearts.[39]

Other Catholics in France believed that the present situation is 'only the accidental result of passing circumstances' and 'will pass away just as the circumstances which brought it about. For those who think so, France remains a Christian nation but ignores being so, and the faith asleep at the bottom of hearts awaits only a favorable occasion to awaken'. These Catholics advocate bringing moderate pressure to bear on the state 'so as to persuade it that the course it has followed is a false one and to try and make it give back to the Church with good grace the functions of which she has been dispossessed'. Gilson hopes and prays that they might be right but asks them 'to admit that another hypothesis is possible and imprudent to ignore'.[40] On this hypothesis,

> France, since the end of the 17th century, has been subjected to a furious operation of de-Christianization, first in the realm of thought and then of conscience undertaken at the outset by some of her most illustrious writers and thinkers, and afterwards by her politicians. Freemasonry, like nothing else, greatly increased the efficacy of this work whenever it could become the mistress of the state. If we add to this the mistakes that Catholics themselves have committed—the political, economic, and social compromises in which they sometimes unwisely have engaged, or

[37] Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique*, pp. 28-29/p. 29.
[38] Ibid., pp. 51-52/pp. 59-60.
[39] Ibid., p. 73, 52-53/pp. 90, 61-62.
[40] Ibid., pp. 31-32/pp. 32-34.

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> in which they still engage the Church—it will come as no surprise that an alert and skillful foe profiting from these errors has made Catholic France what she is today.[41]

Gilson found that the challenge of establishing a Catholic order has become all the more daunting since, according to Gilson,

> we are witnessing the finale of a unique experiment in our history and perhaps in the history of mankind: namely, that of a state that has been founded not only on the exclusion of Christianity but of all religion. […] The France of today is dying from having wanted to set itself up as a secular state, not only a stranger, but hostile, to every religious ideal.[42]

Attempting to ground the ideas of Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité in soil other than that which gave life to them, was, for Gilson, the root cause of the disease France was suffering from, a disease that has turned France into 'a mission country'.[43]

Gilson saw modern paganism penetrating France more deeply each day without Catholics even being aware of it. National education was pagan, and literature, journals, theatre, newspapers, and weeklies of all types 'perpetuate pagan propaganda around us where the mercenary exploitation of man's animal instincts is given free reign. Not only do they demoralize us in dechristianizing us, they also successfully dehumanize us'. Because of the need to escape such evil 'many youthful minds are submitting to the first preacher of revolt and abandoning themselves to the veneration of strength and power, regardless of the end to which it promises to lead'. Once habituated to immorality, young people become ripe for dictators as can be seen by the role they played in controlling German universities and supporting Hitler. France is 'at the crossroads: either to restore a true order, or to impose a communist or fascist dictatorship'.[44]

Gilson also provided a measured, but severe critique of adult Catholics who wishing to be absolutely 'up-to-date', join what has become a cult of youth, and completely abdicate their adult responsibility by prematurely treating children as adults and not the children they really are. Instead of the youth seeking wisdom from their elders, the process now has been reversed—'one of the strangest, most absurd and most harmful phenomena of our times'.[45]

By determining the conditions indispensable for the life of France, Gilson sought common ground across political and religious lines for establishing a Catholic order. Although the first condition of such an

[41] Ibid., pp. 31-32/p. 33.
[42] Ibid., pp. 41-42/pp. 45-46.
[43] Ibid., pp. 32, 42-43/pp. 47, 34.
[44] Ibid., pp. 33, 48-49/pp. 36, 54-55.
[45] Ibid., pp. 73-76/pp. 91-96.

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agreement might seem to be a definition of France, Gilson denied that is the case for two reasons:

> First, because France is a single, distinct entity and an individual, it cannot be defined; but above all because there was not, at the beginning of […] [its] history, a France which made the French, but rather a long series of Frenchmen who finished by making a France. If France is to endure, this type of Frenchmen must be perpetuated.[46]

Gilson submits that there has been only one, sole ideal that has ever been common to all true Frenchmen, whether Catholic, Protestant, Jew, or nonbeliever—it is humanism. This Gilson understands as

> a certain conception of nature and man [and a philosophical realism whose function] is to know things, discern order, and recognize values. […] [Gilson is] not saying that we must adhere to realism so that France may live, but that realism is true and, because it is true, it offers Frenchmen the possibility of uniting and agreeing by putting them face to face with an order of things independent of individual whims.[47]

Third Republic politicians faced an ongoing and impossible quest of finding some system of values capable of generating rational assent within the moral vacuum and instability caused by the 'regime of relative tolerance' prevalent in French schools and society.

For Gilson, philosophical realism makes clear that, as the Greeks never ceased to proclaim, man is the greatest of all things in nature. 'What causes the superiority of man is the fact that he is a rational being and, consequently, a free being. There is no reason without liberty, nor liberty without reason'. From this truth, proceed all morals along with the doctrine of virtues without which there is no true humanity. 'These are what have made France, and France is being demoralized because she is not teaching them anymore'. Gilson charged French national education with being devoid of philosophy, at least 'what all Catholic philosophy designates by the name philosophy'. French national education eliminated metaphysics which it considered reactionary because it inevitably posed 'problems about the soul or, worse still, about God'.[48]

To illustrate to what extent sociology had replaced philosophy in national education, Gilson recounted his experience as a member of an examining board for an undergraduate degree in philosophy. Gilson

[46] Ibid., p. 61/p. 74.

[47] Ibid., p. 62/pp. 74-75. 'From the first century down to the 17th, scholastic philosophy and theology has constantly been the basis of all French teachings in the universities and schools. Consequently, it is easy to see how the French mind had been modeled by that idea of a universal society which is based on a universal truth, and on the acceptance of the universal truth. […] In other words, the systematic force of truth is the unifying power of society and is the unit of society itself' ('Christian Social Philosophy', Toronto, October-December 1933, p. 45, SMCA, reprinted in Gilson, *O.C., I*, p. 278).

[48] Ibid., pp. 63, 126, 44 /pp. 76, 169, 49.

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was invited, in an examination on ethics, to ask a question. Despite many misgivings, he asked what the words 'virtue' and 'vice' mean. As a result:

> the unfortunate candidate was stupefied. He was expecting a question on the marriage law of the Boudry cannibals, on potlatch, or some other manner or custom of African tribes, and here I was going to speak about such rubbish as virtue. That was just not the game.[49]

For Gilson's humanist ideal to be restored in France with its morality indicating the order of things and man's place in that order, the teaching of the humanities must first be reinstituted. This includes the various sciences of our times, modern foreign languages, and especially Greek and Latin because what the ancients 'said of man is inseparable from the way in which they said it; their thoughts about life, morals, good and evil, the virtues and vices only have their full persuasive force when they are expressed as they themselves expressed them'.[50]

The Church recommends the humanities to Catholics because grace presupposes nature:

> Restoration of the natural order requires a nature to be restored; to save a man, one needs a man to be saved. Now it is not Descartes, nor Newton, nor Einstein who teaches us to know him, but Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. […] As for the modern humanities, have as many as you wish, but teach them via the ancient humanities. And the sciences? Have as many as possible; but let the sciences of nature serve to expand our notion of man and not submit him to nature.[51]

Gilson found little support among Catholics for the study of sacred science (scripture, theology, canon law, and Christian philosophy) possibly because they are seen as useless, or because of the view that there is nothing new to learn in these matters because everything has been said. But Gilson was inclined to believe that laymen do not think about such things at all, and he found this strange.

> The whole of Catholicism rests on these two pillars: the sacramental order by which the Christian participates in the life of grace, and the doctrine of the Church, by which he participates in the truth. Suppress the study and teaching of this doctrine, and Catholicism flounders; let them languish and its life itself is going to diminish. The sacred sciences are not only the professional knowledge which priests use, they are the living source of the education they give us which, in turn, we live. Why would we not give them the means to live?[52]

[49] Ibid., pp. 76-77/p. 63.
[50] Ibid., p. 80/p. 65.
[51] Ibid., p. 66/pp. 81-82.
[52] Ibid., p. 105/pp. 138-139.

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Gilson made it clear that 'Catholic education is not a state education received by Catholics. It is not a ready-to-wear garment, even less a well-cut piece of clothing made for someone else that we would approve of. It should be a tailor-made education, i.e., organized by Catholics for Catholics'.[53] Such education requires the coordination and organization of the various sciences in the light of theology while carefully respecting their specific nature:

> We cannot do without institutions which are devoted to the promotion of the study of the sacred sciences simply because their influence is exercised over all other studies. They inevitably give birth to a Christian worldview which a state that is completely neutral prides itself in ignoring.[54] [In fact,] the more Catholic a Catholic education is, the greater chance it will have of being respected and lasting. The more it limits its ambition in order to mirror public schools in the hope of being tolerated, the more it will lose its *raison d'être* even in its opponent's eyes, and the more it will hasten on to destruction. *Catholic education is not catholic enough; let it become so*. This applies to Catholics themselves—the more completely Catholic we are, the better we can serve France.[55]

For Gilson, to achieve freedom in teaching presupposed that Catholics understand the importance of uniting, organizing, and publically and collectively affirming their commitment to restore Christian values in their entirety. They can begin by taking seriously the competencies and qualifications of personnel required for teaching and for the creation of first-rate Catholic institutions of learning. Gilson heartily supported the return of religious congregations into private schools. But the guiding rule governing their return should be that

> no Catholic can be authorized to do what he would not do if he were not a Catholic. The sacrament of Holy Orders confers no more the ability to teach than the religious vocation qualifies one to care for the sick. One can be an excellent priest without being able to teach mathematics, physics, biology, history, or even Latin. […] [Gilson] never understood that apostasy was required of a priest to enter into public teaching, nor […] how a religious vocation or priestly ordination is a sufficient qualification for a person to enter teaching, even private teaching.[56]

The principle to be followed for those responsible for choosing professors may seem harsh, but it is simple:

[53] Ibid., pp. 103-104/p. 136.

[54] Ibid., p. 118/p. 157.

[55] Ibid., pp. 107, 124/pp. 141, 166. Historically, Gilson's own work bore out the truth of this recommendation: '[I]n spite of his unabashed Catholic loyalties, his work received a wider recognition in non-Catholic academic circles than the work of any other 20th-century Catholic intellectual' (Stanley L. Jaki, 'Introduction', Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists*, trans. Philip Trower (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), p. 11).

[56] Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique*, pp. 26, 34, 60/pp. 24, 36, 72.

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> [I]t consists in taking account of the fact that if a Catholic school is religiously a Catholic work, it is, technically, a school. And a school is organized primarily for the students. If the professors are religious or priests, their superiors will assign them that task most suitable, not for their spiritual advancement, but for their students' progress.[57]

If Catholics seek acceptance by those who do not share their faith, devotion cannot replace competence: 'We will only deserve equality when we strive for superiority'.[58] The theme of achieving excellence in Catholic education would haunt Gilson for the rest of his life.

According to Gilson, if Catholics need and want private schools, the burden of creating and supporting them will fall entirely on their shoulders. They will have to pay the tax that guarantees the upkeep of public schools they have the right not to use, while at the same time bearing the burden of an additional charge for maintaining private education.

The funding question is complex. Many Catholic households cannot afford private school tuitions, and Catholic Churches in France receive only modest donations from their parishioners. This leads to the policy issue of whether private schools should be able to claim a proportional part of the state's education appropriations. Why should private education not be included in the state's National Educational Budget just like any other? While Gilson recognized the legitimacy in principle of this proposal, he did not think it was desirable because of an entrenched suspicion regarding services provided by the state. More importantly, he feared that having the government even partially fund private education could seriously jeopardize the freedom of private education. It would give the state the right to inspect Catholic schools and risk its imposing requirements on them (e.g., teachers, curriculum, textbooks, etc.) which they could not in good conscience accept.[59]

Despite the complexity of church and state policy, personnel matters, and funding issues surrounding the complete freedom needed for Catholic education as well as the time and effort required to address them adequately, Gilson placed a priority on organizing and acting.

> [T]he best way to get liberty is to seize it; this demonstrates that we are worthy of it. So let us take as much of it as possible. When the state will confront a system of Catholic education organized according to its own methods, it will respect and perhaps fear it. And if all the Catholics in France stand firmly behind their schools, they will be in a better position to have all their rights recognized without having to pay for them with their freedom.[60]

[57] Ibid., pp. 129-130/p. 174.
[58] Ibid., p. 61/p. 73.
[59] Ibid., pp. 82, 79-80, 85-88/pp. 136, 100-101, 108-114.
[60] Ibid., pp. 93, 120-121/pp. 121-122, 161.

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The situation as Gilson saw it was clear. By forbidding itself to recognize any authority besides itself, the state becomes the master not only over its subjects' bodies but also over their souls which were formerly freed from Caesar by the Gospel. Catholics must now act and deny the state the right to enslave these souls again.

a. Reception

Comments on Gilson's work varied widely, largely depending on the particular reader's position on the ecclesial spectrum and the difficulty of neatly categorizing Gilson's thought. At times, he seems to belong 'to the camp of very conservative Catholics preaching unconditional submission to the hierarchy while creating a type of "Catholic city"' while, at other times, he seems to be 'an avant-garde Catholic sometimes critical of the hierarchy and a supporter of bold political action'.[61]

In May 1934, Fr. Boisselot complimented Gilson on the timeliness and clarity of his articles; Fr. Boisselot noted the extensive comments and appreciation Gilson's recommendations generated not only from readers of *Sept*, but from 'Catholicism as a whole'.[62] On the opposite side, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre—two prominent historians and friends of Gilson from Strasbourg where he taught from 1919–1921—criticized Gilson's work for being too philosophical and too religious. Bloch found the work 'curious, lively and particularly frightening' and alluded to a 'voluntary ignorance' on Gilson's part 'of everything that is both physical sciences and critical disciplines'. Waxing biblical, Bloch continued: Gilson was 'inclined to treat our pedagogical methods as those of whitened sepulchers', but Bloch granted that Gilson's pages on education warranted serious consideration 'by the most secular among us'.[63] For Lucien Febvre: 'The Gilson of *Pour un ordre catholique* […] is crazy. This is not Gilson. He should have left ten years ago. He would have given us his last good moments in Strasbourg'.[64] The newspaper *L'Action Française* did not go into detail and simply dismissed Gilson's effort as 'illogical'.[65]

The pro-rector of the Institut Catholic de Paris and editor of *La Croix* hailed Gilson's frankness and clarity, whereas Emmanuel Mounier agreed that Gilson's principles constituted a check on liberal anarchy

[61] Coutrot, *'Sept': un journal, un combat*, p. 72.

[62] Letter of P. Pierre Boisselot to Étienne Gilson, May 5, 1934 cited in Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 224.

[63] Letter of Marc Bloch to Lucien Febvre, February 11, 1935, *Correspodance Marc Bloch—Lucien Febvre* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 2, p. 209.

[64] Ibid., p. 261, Letter of Lucien Febvre to Marc Bloch, June 24, 1935.

[65] *L'Action Française*, May 26, 1935.

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and initial security against a totalitarian threat. On the other hand, Mounier voiced real 'deception' and 'fear' regarding Gilson's suggestions. The Catholic order, for Mounier, seemed to be driven by a 'position of class' and a 'right of center' political attitude that would breed resentment and tend to 'recreate two Frances'.[66] Claudel agreed with Gilson's blaming the parsimonious nature of French Catholics in explaining the difficulty in creating private schools.[67] Maritain had a few minor reservations, but overall was enchanted with Gilson's work: 'I admire the vigor and clarity with which you remind our brothers the Catholics in France of so many forgotten truths. Your book is filled with so many accurate comments. […] It is a Socratic work, a sting to stimulate the Athenians and the bishops'[68] Cardinal Baudrillart appreciated Gilson's 'very good' book 'full of truths', but faulted his criticizing Catholic schools for not doing what they contended was already in place or had been tried.[69] Gilson informed Fr. Phelan that '*Pour un ordre catholique* is very well received in Rome, up to and including Msgr. Pizzardo and the Holy Father, who are quite happy. It is being translated into Spanish and English'.[70]

In one of his articles published in *Sept*, Gilson used the phrase 'the cult of incompetence' to describe the practice he denounced in private schools of waving credentials or not using staff properly. This touched a nerve and generated trenchant critiques from French bishops. The Archbishop of Reims, Msgr. Suhard, even recommended to Fr. Bernadot that he provide Gilson some 'friendly supervision' on 'what should be said in secret' and what 'can be published in broad daylight'.[71] Gilson responded that he needed to feel free, and the controversy died down. He revised the title of his article to 'Competence and Good Will'[72] and continued to write for *Sept* while Msgr. Richaud,

[66] E. Mounier, 'Étienne Gilson: *Pour un ordre catholique*', *Esprit*, March 1935, pp. 959-964.

[67] Letter of Paul Claudel to Étienne Gilson, July 24, 1934, SMCA.

[68] Letter of Jacques Maritain to Étienne Gilson, January 4, 1935, Gilson & Maritain, *Correspondance*, pp. 122-123; Michel, 'Introduction', Gilson, *O.C., I*, pp. 15-16.

[69] *Les Carnets du Cardinal Alfred Baudrillart, 1932-1935* (Paris: Cerf, 2003), pp. 1079-1080.

[70] Letter of Étienne Gilson to Fr. Gerald Phelan, March 3, 1935, SMCA.

[71] Étienne Gilson, '*Le culte de l'incompétence*'. *Sept*, no 21, July 21, 1934, p. 2, reprinted in Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique*, pp. 94-97/pp. 122-126; '*Dossier des réactions dans Sept: Le 'culte de l'incompétence,' avec les réponses de Gilson*', Ibid./pp. 183-212; Boisselot, '*Notes sur l'histoire du Cerf* ', cited in Michel*, Étienne Gilson*, p. 342; Letter of Msgr. Suhard to P. Bernadot, August 14, 1934, cited in Michel*, Étienne Gilson*, p. 226.

[72] Étienne Gilson, '*Superstition de diplômes*', *Sept*, August 18, 1934, p. 2, reprinted in Gilson, *O.C., I*, pp. 531-533. In his retraction, Gilson wished to explain, not justify, how psychologically he came to use the original title of his article. He had something in mind for his article that he decided not to use; his mistake was not changing or eliminating at the same time the title which alone could make intelligible, and, if not justify, at least excuse it. Then Gilson recounted a story about the superior of a house of ecclesiastical teaching who met with

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in 1936, presented Gilson's suggestions on education to the Assembly of Cardinals and the Archbishops of France.[73]

Education remained one of Gilson's main interests which he revisited numerous times during his long career. After World War II, Gilson went beyond his analysis in *Pour un ordre catholique*. He further explored the defense of private education and threats to it in what he considered to be the pseudo rivalry between public and private education, and the need for a national education.[74]

b. Philosophical Underpinnings

Referring to Gilson's major political episode in the mid-1930s as 'first' or 'early' can be somewhat misleading since it finds Gilson not only chronologically mature—50 years old—but also at the height of his career. His articles in *Sept* reflected decades of teaching and lecturing in France and abroad that allowed him to write with authority on education. In addition, his forging two powerful tools—philosophical realism and the notion of Christian philosophy—provided the solid, philosophical foundation for those articles.

As anyone familiar with Gilson knows, he dogmatically affirmed St. Thomas Aquinas as the only philosopher who made him clearly realize the full metaphysical implications of the major philosophical problems.[75] Gilson never thought that this lessened his intellectual freedom for he always wanted to be free to agree with anyone he thought was right. As a counter to the disease of relativism and subjectivism that infects and incapacitates human thought, Gilson published a collection of five essays written between 1931 and 1935 which used the philosophy of St. Thomas to demonstrate the primacy of the real over the conceptual.[76] And 1932 saw the appearance of Gilson's masterpiece, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*,[77] which showed that Christian philosophy embodies a realism and is philosophy *par excellence*.

two young professors back from Rome where they were awarded their diplomas. One came back as a Doctor in Canon Law, the other as a Doctor of Theology. 'How were they used? The Doctor of Theology was named Professor of Canon Law, and the Professor of Theology was named Professor of Canon Law' (ibid., p. 531).

[73] '*Une Déclaration de Msgr. Richaud*', *Sept*, July 17, 1936; Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 227.

[74] Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 227-228.

[75] At the same time, Gilson maintained that St. Thomas' doctrine was not the only viable human source of philosophical knowledge and true theology. For Jean Lacroix's reservations regarding Gilson's being guilty of a Thomistic 'exclusivism' and references to Gilson's works and correspondence clearly showing that was never the case, see Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 264-265.

[76] Gilson, *Methodical Realism*.

[77] Trans. A.H.C. Downes (New York: Scribners, 1936).

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In *Pour un ordre catholique*, Gilson mentions Christian philosophy only twice in passing, but it deserves at least brief discussion given its close relationship to Christian political engagement.

'Catholics First!', the title of the second part of *Pour un ordre catholique*, served as Gilson's retort to the secularism of the state and to Maurass' slogan 'Politics First!' As indicated above, Maurras propounded a natural politics, which did not exclude the supernatural and served as a common ground for a Christian society as well as a pagan society. Gilson disagreed; he argued that since Catholicism is only fully found within grace, its methods can never be identical with those of a natural politics that does not rise to the order of grace.

Gilson always maintained that 'true philosophy, taken absolutely and in itself, owes all its truth to its rationality and to nothing other than its rationality'. He did not think that this precluded 'a Christian exercise of reason' and called the concrete historical situation of Christians engaging in philosophy, 'Christian philosophy'. He described it generically as 'every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders of reason and faith formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable aid to reason'.[78] It can be shown as a matter of history, he argued, that by being Christian, philosophy becomes more rational—hence his abiding reluctance to isolate philosophy from Christianity. Gilson never denied that this could be done, but thought the responsibility for doing so rests on the shoulders of the thinker engaged in it, and that such philosophy risks losing rational benefits by not being guided by a theology. Because revelation conditions and is a prerequisite for the exercise of philosophy, the respective orders of grace and nature are also made clear: grace always precedes nature and perfects it. This, likewise, applies to politics. So, any attempts to develop a politics seeking to define itself prior to its Christian status is, according to Gilson, futile. The true process is the inverse.

Only a Christian philosophy allows for a proper understanding of the human being and his last end or purpose for which he was created. This, in turn, assures the natural perfection of which humans are capable while orienting them towards the supernatural end where the Church leads them. Whether it is speculative or practical, thought stimulated by revelation makes possible Christianity's flexible, continual adaptation over time into the societies in which it lives. Furthermore, if Christian philosophy is indeed philosophy in its Christian state and if politics is only conceivable in the changing but necessary framework of Christianity, it is only because nature is itself in grace. In other words, since man's ultimate end is of a supernatural order and since disorder affects human nature, man's natural capacities cannot establish an

[78] Ibid., pp. 12, 37, 40. For Gilson's growth in understanding Christian philosophy, see Armand Maurer, 'Translator's Introduction', Étienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993), pp. xiv–xx.

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adequate moral order and politics.[79] Only by abstraction and not without loss, can anyone isolate a nature in the current state where it is exercised and corrupted because of original sin. This inevitably leaves a 'pure' philosopher (if such a person whose thought is not influenced by any cultural conditions exists!) unsatisfied, but a natural order cannot be established before first taking into account the supernatural order.

Some Thomists and theologians have argued that nature 'founds' the supernatural, whereas for Fr. de Lubac, the supernatural is the source, meaning, and ultimate goal of nature. A Christian political vision does not establish itself in a secular theory which claims to supply the essence of human nature, but rather, appeals to the 'non-foundation' of grace. Gilson agreed with and supported Fr. de Lubac's position that there is no such thing as 'pure nature'.[80] For Gilson, 'The elimination of revelation for the benefit of the rational does not progress without a parallel elimination of the supernatural for the benefit of the natural'.[81] Radically separating nature and grace and according autonomy and independence to nature concludes only with a secularization of society and philosophy.

> It is not a question of knowing whether democracy should teach the need for a supernatural order, but, if resting on virtue, it makes sense for it to undermine faith in a supernatural order, which requires and founds virtue. Grace presupposes nature and, to be able to fill it with its gifts, grace forbids it to corrupt itself. The purely naturalist morality that some want to put in its place, when they still care about having one, soon makes them forget nature and no longer even know what it is. For an areligious nature without grace or sin, everything that exists is in nature and, consequently, natural. Everything is, therefore, good or everything is bad, or rather nothing is one or the other. In the absence of any distinction between the normal and the pathological, we only find 'mores', ways of acting which are all equivalent, and none of which expresses the corruption of a vice or the perfection of a virtue. If democracy is in danger, it is because by fighting against Catholicism, our pseudo-democrats had sawed off behind them the branch on which they liked to perch.[82]

[79] Étienne Gilson, '*La démocratie en danger*', *Sept*, no. 2, March 10, 1934, p. 3, reprinted in Étienne Gilson, *O. C., I*, p. 480.

[80] Etienne Gilson, '*L'humanisme de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*', *Atti del V Congresso Internazionale di filosofia Napoli 5-9 maggio 1924* (Napoli: Perrella, 1925), pp. 976-989 ; Letter of Étienne Gilson to Fr. de Lubac, December 17, 1961, Étienne Gilson & Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Lettres de Monsieur Étienne Gilson au Père de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), pp. 45-46. Fr. de Lubac's classic work, *Surnaturel*, can be seen as a sequel to Gilson's defense of Christian philosophy.

[81] Étienne Gilson, '*La tradition Française et la Chrétienté*', *Virgile*, I, 1931, pp. 53-87, reprinted in Gilson, *O.C., I*, pp. 169-188, at p. 180. See Humbrecht, '*Étienne Gilson et la politique*', pp. 278-282.

[82] Étienne Gilson, '*La Démocratie en danger*', *Sept*, no. 2, March 10, 1934, p. 3, reprinted in Gilson, O.C., I, pp. 479-481, at p. 480.

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c. Relevance

Gilson's articles in *Sept* (including the 35 he did not select for *Pour un ordre catholique*) as well as his other political journal and newspaper articles, lectures, and courses from the mid-1920s through the late 1930s deserve continued study primarily because their extraordinary breadth of thought bears directly on issues confronting Catholics today. If we look at the United States, for example, survey data from 2019 reveal several alarming findings regarding an understanding of the faith and the Catholic Church membership. Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ.[83] And more than half of U.S. Catholics (56%) said abortion should be legal in all or most cases.[84]

In the ten years since 2009, the number of Catholic adults decreased from 23% to 20%. Meanwhile, all subsets of the religiously unaffiliated population—a group also known as religious 'nones'—have seen their numbers swell.[85] In 2019, the bishops considered how to get 'nones', particularly young people, back to the Catholic Church as the second-most important issue currently facing U.S. Church leaders. A 2015 survey showed that about half (52%) of all U.S. adults who were raised Catholic have left the church at some point in their lives. A significant minority of them returned, but most (40% of all those raised Catholic) have not.[86] According to one bishop, the primary reason for those leaving is that they simply no longer believe the church's teachings, primarily its doctrinal beliefs. In his opinion, this is 'a bitter fruit of the dumbing-down of our faith' as it has been taught in catechesis and apologetics.[87] Of course, multiple factors come into play in explaining these findings, but the need for a new apologetics and for substantial improvement in catechetical outreach clearly warrant taking seriously Gilson's clarion call to establish first-rate Catholic institu-

[83] Gregory A. Smith, 'Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ', *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center, August 2, 2019 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/ (accessed April 20, 2021).

[84] Dalia Fahmy, '8 key findings about Catholics and abortion', *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center Survey, October 20, 2020 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/20/8-key-findings-about-catholics-and-abortion/ (accessed April 20, 2021).

[85] Pew Research Center, 'In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace', October 17, 2019 https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/ (accessed April 20, 2021).

[86] Caryle Murphy, 'Half of U.S. adults raised Catholic have left the church at some point', *Fact Tank*, September 15, 2015 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/15/half-of-u-s-adults-raised-catholic-have-left-the-church-at-some-point/ (accessed April 20, 2021).

[87] Catholic News Service, 'Bishop Robert Barron: Reach Out to "Nones" or Young People Who Have Lost Affiliation', *The Dialog*, June 12, 2019 https://thedialog.org/national-news/bishop-robert-barron-reach-out-to-nones-or-young-people-who-have-lost-affiliation/ (accessed April 20, 2021).

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tions of learning, institutions which have no room for mediocrity, teach the humanities, and are guided by sound theology and philosophy.[88] Only such institutions can effectively meet the challenges of developing a new evangelization today to produce courageous, well instructed, Catholics who are not fooled by shoddy reasoning, inaccurate history, slogans, emotions, one-sided media, or coercive shaming campaigns. Moreover, these institutions of learning will, as Gilson predicted, gain the respect of others precisely because of their unambiguous identity as being Catholic, not somewhat Catholic or Catholic in name only.

On a related front, Gilson's insights and recommendations regarding the fight for religion within a secular state also are needed today more than ever to combat the vicious and sinister war being waged against Western civilization and the Judeo-Christian tradition. I am referring to the American-style 'woke' ideology which is intent on delegitimizing and undermining society by fomenting chaos and violence throughout the United States.

Michel Foucault, the thinker most readily identified with 'woke' ideology, agreed with Friedrich Nietzsche that God is dead and denied any objective grounding for moral values. On this view, human life is reduced to a ruthless power struggle in which the strong create their own values and dominate the weak. Foucault's works of 'intellectual archeology' dug underneath the common agreement on incarceration, sexuality, madness, order, knowledge, language, etc. His works exposed so called 'objective moral principles' as espoused in these areas by secular society or the Church as nothing more than means by which the powerful retained power. Further work by Foucault's disciples in the Western academy examined issues of colonialism, gender, homosexuality, and race. Not surprisingly, what they found in all these areas was a struggle for power between the oppressors and the oppressed. Once awakened to this reality (woke), efforts to instigate confrontation between the powerless and the powerful eventually spilled out of academia onto city streets in the form of demonstrations, looting, arson, and murder.[89]

'Woke' ideology views inequality as an intolerable evil caused by pervasive racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like. It defines good and evil, explains life and the world, and tells us what we should aspire to and how we should act. It has become the pseudo-religion of

[88] In the 1960s, Gilson recognized that further work would be needed in Thomistic metaphysics, which in the future will depend on the existence or absence of theologians with training in the hard sciences. St Thomas's metaphysics could no longer take its starting point from the Aristotelian or Thomistic world and had to start from current understandings of physics. See Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, 232; Stanley L. Jaki, 'Gilson and Science', in *Saints, Sovereigns, and Scholars: Studies in Honor of Frederic D. Wilhelmsen*, ed. R.A. Herrera, James J. Lehrberger, and M.E. Bradford (New York: P. Lang, 1993), pp. 42–43.

[89] Bishop Robert Barron, '"Wokeism" in France: The Chickens Coming Home to Roost', *Word on Fire*, February 18, 2021 https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/wokeism-in-france-the-chickens-coming-home-to-roost/29871/ (accessed April 20, 2021).

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the Western metropolitan elite and is growing faster than Christianity. At its core, it is avowedly secular, anti-Christian, profoundly anti-Catholic, and against God and the order He created. Since 'wokeism' is a political religion, the redemption it promises is this-worldly and accomplished through the state. It entails strict equality of material and social outcomes across all social groups even if the individual must be sacrificed to the needs of the state. Some of the basic 'woke' issues such as actual injustice or racism can be shared by Catholics, but most cannot. Pre-born babies, for example, cannot be sacrificed to 'quality of life'. Nor can Catholics accept sections of the official woke creed which include support for the LGBT agenda, dismantling the traditional family, and denying fundamental differences between men and women. All dissent from the 'woke agenda' must be 'cancelled', i.e., dissenters should no longer be supported, but rather boycotted or attacked for having done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. Recently, 'wokeness' has attained such a position of dominance and acceptance that significant social institutions and businesses now pay tribute to it. When the social machine becomes all in all, the Church has two choices: either assimilate or be crushed. Because all historical institutions are tainted, She, like the rest, must be radically transformed on ideological grounds.[90]

Some believe defending neutral values such as free speech and free inquiry will reverse 'wokeism'. That defense is necessary, but insufficient to counter such an intolerant, militant movement. If Gilson is correct, and I think he is, a meaningful defense like the one he advocated during the French Third Republic will require organizing, acting, publicly manifesting support for freedom, and seizing freedom before losing it. At the same time, Catholics must defend a different and sounder set of ideas, a social consensus that is non-utopian. This should be based on two of Gilson's key ideas. First is Gilson's contention that a secular or natural politics which is not situated in the context of Christianity will never be adequate to the human condition.[91] Second is the notion that only a true humanism—one that recognizes man as a free creature who can know things, discern order, and recognize values—will generate support across political and religious lines precisely because only such a humanism is true. As such, it confronts us with an order of things independent of us, an order which shows that reality is not a social construct. An elaboration of these points will go a long way in exposing the intellectual bankruptcy of 'wokeism' and showing

[90] James Kalb, 'Wokeness and Catholicism', *The Catholic World Report*, April 14, 2021 https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/12/02/wokeness-and-catholicism/ (accessed April 20, 2021).

[91] Gilson, '*L'humanisme de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*', pp. 976-989; '*Philosophie medieval et humanisme*', *Association Guillaume Budé, Actes du Congrès de Nice, 24-27 avril, 1935* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1935), pp. 340-358.

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it for what it is—a materialistic ideology, like Marxism, which strives not to seek truth, but to advance a political agenda to gain political power.

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