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## Introduction from "Maritain and America"

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## INTRODUCTION

### I Prologue

The French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) left war-torn Europe for America in 1940 for what was to be a brief visit. As things turned out, he took academic appointments in New York and Princeton and, excluding his three year tenure as French ambassador to the Vatican after the war, ended up living in the United States until 1960. Maritain's work on political philosophy written during this period (*The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, *Christianity and Democracy*, *The Person and the Common Good*, *Man and the State*, and *Reflections on America*) evidence a cheerful enthusiasm for the American political experiment in liberal democracy. But why, one wonders, was Maritain so optimistic about the religious and political potential of America? It has certainly never been in vogue for European intellectuals to fawn over America, particularly not French ones. Maritain did have good luck and found favorable reception among the most elite universities during his exile, but still his critical reflections on American ethical and political life found throughout the writings of his American period are far more than the unthinking applause of a grateful refugee.

The richest and most intellectually elaborate part of Maritain's work on America is found in his presentation of the unique relationship between religion, specifically Christianity, and the political liberalism found in the United States. Maritain proposes that the American political experiment exemplifies a "secular democratic faith" that organizes temporal, political life, yet without abandoning the super-temporal, spiritual dimension of the Christian faith. American democratic society is able to cling to its Christian heritage without excluding other creeds or privileging churches with unwarranted political power, according to Maritain. America is also more strictly secular than many European countries in its original distinction between church and state, yet without drifting toward a wholly non-religious form of cultural secularism. This unique harmony between things human and divine had been struck in the original documents of the country's founding and was still reverberating, Maritain thought, in

the religious and political life of the postwar period that he experienced firsthand.

When faced with the liberal “achievements” of modern political life (e.g. representative democracy, human rights, the ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity), one is forced to ask how this new historical epoch came about. To answer this question requires that one tell some sort of story. Was the Enlightenment’s break with the past responsible for this new era in human history? Or are the traditional resources of Greek and Roman philosophy, coupled with the revealed resources of Jewish and Christian traditions, responsible for the relative achievements in human flourishing found in modern democratic society? Is modernity a story about the unfolding development of the self-consciousness of human freedom, as Hegel would have it? Or has the age of modern democratic society only been made possible by the Christian heritage of the West and will it be lost insofar as living Christian faith disappears?

Maritain argued that modern democratic society is a human achievement, yet it is also only made possible by the Christian origins of democratic ideals. He inherited the notion from his teacher, Henri Bergson, that modern democratic society is a temporal, “secular” expression of true Christian spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there is both an intellectual component—in the sense of historical inheritance—as well as a spiritual component that animates political society through the vitality of faith. That is, democratic society is the secular expression of the deep Christian recognition of universal human dignity and fraternal love summarized in the scriptural exhortation to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Maritain calls the Christian roots of modern democratic society (both intellectual and spiritual), the evangelical inspiration of authentic democracy.<sup>2</sup> By “evangelical,” Maritain is appealing not to a group of church denominations, but to a universal sense of the Christian Gospel message enshrined in the double commandment of love and the life and work of Christ. Maritain notes that the achievements of modern democratic society—such as the consent of the governed, respect for the rights of people, and proper

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy & The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

concern for the common good—are all rooted in a certain transcendent conception of the human person that exceeds the Enlightenment rationalism of thinkers like Kant and Rousseau and has its source in the heritage of Christian thought as well as the animating spirit of the Christian concept of universal neighborly love. In his work on political philosophy, *Christianity and Democracy*, written just after World War II, and very early on in his sojourn to North America, Maritain writes:

Not only does the democratic state of mind stem from the inspiration of the Gospel, but it cannot exist without it. To keep faith in the forward march of humanity despite all temptations to despair of man that are furnished by history, and particularly contemporary history; to have faith in the dignity of the person and of common humanity, in human rights and in justice—that is, in essentially spiritual values; to have, not in formulas but in reality, the sense of and respect for the dignity of the people, which is a spiritual dignity and is revealed to whoever knows how to love it; to sustain and revive the sense of equality without sinking into a leveling equalitarianism; to respect authority, knowing that its wielders are only men, like those they rule, and derive their trust from the consent or the will of the people whose vicars or representatives they are; to believe in the sanctity of law and in the efficacious virtue... of political justice in the face of the scandalous triumphs of falsehood and violence; to have faith in liberty and fraternity, an heroic inspiration and an heroic belief are needed which fortify and vivify reason, and which none other than Jesus of Nazareth brought forth in the world.<sup>3</sup>

This passage illustrates Maritain's thorough going emphasis on the continuity between modern democratic society and its Christian heritage through highlighting the complementary relationship between faith and reason expressed in the interdependence of the temporal and spiritual domains of human life. This emphasis on the complementarity of Christianity and modern democratic society runs throughout Maritain's work during his American period.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

Since the end of Maritain's exile in America (1960), there has been a popular trend in Christian philosophy and theology in this country toward a much less optimistic appraisal of liberal democratic society, recently dubbed the "new traditionalism" by Jeffrey Stout in his book *Democracy and Tradition*. These thinkers complain that modern democratic society is morally and spiritually empty, rooted solely in a self-sufficient humanism and anti-religious form of secularism born from Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>4</sup> The preeminent exponents and most influential authors in this new form of antimodernism, as Stout narrates it, are Alasdair MacIntyre, a Roman Catholic philosopher, Stanley Hauerwas, a Methodist theologian, and John Milbank, an Anglican theologian. Rather than narrate modernity and the relative achievements of liberal democratic society as part of the Judeo-Christian heritage, as Maritain does, the tone of the new traditionalism is much more apologetic and combative. The goal of the new traditionalism is to return to a coherent premodern moral tradition, such as Augustinian Thomism, from the ruin and fragmentation of liberal modernity. These authors hope to rescue modern democratic society from its own dangerous amnesia by emphasizing the dependence of all rationality upon tradition. The method is no longer that of reconciliation and intellectual alliance with secular, liberal modernity, but rather that of "apologetic out-narration," as John Milbank puts it.<sup>5</sup> The goal of apologetic out-narration is to reveal the sandy, even "nihilistic" foundation of liberal modernity, which is simply the social expression of the Enlightenment project's antitraditionalism.<sup>6</sup> The age of secular liberalism is not the social expression of Christian faith, according to these thinkers; it is rather a narcissistic form of anthropocentric humanism that is doomed to individualism and isolation.

One may legitimately wonder whether Maritain's optimism about the complementary relationship between Christianity and modern democratic society is still tenable today, over fifty years later. One

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 11-12, 118-39.

<sup>5</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 331.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

might ask this question in an historical way and wonder whether or not a modern democratic society like America has drifted away from its Christian roots and therefore lost the intellectual and spiritual resources for an authentic democracy. Or, one might ask whether the theoretical justification Maritain offers for his vision of the complementarity between Christianity and modern democratic society is viable. It is this second question that I shall consider in this essay. Was Maritain's perception of the complementary relationship of Christianity and modern democratic society skewed by a false emphasis on a secularized, political version of Christian faith? Is Maritain's attempt to reconcile Christianity and modern democratic society simply an attempt to reinterpret Christianity in terms of the dominant political discourse of modernity? These questions hinge on how one understands the concept of the secular and whether or not there is a legitimate temporal or secular expression of Christian faith that can be invoked to organize political society.

In the first section of what follows, I shall consider Maritain's conception of secularization and the "democratic secular faith" that he proposes in *Man and the State* as an alternative to the thoroughgoing rejection of the autonomy of the temporal, secular sphere found in the new traditionalism. Maritain sought to provide theoretical legitimacy for the process of secularization through resources that he found in the Christian tradition itself. The new traditionalist, and founder of the Radical Orthodoxy school, John Milbank, on the other hand, offers that the secularization of political society in modernity is a parody of the Christian distinction between the temporal and spiritual domains of life rooted in misinterpretations of Augustine and Aquinas. I suggest that Maritain's version of a "secular faith," which does include both the neo-Augustinian and neo-Thomist elements that Milbank dismisses, is primarily a practical response to the fact of pluralism in modern democratic society and provides a useful model for a religiously renewed democracy that is secular yet open to the practical conclusions drawn out of theological beliefs. Maritain's understanding of the secularization of political life in modern democratic society is more nuanced than is often recognized and provides an important response to antimodern traditionalists like Milbank.

In the second and final section of this introductory essay I shall turn to Maritain's *Reflections on America* and argue that they are a case study

of the “democratic secular faith” that Maritain proposes in *Man and the State*. His reflections exemplify how one might interpret modern democratic society, not as a secular parody of true Christian faith, but as one possible version of Christian faith expressed in secular terms in the political sphere—or what Maritain calls a “temporalization” of Christian faith for the sake of political society. I shall also suggest that Maritain’s cautious optimism about the modern democratic society he found in America is an example of both translation and Christian discernment that can and should be recovered and employed once again in the present moment.

## II Maritain’s conception of secularization

To answer the question of whether or not Maritain presents an overstated pact between Christianity and modern democratic society requires that one understand Maritain’s conception of secularization. Maritain argued in numerous places that modernity is the legitimate secular progeny of Christendom, born in the aftermath of the sacral medieval era, which was “a great attempt... to build the life of the earthly community and civilization on the foundation of the unity of theological faith and religious creed.”<sup>7</sup> This arrangement succeeded for a period of time but failed after the Renaissance and Reformation, and “a return to the medieval sacral pattern is in no way conceivable.”<sup>8</sup> During the medieval epoch, the vitality of the political order was reinforced through the spiritual unity of Christian faith, yet this often required that the spiritual element of Christian faith be enforced through temporal means. This, unfortunately, transgresses the Christian distinction between civil society and the spiritual realm of the church. Regarding the transition from the medieval era to modernity in *Man and the State*, Maritain writes:

In proportion as the civil society, or the body politic, has become more perfectly distinguished from the spiritual realm of the Church—a process which was in itself but a development of the Gospel distinction between the things that are Caesar’s and the things that are God’s—the civil society has become grounded

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

on a common good and a common task which are of an earthly, "temporal" or "secular" order, and in which citizens belonging to diverse spiritual groups or lineages share equally. Religious division among men is in itself a misfortune. But it is a fact that we must... recognize.<sup>9</sup>

These comments given by Maritain on the distinction between the secular and spiritual domains of human life represent a broader trend among Christian intellectuals in the middle of the twentieth century to attempt to show that the secularization of political life in modernity is actually a legitimate expression of Christian thought.<sup>10</sup> As Maritain suggests in the quotation above, the distinction between the secular and spiritual realms of human allegiance, and also the autonomy of the temporal sphere, are at the very heart of Christian scripture and theology.<sup>11</sup> Maritain found support for this distinction in Jesus' enigmatic statement to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," in Augustine's distinction between temporal and eternal goods, and in the neo-Scholastic distinction between the natural and supernatural ends of mankind.

One key feature of the new traditionalism's intellectual project, particularly as represented in the work of John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy, has been an attempt to upset the security and autonomy of this so-called "secular sphere." The secular sphere, Milbank objects, operates through a supposedly tradition-free and religiously neutral form of "secular reason" that is indebted to Enlightenment rationalism and is rooted in misinterpretations of Augustine and Aquinas. Milbank argues that twentieth century Christian thinkers, like Maritain, offered too much theoretical legitimacy to the autonomy of the temporal

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The classic neo-Augustinian expression is found in R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. 6. Cf. James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher in Society* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), p. 111.



sphere and thereby unwittingly the formation of a religion-free secularist ideology.

In *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Milbank constructs an alternative narrative regarding the legitimacy of the secular sphere, reminding his readers that in the medieval Christian epoch “secular” primarily refers to a time, not a domain or sphere. Milbank argues that the modern “spatialization” of the secular has reinforced a dogmatic humanism and anti-religious, or beyond-religious, secularist ideology. He begins the first paragraph of the first chapter in his book saying:

Once, there was no ‘secular.’ And the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the ‘purely human,’ when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed. Instead there was the single community of Christendom, with its dual aspects of sacerdotium and regnum. The saeculum, in the medieval era, was not a space, a domain, but a time.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank focuses mainly on the Augustinian conception of the secular and its transition from a temporal to a spatial concept—that is, from naming a time to naming a domain. The classic neo-Augustinian expression of the legitimacy of political secularization that Milbank rejects is found in R.A. Markus’s *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine*. Markus argues that, for Augustine, the secular names both a time and a domain. Markus argues further that Augustine’s spatial and temporal definition of the secular in *The City of God* is the beginning of the Western process of “secularization” and provides the foundation for a secular account of political order.<sup>13</sup> Markus sees Augustine’s concept of the secular as “desacralizing” the Roman political sphere and thereby “loosing it from the direct hegemony of the sacred” that dominated it during the classical, pagan era.<sup>14</sup> And, in this way, Augustine’s rendering of the secular is effectively proto-modern and liberal in that the “secular” signifies a new phase of neutrality and autonomy for the political sphere to be governed by rational pragmatism, rather than religious

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<sup>12</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> R.A. Markus, *Saeculum*, pp. 55-102.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 173.

discourse.<sup>15</sup> Markus cites Book XIX of *The City of God* as Augustine's definition of a "secular political sphere" wherein the inhabitants of the two cities (earthly and heavenly) are forced to cooperate with one another in specifically non-religious ways for the sake of survival—that is, "for the common goods necessary to this mortal life," as Augustine puts it.<sup>16</sup> This Augustinian insight, Markus argues, was buried during the sacral medieval era and resurfaced in the awakening of the modern epoch.

But does Augustine's use of the Latin words *saeculum* ("age" or "period of time") and *saecularis* ("referring to such a period of time") warrant this rendering of the "secular"? In direct opposition to Markus, Milbank argues in *Theology and Social Theory* that such a neutral rendering of the spatial sense of the secular is not to be found in *The City of God* and furthermore it is not intelligible apart from Augustine's distinctly theological narrative of history. There is therefore nothing transferable about Augustine's concept of the secular for any modern universalized discourse of "secular reason" or "secular order."<sup>17</sup> As Milbank says, "Once, there was no 'secular'" and secularism must remember its own Augustinian story and see itself once again as a distinctly Christian innovation.<sup>18</sup> By highlighting the church as the only truly "political" community, where the virtue of charity is able to unite individuals with deep differences into a community of forgiveness without coercion, Milbank scorns the pretences of liberal toleration and religious diversity in modern democratic society, arguing that this type of toleration is rooted in a smug and soulless form of Enlightenment rationalism. Milbank's presentation of the church as the only truly political community on earth, in time, is rooted in his own

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<sup>15</sup> R.A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 63-64.

<sup>16</sup> R.A. Markus, *Saeculum*, p.102. This quotation from Augustine is found at *De civitate Dei*, XIX, 17.

<sup>17</sup> In addition to his *Theology and Social Theory*, see also John Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 15 (1987): 199-224.

<sup>18</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 9.

disputed reading of Augustine's ecclesiology in Book XIX of *The City of God* against Markus's interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

Although Maritain does not address the concept of the secular in Book XIX of Augustine's *City of God* directly, he is clearly influenced by Augustine's political thought, particularly Augustine's distinction between the eternal, heavenly city and the earthly, temporal city. Maritain takes this Augustinian distinction to be foundational for the Christian distinction between the spiritual and temporal spheres of human society represented by the church and civil society. He says:

A genuine temporal community of mankind is not the perfect *civitas* in the Aristotelian sense, but that kind of *civitas* in the Augustinian sense, which is imperfect and incomplete, made up of a fluid network of human communications, and more existential than formally organized, but all the more real and living and basically important.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout his writings, Maritain's favor for Augustine's political realism over Aristotle's idealism aligns Maritain much closer with the secular realism of Markus's reading of *The City of God*, rather than Milbank's idealistic presentation of the church as the only truly political community.

The other distorted theoretical affirmation of the autonomy of the "secular" sphere, according to Milbank, is found in certain neo-Thomist distinctions between nature and grace and the corresponding notion

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<sup>19</sup> Milbank argues his case against Markus in *Theology and Social Theory*, chap. 12. For excellent critical discussions, see Michael J. Hollerich, "John Milbank, Augustine, and the 'Secular'" in *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God*, eds. Mark Vessey, Karla Pollman and Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), pp. 311-26; John R. Bowlin, "Augustine on Justifying Coercion," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17 (1997): 49-70; Robert Dodaro, "Ecclesia and res publica: How Augustinian are Neo-Augustinian Politics?" in *Augustine and Postmodern Thought. A New Alliance Against Modernity*, eds. L. Boeve, M. Lamberigts, M. Wisse (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), pp. 237-72.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, eds. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), p. 319.

of a purely natural end for mankind. In modernity, Milbank argues, this neo-Thomist picture of a natural end for mankind has hardened into a fictitious conception of secular, political society that is too distinct from religious institutions and insulated from the intrusion of religious reasoning. Milbank's most thorough treatment of this neo-Thomist distinction is found in his book on Henri de Lubac called *The Suspended Middle*, where he praises de Lubac's understanding of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. Milbank highlights de Lubac's essay "Nature and Grace," where de Lubac offers a critical assessment of American social and political life, arguing that its errors are ultimately rooted in a misguided neo-Thomist duality of nature and grace.<sup>21</sup> Milbank notes that de Lubac's position on the United States seems accurate and differs intensely from Maritain's "uncritical enthusiasm" for the modern democratic society he found in America. Although Milbank has not developed his own critique of Maritain's neo-Thomist appraisal of secular modernity, Tracey Rowland invokes Milbank's "postmodern Augustinian Thomism" as a critical alternative to Maritain's pro-secular, neo-Thomist description of political society and broader reconciliation of Thomism and Liberalism in her book, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*.<sup>22</sup>

One should note that the story Milbank tells about the birth of the secularist ideology in modernity is fundamentally an intellectual one. It is a story about the power of ideas in forming culture. Certainly, the inter-traditional arguments among Thomists and Augustinians about the legitimacy of secularization are important, yet it strikes the reader as strange that Milbank thinks the rise of secularization is exclusively

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<sup>21</sup> John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 22-23 n. 6. Milbank cites a speech that Henri de Lubac delivered in the United States in 1968 that was later published as, "Nature and Grace" in *The Word in History: The St. Xavier Symposium*, ed. T. Patrick Burke (London: Collins, 1968).

<sup>22</sup> Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition. After Vatican II* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 22, 50. Rowland's book is published in Routledge's *Radical Orthodoxy Series*, which is edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. Rowland's critique of the reconciliation of Thomism and Liberalism, which includes her reading of Maritain, represents an interesting confluence of *Ressourcement* theology and Radical Orthodoxy.

an intellectual issue. There also seem to be practical and historical reasons for the rise of secularized political society in modernity.

Although Maritain's narrative of the rise and legitimacy of the autonomy of the temporal, political sphere relies on both the Augustinian temporal-spatial sense of the secular, as well as the Thomistic distinction between nature and grace, ultimately Maritain's affirmation of political society as properly "secular" is rooted in a response to the plural and diverse religious and metaphysical outlooks represented by citizens in liberal democratic societies and the need to recognize the differences of religious conscience. The process of the secularization of political society in modernity is a practical consequence of theological plurality. Although religious pluralism is not a good that needs to be celebrated, for Maritain, it is a fact that must be recognized.<sup>23</sup>

### III Maritain's "Democratic Secular Faith"

Maritain's account of the legitimacy of the secularization of political discourse and the autonomy of the temporal sphere in modernity contrasts sharply with Milbank's anti-secular narrative in that Maritain proposes a "secular faith," rather than promoting a form of "secular reason" associated with a version of political liberalism. Maritain also proposes a practical model for democratic society to remain religious, or regain its religiousness, by distinguishing between the second order "practical conclusions" that issue forth from the deeper "theoretical justifications" that are rooted in disputed philosophical systems and religious creeds represented by the diverse members of the body politic.

In *Man and the State*, Maritain rejects the tendency in eighteenth and nineteenth century European political philosophy to ground political society in "mere reason," that is, "reason separated from religion."<sup>24</sup> He argues that the tragic events of the first half of the twentieth century have refuted this type of bourgeois rationalism. He says that "we have been confronted with the fact that religion and metaphysics are an essential part of human culture, primary and indispensable incentives

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

in the very life of society.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, if modern democratic society is to enter its next historical stage with sufficient intelligence and vitality, “a renewed democracy will not ignore religion, as the bourgeois nineteenth century, both individualist and “neutral,” did; and this renewed, “personalist” democracy will be of a *pluralistic* type.”<sup>26</sup> This “renewed democracy” that Maritain proposes must either embrace, or at least acknowledge, the Christian intellectual heritage reflected in its own ideal of freedom united for the common good, while still also recognizing that “men belonging to... different philosophical or religious creeds and lineages could and should cooperate in the common task and for the common welfare, provided they similarly assent to the basic tenets of a society of free men.”<sup>27</sup>

The democratic “secular faith” that Maritain outlines is practical in nature and not primarily dogmatic or theoretical; that is, secular faith is a practical, political expression of dogmatic or theoretical beliefs. Maritain makes an extremely intricate case for these “practical tenets” of the temporal creed that combines a three-fold appeal to natural law, revealed law, and the historical shape of human reason as it has developed in Western civilization. He proposes that “many can share the same practical secular faith provided they similarly revere, perhaps for quite diverse reasons, truth and intelligence, human dignity, freedom, brotherly love, and the absolute value of moral good.”<sup>28</sup>

Maritain argues that one must maintain a sharp distinction between “the human and temporal creed which lies at the root of common life” and is but a set of “*practical conclusions*” or “*practical points of convergence*” on the one hand, and on the other, the “*theoretical justifications*, the conceptions of the world and of life, the philosophical or religious creeds which found, or claim to found, these practical conclusions in reason.”<sup>29</sup> Maritain also expects there to be a fluid and deep relationship between these theoretical justifications and practical points of convergence. It is the task of the political society’s citizens to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 109.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid; italics in original.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; italics in original.

translate the relevance of their religious or metaphysical outlooks into the general, practical language of the political society's "secular faith." What, one wonders, is the content of these practical conclusions drawn up in the democratic secular faith that Maritain envisions? In *Man and the State*, Maritain offers a moral charter that outlines the points that the practical tenets of the democratic secular faith must deal with:

Rights and liberties of the human person, political rights and liberties, social rights and social liberties, corresponding responsibilities; rights and duties of persons who are part of a family society, and liberties and obligations of the latter toward the body politic; mutual rights and duties of groups and the State; government of the people, by the people, and for the people; functions of authority in a political and social democracy, moral obligation, binding in conscience, regarding just laws as well as the Constitution which guarantees the people's liberties; exclusion of the resort to political coups in a society that is truly free and ruled by laws whose change and evolution depend on the popular majority; human equality, justice between persons and the body politic, justice between the body politic and persons, civil friendship and an ideal of fraternity, religious freedom, mutual tolerance and mutual respect between various spiritual communities and schools of thought, civic self-devotion and love of the motherland, reverence for its history and heritage, and understandings of the various traditions that combine to create its unity; obligations of each person toward the common good of the body politic and obligations of each nation toward the common good of civilized society, and the necessity of becoming aware of the unity of the world and of the existence of a community of peoples.<sup>30</sup>

Maritain argues that the cherished practical tenets involved in such a moral charter are not sustained by reason alone, but through a fluid and complex process of practical agreements rooted in theologically diverse theoretical justifications that are welcomed, yet never fully expressed, in the public sphere.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 112-13.

One may legitimately wonder whether Maritain was too optimistic about the authority and longevity of the “Christian inspiration” that undergirds his “democratic secular faith.” One may also wonder if Maritain is subtly relying on an Enlightenment style concept of universal rationality in his appeals to “truth” and the “absolute moral good” that sounds quite similar to the eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalism that he is denouncing—a case of cutting off the branch that he is standing on. I suggest that this is not the case because Maritain is not proposing a variety of “secular reason,” but rather a conception of “secular faith” wherein religious believers learn to project their faith into the political sphere through a process of “temporalization,” in order to reach practical agreements with other citizens. Maritain’s picture of a personalist democracy rooted in a “secular faith” presents a model of dialogue for democratic society that both respects the depth of theological diversity among its citizens, without abandoning the pursuit of universal truth, and also promotes a common morality that might transcend these differences and legitimate the practical conclusions drawn out by the citizens. Ultimately, this dialogue must be done by the citizens and not arbitrated by the administration of the political society itself, according to Maritain, which in itself remains secular.<sup>31</sup>

Maritain’s response to the secularization of political discourse and his model of practical agreement is still a compelling and useful model for incorporating religion in democratic society. Rather than hunting the intellectual ghosts responsible for the false ideology of secularism, as Milbank’s narrative does, Maritain approaches the secularization of political discourse in modernity as a necessary historical stage after the medieval epoch and as an appropriate response to the fact of religious and metaphysical pluralism. Maritain offers a practical model for retaining religion in modern democratic discourse while not neglecting, nor praising, deep metaphysical differences. Ultimately, Maritain remains hopeful that secular democratic society will give way to a new Christian civilization. This civilization will necessarily look different than it did in the past, although it will not be unrecognizable to those within the tradition.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 114.



#### IV Maritain's Reflections on America

Maritain delivered the Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago in 1949 (these lectures became *Man and the State*, published in 1951) and was invited back in 1956 to give a three-day seminar on the topic of America, under the auspices of the Committee on Social Thought. The talks Maritain delivered grew into his *Reflections on America* (published in 1958), which retain the informal character of Maritain's considerations of America offered in the three seminars.

In his reflections, Maritain provocatively says that if a "new Christian civilization is ever to emerge in human history, it is on American soil that it will find its starting point."<sup>32</sup> One way to understand this optimism about the reconciliation of Christianity and modern democratic society in this country is to read his *Reflections on America* as a case study of the "democratic secular faith" that he proposes in *Man and the State*. In this way, one can identify the features of modern democratic society that Maritain praises in American life as secularized fragments of Christian belief. Rather than speak of a "secular faith" in his *Reflections*, Maritain invokes the language of a "temporalization" of Christian belief. In the fourth and final section of this essay, I shall consider what features of American political life Maritain sees as "temporalized" Christian beliefs and conclude by highlighting Maritain's own warnings about the delicate nature of a society formed by a temporalized, that is, a secularized, version of Christian thought and practice.

In any attempt to narrate the "evangelical inspiration" that intellectually grounds and spiritually animates a modern democratic society, like America's, one runs the risk of making a triumphalist appeal to Christian supremacy in a culture of waning political influence on one hand, and on the other, of reinterpreting Christianity in the dominant political discourse of the day in such a way that it corrupts the truly revolutionary character of the Christian gospel, which is both spiritual and political in content. The "new traditionalists" are concerned that the political philosophy of thinkers like Maritain represents both triumphalism and also a modern corruption. Yet, if one

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), chapter 19; this is hereafter cited in the text as "RA," with the chapter number following in Roman numerals.

considers Maritain's *Reflections*, one finds that Maritain himself is keenly aware of both these dangers.

In his *Reflections*, Maritain has high praise for traditional American figures like Abraham Lincoln and the Founding Fathers, traditional documents like the Constitution, traditional institutions like the Supreme Court, and traditional American ideals like natural rights, seeking to narrate how these modern figures, ideals, and institutions were made possible by the inherited Christian notion of the human person. Maritain also highlights and praises what he sees as the contemporary sparks of "evangelical inspiration" flickering in the democratic and spiritual movements of the postwar period. He praises Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation, as well as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and the black people of Montgomery, Alabama. Maritain sees them all as people who embody the Christian ideal of human dignity expressed in the Gospel and in America's Constitution (RA VI).

Maritain also suggests that American political life is sustained as much by the founding documents and ideals as it is by the constant stream of immigrants who continue to travel to America from every corner of the world (RA IX). He speaks of Americans as "bruised souls," alluding to the wounds and sorrows of American ancestors, who either migrated here or were brought here forcefully (RA IX). The "bruised soul," Maritain says:

bears witness to a kind of bruise or wound which is, I would say, of an evangelical nature: because wounds which cause a human soul to be compassionate are evangelical wounds; and such a sentence offers us, I think, the deepest reason for the sense of mercy and pity, and the sense of responsibility toward all those in distress, which are rooted in the collective American psyche, deep beneath the hardness and harshness of the hunt for material interests and advantages which is the object of ordinary activity and ordinary conversation. This spark of the Gospel lying deep in people who more often than not do not think at all of the Gospel, is not a thing that one speaks of. It is hidden in the secret life of souls, and covered by all the ordinary selfish desires and concerns of human nature. It exists, however, and is active in the great mass of the nation. And what is more valuable in this poor world than to find a trace of Gospel fraternal love active among

men? There is, in the most existential sense, a strain of Gospel fraternal love deep in the American blood (RA IX).

Maritain highlights the spiritual importance of immigration for the life of this country—admitting the complexity that immigration will involve as the country’s population rises—and suggests that the constant influx of poor, humiliated, and marginalized people is a secret source of strength and energy for the spiritual and democratic life of this country. Maritain also warns the members of the “commercial republic” about the distractions involved in consumerism and the dangers of unrestrained corporate power, encouraging Americans to move into a new phase of capitalism.

In America, Maritain thought he found evidence for his conviction that a thorough account of the separation between the secular, political sphere and the spiritual domain of the church would lead not to isolation, but to cooperation and mutual benefit. This idea runs from Maritain’s early work, *Integral Humanism* (1936) through *Man and the State* and on to his *Reflections on America*. Maritain also emphasized how fragile this relationship of institutional separation and spiritual cooperation actually is, warning that any “temporalized religious inspiration runs the risk of terminating in a failure if religion in its own order does not victoriously resist any trend toward becoming itself temporalized” (RA XIX). Maritain goes on:

The risk is that *religion itself* might become temporalized, in other words, so institutionalized in the temporal structures themselves and the temporal growth itself of a given civilization, that it would practically lose its essential supernatural, supra-temporal, and supra-national trans-cendence, and become subservient to particular national or temporal interests (RA XIX); [*italics in original*].

The religious inspiration that is at work in the “temporal consciousness” of this country, Maritain proposes, is not an abstract spiritual force, but “is rooted, of course, in the particular religious creeds to which such or such individuals or families subscribe” (RA XIX). The projection of religious belief into the temporal order can “survive for a time even if some have slipped away from religious faith,” but it can only preserve its vitality “if in many others it is not cut off from living religious faith” (RA XIX).

Given that the temporal projection of religious belief in this country has not resulted in an undeniable “new Christian civilization,” one may legitimately wonder whether Maritain’s proposal for a democratic secular faith and a religiously renewed personalist democracy has not, on the contrary, simply reinforced an antitraditional secularist ideology that is immune to religious dialogue in public debate, as the new traditionalists fear. In response, I suggest that Maritain’s language about the temporalization of Christian faith does not reinforce a secularist ideology, but rather is a useful way of thinking through the role of religion in secular democratic society.<sup>33</sup> Rather than providing an intellectual assault on the validity of the autonomy of the secular sphere and polarizing the debate between adherents of the Christian tradition and liberal secularists, Maritain’s approach offers a middle way between antimodern traditionalism and liberal secularism. Maritain’s approach also provides a modest attempt to remind modern democratic societies, like America’s, that their precious ideals about human dignity, liberty, and fraternity lose their intelligibility when excised from the philosophical and theological conversations in which they have been fashioned. Even more importantly, these ideals lose their vitality when divorced from living faith in the transcendent source to which all temporal human life must ultimately be ordered. The spiritual traditions, namely Christianity, for Maritain, must be remembered intellectually, and more importantly they must be practiced faithfully.

One can now see that Maritain’s postwar enthusiasm for American democratic society may have been too optimistic about the ongoing reconciliation between individual rights and the common good, the alliance of religious faith and secular political institutions, and the possibility of a humanism which remains theocentric rather than turning anthropocentric. The new traditionalists’ appraisal of modernity has helped many regain the confidence and critical capacity necessary to discern the vast difference between the anthropocentric humanism of secular liberalism and the Christian humanism found in

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<sup>33</sup> James V. Schall makes the important point that reading Maritain on democracy and human rights in the contemporary moment requires “constant internal correction to recognize that what he means by these terms is something very different from what is generally meant by them in the culture”: James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain*, p. 95.

the Augustinian and Thomist traditions. The new traditionalists have provided some thinkers, like myself, with the courage to think and live out of the resources of a particular premodern tradition again, something that Maritain himself exemplified. Yet the danger in the new traditionalists' strategy is that it can cause one to forget how to narrate the indebtedness of the achievements of liberal democratic society to the heritage of Christian thought and practice. This ongoing "positive" work that Maritain embodied must be done, not as an act of cultural triumphalism, but as an act of spiritual and intellectual discernment.

Maritain's conception of a "secular faith" in *Man and the State*, which affirms an ongoing fragile process of projecting religious belief into the temporal order, is simultaneously an act of translation and interpretation, as well as an act of critical, spiritual discernment. Each new age and political epoch presents unique dangers and possibilities of misinterpretation. The process of working out the temporal, political expression of Christian faith in an age of unprecedented pluralism, information exchange, and communication is an evolving task. For Maritain, modern democratic society is *a*, not *the*, temporal, "secular" expression of Christian faith. It is an expression particularly focused on the dignity of the human person that is embodied in the revolutionary Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. A temporal expression of religious belief is necessarily inclusive and pluralistic, which means, for Maritain, that it seeks a "practical," rather than a full-blooded theoretical, agreement among those of diverse philosophies and religious creeds in the body politic. It is this practical response to pluralism that distinguishes Maritain's theory of secularization from that found in the new traditionalism, as I mentioned above, and gives Maritain's theory ongoing significance today.<sup>34</sup> For Maritain, the task is to continue discerning whether or not the culture of any modern democratic society is an accurate temporal expression of the Gospel.

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<sup>34</sup> In many ways, this brings Maritain's approach to the secularization of political life and the role of religion in modern democratic society much closer to the pragmatic expressivism of Jeffrey Stout, rather than the new traditionalism's absolute refusal of the secular sphere. See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 98-100.

Maritain provides an example of the ongoing task of translation and discernment. Modern democratic society, for Maritain, is a contingent, imperfect version of political society, yet a version that uniquely expresses certain elements of Christian truth about the human person. Although the version of modern democratic society found in America is flawed, there may still be strains of “evangelical inspiration” in the American blood that thinkers like Maritain can help one detect. In this way, Maritain is an example of what it might mean to be both modern and traditional. In the spirit of Maritain, and in the country that Maritain was so critically hopeful and cautiously optimistic about, the essays in this volume contribute to the ongoing process of “temporalization” that Maritain proposes.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have suggested that Maritain’s conception of a “democratic secular faith,” that he proposes in *Man and the State* and sees expressed in his *Reflections on America*, is an alternative to the new traditionalism’s thoroughgoing rejection of the autonomy of the temporal, secular sphere. Maritain sought to provide theoretical legitimacy for the process of secularization through resources he found in the Christian tradition in order to form a practical response to pluralism. I suggest that Maritain’s understanding of the secularization of political life in modern democratic society is more nuanced than is often recognized and that his narrative of secularization provides an important response to antimodern traditionalists like John Milbank. Maritain’s *Reflections on America* exemplify how one might interpret modern democratic society, not as a secular parody of true Christian faith, but as one version of Christian faith expressed in secular terms in the political sphere—or what Maritain calls a “temporalization” of Christian faith for the sake of political society. I suggest that Maritain’s methodology for interpretation and discernment can and should be recovered and employed in the present moment, as the essays in this volume reflect.

Upon his arrival in New York City from France, Maritain’s first impression of America was that it was a hopeful country, freed from the memories and burdens of historical necessity that plague the Old World of Europe (RA III). Maritain admits in his *Reflections* that this sentiment of freedom from history is a great illusion, yet it can also be a liberating thought that helps a nation turn forward in openness to the

future. And, in this sense, America is “young” and full of hope (RA III). When considering the contemporary moment, one may worry that this openness to the future and freedom from the past has simply created a cultural wasteland of tradition-starved consumers marching forward under the banner of progress in America. If America’s hopefulness is to become anything more than a cynical joke, it is imperative that the citizens of this “young” country consider the sources—both intellectual and spiritual—that lay underneath its cherished democratic ideals. For these ideals are often the precious and fragile projections of religious belief into the temporal order of a pluralistic society that is trying to find the common good.

In his reflections, Maritain cautions Americans about the dangers of submerging themselves in a frantic cycle of work and consumption without making space for leisure and quiet (RA XVIII). He worries that the American attitude toward time may be antithetical to the contemplative activity required for a whole civilization to be formed in the United States. “What the world expects from America,” Maritain concludes in his *Reflections*, “is that it keep alive, in human history, a fraternal recognition of the dignity of man—in other words, the terrestrial hope of men in the Gospel” (RA XX). Yet this fraternal recognition of the dignity of man, which is the terrestrial, secular hope offered in the Gospel, can only be sustained, according to Maritain, by a living awareness of the eternal source of human dignity. The true end of civilization building, indeed of all human activity, is summarized, for Maritain, in the scriptural invitation to “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 45:11; RA XVIII).

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