

REFLECTIONS ON A CRITIQUE OF
JACQUES MARITAIN

NOT a little interest has been aroused by the publication, in a recent issue of the *Tablet* (18/8/1945), of a review by Mr. T. S. Gregory of M. Maritain's *Christianity and Democracy*. Even more hostile in tone than an earlier critique (see *Tablet* 18/11/1944) of the author's *The Rights of Man*, its manifest aim is to belittle, if not wholly to discredit, the reputation of the distinguished French philosopher.⁽¹⁾ Maritain has never escaped criticism even from his warmest admirers; they have noted a tendency to over-simplify complex historical issues, an occasionally unpersuasive manner of discoursing as it were from a great height, an uncertainty of judgment in aesthetic and literary matters. But these and possibly other limitations have done little to diminish their respect for him as a noble Christian intelligence and perhaps the ablest metaphysician of our day. His writings now have their recognized place as source-books of modern Thomism, to which professors of theology and philosophy are accustomed to refer their students. For this reason, if for no other, Mr. Gregory's remarks merit serious consideration.

The worth of a political essay may fairly be judged on its own account, without reference to its author's views as expressed elsewhere; but when it is made the occasion for a radical attack upon a philosopher's system of thought, we have the right to expect from the critic familiarity with the philosophical standpoint in question. Mr. Gregory offers little to justify this expectation; he knows that Maritain has somehow achieved considerable fame, but betrays no inkling of that upon which it is based. To accuse a thinker whose declared position is that of a critical realist of employing "a type of logic which used to be called nominalism" must have a bewildering effect upon a reader acquainted with the body of the philosopher's work. Bewilderment gives place to serious misgiving when a writer who, following St. Thomas, "s'oppose . . . à un monisme pur comme celui de Hegel"⁽²⁾ is charged with "Hegelian doctrine". When finally there is fathered upon him "undiluted Rousseau", one is left completely at a loss.⁽³⁾ The solution might be that Maritain has been found guilty of self-contradiction and inconsistency, now disclosing themselves under a searching analysis; but readers of Mr Gregory's critique may be allowed to form another opinion as to the real source of the mental confusion.

It would be unfair to tax Mr Gregory with deliberate misinter-

(1) "Maritain Debunked" is the sub-heading aptly provided by 'Jotter' of the *Catholic Herald* (24/8/1945); though he cannot refrain from observing: "It was startling to read last week in the urbane columns of the *Tablet* so sharp an attack on Maritain as T. S. Gregory wrote lengthily reviewing his *Christianity and Democracy*".

(2) Maritain, "*Les Degrés du Savoir*", p. 416.

(3) Comprehensive refutation of this may be found in the third essay, on Rousseau, in Maritain's *Trois Réformateurs*; see also pp. 14-15 of the book under review.

pretation; but he labours under two disadvantages which incapacitate him in the present instance from the work of objective criticism. He has an obvious intellectual antipathy towards Maritain's whole method of approach and he is concerned to argue a case of his own. In consequence, by a process of selective quotation and omission, there emerges, not a balanced assessment of what the philosopher has to say, but a convenient aunt-sally to be effectively disposed of under the blows of hostile criticism. Being something of a philosopher himself, Mr. Gregory has a number of valid points to make; but his argument is marred by a regrettable querulousness and ungenerosity of tone. When confronted by sentiments with which he can scarcely disagree, he can only comment: "This is all very fine. We can all play that game with language". Similarly, with reference to Maritain's differentiation of "equality" from "equalitarianism": "Again very fine; but what does it mean? The word is common currency enough—almost the favourite tender of politicians for applause". He must surely be accorded the unique distinction, not only of accusing Maritain of playing with words, but of challenging his intellectual integrity. Remarking that the author is writing in America, Mr. Gregory observes, "it may be that a courteous guest likes to say what his kind host likes to think". The imputation of motive could hardly be more explicit.

The impression that Mr. Gregory is out to confute his adversary at all costs is heightened by such a sentence as the following: "M. Maritain has too much of Gladstone, too little of the Pope". Where is the evidence for Maritain's Gladstonian sympathies? That statesman is nowhere cited or referred to. On the other hand, Pope Pius XI is quoted explicitly twice (p. 19 and p. 57-58) and the whole essay might be considered as an application, not necessarily valid in every particular, of the Papal teaching on the Natural Law.⁽⁴⁾ Again, where is the aptness in such final condemnatory flourishes as that there is "one name under Heaven by which we may be saved", and "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him"? Is it seriously to be supposed that Maritain disagrees with these elementary Catholic truths? Within the limits of his method he has argued most cogently for them himself. Mr. Gregory more than once insinuates the charge of unorthodoxy and compromising the Faith. It is a pity; for the role of inquisitor and heresy-hunter is not one which he has the right to assume with any confidence.

Having seen something of its method, we may now briefly consider the substance of the criticism. Mr. Gregory's chief objection is directed against Maritain's finding validity in the natural aspirations of man, apart from the direct influence of the Church. With the idea of an *anima naturaliter Christiana*, despite an impressive weight of authority in its support, it appears he will have nothing to do. He thinks Maritain to be in error in placing any hope in what

(4) For a convenient summary of this—Mr. Gregory would do well to take note!—see the Index to Fr. Philip Hughes's *The Popes' New Order*, p. 224.

he calls the "secular conscience"⁽⁵⁾ and "evangelical inspiration" on the natural plane. Mr. Gregory rightly holds (in common with Maritain, though he is apparently unaware of their agreement) that there is no good to be found in man which does not come from God, no possibility of salvation apart from Christ and supernatural faith; but he seems also to maintain that without God's grace man is incapable of acting well. This will hardly do. The Church's teaching on the dire effects of Original Sin must be supplemented by the principle: *potest tamen homo quaedam bona (naturalia) etiam sine gratia agere.*⁽⁶⁾ In his earlier critique Mr. Gregory commits himself to the following: "The sacrament of penance, for example, is not a *better* method than Platonism, or 'the habitual vision of greatness', or social security, for getting rid of sin: it is the only method, and without it there would be nothing but damnation, and a chaotic drift thither". Not to put too fine a point upon it, it may be remarked that no Catholic theologian could be found to give his *nihil obstat* to that sentence.

Can it be that a number of Mr. Gregory's difficulties have their source in his unwitting retention of a view of Original Sin derived from another tradition? At any rate, he might profitably give his attention to the contrast between the Catholic and Lutheran standpoints, which is a commonplace of the Church's theology and the implications of which are clearly in Maritain's mind. What, for example, does he make of the thesis of St. Thomas—not, it may be conjectured, one of his favourite authors—that "*primum . . . bonum naturae nec tollitur nec diminuitur per peccatum*"?⁽⁷⁾ Neither St. Thomas nor the teaching Church underrates the grave effects of man's Fall, but her doctrine on the point is more discriminating than perhaps Mr. Gregory appreciates.

Maritain's conception of the remotely Christian aspirations of the "secular conscience" and of "evangelical inspiration" behind certain trends of contemporary thought should occasion no difficulty to the instructed Catholic. The Church has recognised the possibility of those outside her fold, in invincible ignorance, leading a life so naturally good as to reach, under God's grace, to eternal salvation.⁽⁸⁾ Might not a life so led, in fidelity to the natural law divinely inscribed on the hearts of all men, be looked upon as dictated by the "secular conscience"? Since such a movement of the soul must be influenced by the Spirit of Christ—"No man cometh to the Father but by me" (St. John, xiv, 6)—surely we may fairly speak in this context of "evangelical

(5) Though here again Mr. Gregory reveals his unconscious unfairness. Maritain almost invariably qualifies the phrase "secular conscience" with the words "if it does not veer to barbarism" (So, with almost tiresome iteration, on pp. 34, 35, 36, 37). This qualifying clause nowhere appears in his critic's citations!

(6) *Denzinger*, Index systematicus, VII d.

(7) *Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 85, art. 1.

(8) *Denzinger*, 1677.

inspiration". Whether or not a truly democratic polity has ever in fact existed, it is curious that Mr. Gregory should be so reluctant to admit that the democratic principle, with its insistence on human freedom and the value of the individual person, owes anything to the Gospel. The ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity, whatever we may think of the attempts at their embodiment in the modern world, can claim ample support from the New Testament.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Gregory has such little taste for nice, though highly significant, distinctions. "Men are not so subtle as M. Maritain". No doubt; but those who read a philosopher, his critics most of all, must be prepared for subtleties. A metaphysician, who is concerned with the unchanging essence of things, and a moralist, writing with a view to man as he should be, is not to be confuted by rhetorical appeals to history and concrete "facts". Unless, of course, the only philosophy we recognize be pure empiricism. But here again Mr. Gregory is in difficulties. "... politics is not an abstract science. You cannot say anything worth saying in politics *a priori*"; though he adds, somewhat bafflingly, "that is why politics demands a metaphysic and cannot keep sane without one". Politics may well not be an abstract science, but political philosophy, which is the subject of Maritain's essay, in some sense must be. Maritain is attempting to propound the desired metaphysic, yet he is to be censured because "his political doctrines are abstractions". Can Mr Gregory square the circle and provide us with a non-abstract metaphysic?

It may be that his effort to achieve this *tour de force* is the explanation of the embarrassment produced by his writing in the minds of those familiar with the *philosophia perennis* of the Church. His dialectic fluctuates between the planes of philosophy and history with bewildering rapidity. "Alas, that history does not answer to the vision of the seer", writes Mr. Gregory in his earlier critique, "that in fact positive law so often takes on the *force* of law without imposing itself on the conscience. . . . The theologians of Salamanca pronounce it unlawful for Spaniards to conquer the Indians; but the Spaniards conquer them all the time". And the moral? That men don't always behave as they should; they sometimes disobey their preceptors. Surely Maritain might have been credited with taking account of such a possibility. It is good for the philosopher to be something of an historian, and the historian a philosopher, but philosophy is one thing and history another. A facile and premature synthesis of the two ends only in confusion. *Distinguer pour unir*, the title of perhaps the greatest of Maritain's works, supplies a principle of which his critic might profitably take note. "Whatever reason may deduce from the specific definition of man 'as such' and his rights 'as such', the empirical situation at any given moment is always laden with sin, and for sin there is but one redemption". This is a characteristic example of Mr. Gregory's looseness of thought. It is not "sin", but man, both "as such" and in his "empirical situation", who is redeemed. All three ele-

ments of the problem—sin, man, the concrete situation in which he finds himself—must be carefully distinguished and analysed before anything to the point can be said of the Catholic doctrine of redemption. Simply to subsume "man" under the notion of "sin" is to lead nowhere, except perhaps to Lutheranism.

Mr. Gregory's fundamental difficulty, however, lies in the inhospitality of his own mind to that of Maritain. Nor was it to be expected that a tradition of Oxford eclecticism and Protestant Non-conformity could easily assimilate an intelligence trained over long years to move with assurance in the high places of Catholic philosophical and theological thought. Mr. Gregory's epistemology, his idea of the process of "abstraction", his "metaphysic", appear to have little in common with these notions as learnt at the feet of St. Thomas. Students of the *Doctor Communis* of the Church, as also perhaps the normal reader unhampered by the sophistications of an alien philosophy, will notice significant phrases in Maritain's essay, unobserved or unheeded by his critic. They will note, for example, his care to preserve intact the doctrinal content of Catholicism, "a Christianity, which is irreducibly formed in its structure and doctrine" (p. 21), "the irreducible division that it involves on the dogmatic and religious plane" (p. 26), his careful distinction between "Christianity as a religious creed and road to eternal life" ("a treasure of divine truth sustained and propagated by the Church") and "Christianity as leaven in the social and political life of nations and as bearer of the temporal hope of mankind" (p. 25).

Mr. Gregory, unbecomingly zealous to withdraw the heretical mote from his brother's eye, should have pondered such sentences as these before allowing himself to become "weary of distinguished converts whose medicine for fallen mankind is scrupulously coated with the doctrine that the Church must learn from unbelievers the elementary truth which she has never failed to proclaim and which heresy has never failed to compromise". The Church, as "a treasure of divine truth", has nothing to learn from the heretics; but may not Catholics strive to assimilate everything of value in the temporal order, from whatever source it comes? St Paul would seem to impose such a task upon us: "For the rest, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever modest, whatsoever just, whatsoever holy, whatsoever lovely, whatsoever of good fame, if there be any virtue, if any praise of discipline: think on these things" (Philippians iv, 8).

It would be easy to illustrate further how widely Mr. Gregory's critique misses the mark; but enough has perhaps been said to justify regret that he should have been urged to embark on it at all. He has his own contribution to offer, a talent too considerable to be placed at the service of any sectional interest within the Church; but it is hidden rather than revealed in crossing swords with an acknowledged master of the tradition and technique of Catholic philosophy. Here in England our intellectual treasury is

not so over-endowed with riches that we can afford to reject largesse from across the Channel. It was therefore painful to find our leading Catholic weekly, in so many respects appreciative of what is best, lending itself to an ill-considered attack upon a distinguished co-religionist. We have more than sufficient to occupy us in bearing witness to the truth without picking an idle quarrel with a man better qualified than most to further the common cause. Good taste alone should have prompted a different treatment of the French Ambassador to the Holy See, who has merited, from so discerning an observer as Etienne Gilson, the honour of being described as "the living incarnation of Christian France" (*La Vie Intellectuelle*, March, 1945, p. 38).

Whatever the gifts of our English Catholic writers, none of them, if a personal opinion may be allowed, can approach Maritain for depth of insight and sustained intellectual power. His capacity as a philosopher, which has gained him high esteem in the world of contemporary thought, combined with an assured grasp of the great principles of the Church's theology, enable him to throw a light upon many of our most urgent problems to which only perversity could close its eyes. His elucidation of the relations between the individual person and society as a whole, of the interplay between the spiritual and temporal spheres, of the nature of Christian philosophy, not to mention his occasional essays on ascetical and mystical theology, have no parallel in our native Catholic literature, clerical or lay. We have our own traditions and processes of thought; that is why many are now turning for guidance—though perhaps a little too much in the spirit of *laudatores temporis acti*—to Cardinal Newman. But, if reliance is to be placed in a single writer, it may be doubted whether even he is as illuminating a guide to the world-view of Catholicism as Jacques Maritain.

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NOTE—Dom Aelred Graham's article was sent in for publication before M. Maritain's own reply appeared in *The Tablet*, 13:xi:45.

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ERRATUM

In the last issue of BLACKFRIARS (October) p. 383 line 6, for "inductive" read "reductive"