

The future of Western Civilization according to Jacques Maritain

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We often hear that the West, especially Old Europe, is in a deep crisis. There seems to be unanimous agreement among specialists on this point. However, our civilization remains active and, at least apparently, shows still a great vitality. What kind of crisis is it? Is it a crisis of growing or a degenerative crisis? The position of this paper leaves open the answer to this question. Nevertheless, by borrowing from the political philosophy of Jacques Maritain, it tries to define the conditions that will determine the kind of future we might face.

What are those factors? In what way can they contribute to the consolidation and a better application of the democratic philosophy which is underlying and which inspires the deeds of our civilization? Some facts provide us a first clue. Perhaps it is no accident that democracy arose, developed, and remains stable only on Western soil. Maybe the difficulties that usually accompany the desires to implement and to make lasting fruition on other soils of this kind of political life and its related ideals are not random.

Clearly, there will be people saying that democracy (this is the official history of our Western democracies) has only a spiritual debt to rationalism, to the French Revolution, even to Marxism (in those aspects related to the social rights that are today an essential part of democratic philosophy). However, although we cannot ignore the contributions that modern philosophy and culture have made in this area, it is very important too, in my opinion, to emphasize and recognize as well (in any case, but today more than ever) the essential and decisive influence that Christianity, as refracted in the temporal order, had in the generation of that democratic philosophy which rules the social and the political life in our countries.

Regarding this question, Jacques Maritain's work seems to me indispensable.¹ As most of modern and contemporary thinkers, Maritain wanted to adopt all along an essentially humanistic perspective. He defined humanism in general like an attempt to "render human beings more truly human and to manifest their original grandeur by having them participate in all that which can enrich them in nature and in history."² Unfortunately, not everything that is

called humanism really contributes to the integral development of human beings. In fact, there are defective and incomplete humanisms which end up being destructive for people, reductionist and disintegrative humanisms that do not recognize the transcendent character of the person and, paradoxically, consider human beings, from an exclusively immanentist point of view, as the center and measure of everything. True humanism, the “integral humanism” that may aid us to overcome the current state of our civilization

has to be founded on reason and to derive from reason, but –Maritain says– it cannot derive from a reason which is separated from itself and ignores what is better than reason. Such humanism will take root and develop only in a renewed civilization that ... will be the age of Christian philosophy, and in which, under the inspiration of that philosophy, science and wisdom will be reconciled.³

In short, his goal was to make compatible the movement of history with the realization of the essential finalities of human beings (which were characterized by philosophy in its more complete and perfect state, as represented by Christian philosophy). That required –according to our author– drawing within the socio-political order a project for the future, a “prospective image” which, being dynamic and “situated,” was not a mere *utopia* but a “concrete historical ideal,” realizable in the long term: Maritain called it a “new Christendom.”

What will be the features of this future civilization? Under which criteria may its ideal be formed? It will be a lay State because it will recognize the pluralist character of society, it will respect the autonomy of the temporal with regard to the supernatural, and it will have as its main political purpose the human good of the community. And however, it will be also Christian, because, even if the “unity of beliefs” does not exist –since truth cannot be imposed, nor force be put in the service of God– the unity and the energies of this new temporal civilization will derive from the Christian inspiration: this new civilization will be, he says, “vitaly Christian in its concrete behavior and morality as a social body,”⁴ a city “of human rights and the dignity of the human person, a city where human beings who belong to

different races and religious beliefs would commune in a temporal common good, and in common work that is truly human and progressive.”⁵

According to Maritain, the Christian character of this temporal city would be evident especially by recognizing the extraterritoriality of the human person in respect of the temporal and political ways, and also in the implications that derive of such recognition. Indeed, as individuals and as part of the social whole, human beings are “for the State,” but as persons (an apart whole, superior, opened to the transcendent and destined for a supernatural end), it is the State which is subordinated to the person and his needs. Autonomy of the temporal order is conceived, thus, by way of an “intermediate and infravalent end” regarding the supernatural end of human beings. This latter is an absolute end, which takes part in the political common good and, simultaneously, transcends it.

The unity we need, attained by way of reconciliation, promoted by Christian philosophy in the socio-political plane and expressed by the form of a personalist and communitarian regime, also presupposes –according to Maritain’s position– a firm choice for moral integrity in our behavior, a communion in the good in regard to coexistence and the rules which govern it, and a spirit of justice in politics. In short, it requires in any case an attitude respecting truth, wisdom, and freedom that –the French philosopher insists– even if it is not exclusive of Christianity, in practice only the Christian faith can fully guarantee insofar as the Christian evangelical spirit penetrates us.

Nonetheless, because of the circumstances and their historical urgency, Maritain ended up postponing and even forsaking the proposal of a historical ideal, concrete but future, of a new (and, ultimately, maybe utopian) Christendom. With a similar framework, he began to focus his efforts on a more feasible purpose, closer to the main goal of this paper: the regeneration and fulfillment of democracy.⁶

For our philosopher, the term “democracy” does not only constitute a kind of political regime but, first and primarily, “a general philosophy of human and political life, and a state of mind”⁷ that accompany human beings in their progress. Due to democracy, man has entered the path that leads to the true moral rationalization of political life; nay, “democracy is the unique way through which the progressive energies in human history do pass.”⁸

What happened was that the different kinds of democracy that fed on modernity did not accomplish the goals that they had pursued. Where does this failure lie? There are several causes. But the deepest, the only cause able to fully explain the failure of modern democracies is of a spiritual kind: modern democracies were based on a defective humanism of anthropocentric inspiration, they ignored or forgot their Christian roots and the evangelical sap that runs through them. If this is not taken into account, it will be very difficult to pass from a frustrated democracy to a real democracy. Maritain dared to warn that where the Christian spirit is not, or where it has evaporated, a real democracy and a truly humanistic political philosophy hardly will flourish: “the durable advent of the democratic state of mind and of the democratic philosophy of life –he points– requires the energies of the Gospel to penetrate secular existence.”⁹

However, this does not imply that, in order to conform and consolidate a true democracy, it is necessary to accept all ideas that Christianity sustains: it is not a homogeneous unity of doctrine that is required. What is needed is a moral unity. Maritain will maintain that, in a pluralistic society, a “faith” or common conviction of secular character and practical order would be enough to allow both individuals and groups belonging to spiritually different “families,” even competing freely and pacifically from a theoretical perspective, to cooperate in a common and natural task.¹⁰ This faith would be structured around some fundamental principles that –he specifies– “depend basically on simple, *natural* apperceptions of which the human heart becomes capable with the progress of moral conscience, and which, as a matter

of fact, have been awakened by the Gospel leaven fermenting in the obscure depths of human history.”¹¹

What are those principles? Maritain addressed this issue several times and by diverse ways.

His statements are not always identical, but I do not think we will miss a lot if we list these:

- 1° The dignity of the human person, and also that person, while being a part of the State, yet transcends it because of the inviolable mystery of his spiritual freedom and of his call to the attainment of absolute goods.
- 2° Faith in the rights of the human person, as a human person, as a civic person ... as a working person.
- 3° Faith in justice as a necessary foundation for common life, and as an essential property of the law.¹²
- 4° The sense of freedom and the conviction that the forward march of human societies is a march toward the conquest of freedom, in accordance with the vocation of our nature.¹³
- 5° That human history does not go around in circles, but is set toward a goal and moves in a certain direction.¹⁴
- 6° The dignity of the people—...; people in the sense of the community of the citizens of a country, united under just laws.¹⁵
- 7° The sense of man’s equality in nature and the relative equality which justice must establish among them, and the conviction that by means of the functional inequalities demanded by social life, equality must be re-established on a higher level, and must fructify in everyone’s possibility of acceding to a life worthy of man.¹⁶
- 8° That the authority of the rulers, by the very fact that it emanates from the author of human nature, is addressed to free men who do not belong to a master, and is exercised by virtue of the consent of the governed.¹⁷
- 9° That in the truth of things, politics depends upon morality.¹⁸
- 10° And, finally, The faith in the brotherhood of man, a sense of the social duty of compassion for mankind in the person of the weak and the suffering.¹⁹

As noted, Maritain knows that most of these principles are accessible to reason but, in his opinion, it was in fact the Christian faith that revealed them concretely, and it is Christian philosophy that can explain and consolidate them in the best way. In addition, among all them the last is perhaps the most important. Certainly, although justice and law are necessary conditions of democracy, they are not enough. What truly is capable of dissolving the conflict between law and freedom, the soul of justice, the unique impulse that is able to guide everyone in seeking the common good, and to accomplish the common work that defines

social and political life, the source and the channel of peace, the sap of democracy, is brotherly love.

The ancients had already guessed how important it was for a city to have what Aristotle called “civic friendship. “Only love,” Maritain says in a similar way, “is a proper and proportioned cause of pacification and unity among human beings.”²⁰ This love is, first, natural love that usually is directed to beings of the same species: it is based on their equality of nature and it is an expression of that unity which is characteristic of the human race. But, if we had to be satisfied with that love, we could hardly overcome, for instance, Machiavellian pessimism. Besides natural unity, there are among human beings many inequalities that can be both a source of wellbeing and a cause of very deep difference. The idea of a human fraternity, without a common Father, is just a pipe dream and leads to the worst of illusions.

Therefore, the French philosopher says,

what is necessary is a love of higher origin, immediately divine, what catholic theology calls supernatural, a love in God and by God that, on the one hand, strengthens in its own domain the diverse dilections from the natural order, and, on the other hand, transcends them infinitely. Only charity (very different from the mere human benevolence preached by philosophers and already very noble itself, but ultimately inefficient), only charity ... can enlarge our heart in the love towards everyone because, coming from God who loves us first, it drives us to want for all human beings the same divine good, the same eternal life as for ourselves, and sees in everyone those whom God calls, spouting –let me say so– the mysteries of His mercy and the fulfillments of His goodness.²¹

This higher love does not cancel our natural love but brings it to fulfillment: it is the love that Christ expressed as commandment of brotherly charity and the cornerstone of a heroic humanism; it is the first human law and the law that summarizes all laws.

Nevertheless, an objection can arise now as a difficult question. Although it is true that love is the strongest thread of solidarity that can be established among people, how could it be possible for all of us to partake in a common endeavor, like the promotion of social or political life, without a certain communion of doctrine? We return here to the very beginning

of our analysis, but now we can better understand the Maritainian response (even if he adds some new requirements):

Existence of God, holiness of truth, value and necessity of good will, dignity of person, spirituality and immortality of soul, and all the other implications of this law of brotherly charity which are linked to it and I do not mention here – says Maritain– are notions that respond to spontaneous views of our reason, and to initial inclinations of our human nature; notions that must not be understood in a univocal and identical way,²²

but that, in any case, can serve people from very different spiritual families and beliefs to cooperate practically in looking for truly human progress in the temporal order.

It is time to conclude this paper. What kind of crisis is Western civilization suffering? The answer seems to me obvious: it is a crisis of identity, caused by the loss of faith in the principles which generated it and that, though our world is not aware of its true sources, still sustain it weakly in its already long historical itinerary. Does Western civilization have a future? The response is still open. If Maritain is right, the future of our civilization will not be very hopeful if it does not recover its awareness about that identity and nourish from it:

if all what subsists of cultural Christianity, under diminished modalities but still keeping somehow the sense of human dignity that Christianity had given to the world, does not gather its energies, and if the old Christian sap of Western civilization does not recover its vigor and its purity under the effect of a Christian inspiration ... and does not renew its conceptions and its socio-temporal structures due to vivid evangelical penetration (what we name “integral humanism”), we do not see how Western civilization can resist its current, inner ferments of death.²³

Will we be able to recover the pulse and resume the firm forward movement of Western history? Will this twilight age be an eve to a brighter and clearer day? Although it is not easy, the future is still in our hands. To make this happen, it is absolutely necessary to retrieve the collaboration among countries that make up the West, and to configure a new form of unity. This unity to which we have to aspire (that, actually, could include all people of good will), cannot be the homogeneous unity of a materialistic and skeptic globalization, or the unformed unity of a suicidal multiculturalism. It should be a unity in plurality, a unity by way of

analogy and not by way of univocity; it will not be a dogmatic unity (no doubt!), but neither the unity of weak thought, a heterogeneous unity that cannot yield other fruit than a spiritual dispersion that would become a source of conflicts and ruptures.

We have already seen what are the principles that, I think, would have to sustain the vital and moral unity on which the future of West depends, and even the temporal destiny of all human beings. Europe and America can say and make a lot of things, especially regarding the future of our civilization. Maritain saw it clearly and I am going to finish by repeating his words:

It will be necessary that the sense of the tragic in life and the sense of the great human adventure meet and influence each other, that the spirit of Europe and the spirit of America work together in common good will. We do not believe Paradise is set for tomorrow. But the task to which we are summoned, the task we have to pursue with all the more courage and hope because at each moment it will be betrayed by human weakness, this task will have to have for an objective, if we want civilization to survive, a world of free men imbued in its secular substance by a genuine and living Christianity, a world in which the inspiration of the Gospel will orient common life toward an heroic humanism.²⁴

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Maritain, Jacques. *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques et Raissa Maritain*. Fribourg –Suisse: Éditions Universitaires, 17 vols. 1982-2008.

¹ The references of Maritain's books will be abbreviated from the *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques et Raissa Maritain* –henceforth OEC.– The meaning of the abbreviations is as follow:

OEC II (ed. 1987): *Th* (*Théonas*).

OEC IV (ed. 1983): *RC* (*Religion et culture*).

OEC V (ed. 1983): *RTL* (*Du régime temporel et de la liberté*).

OEC VI (ed. 1984): *ScetSg* (*Science et Sagesse*), *HI* (*Humanisme intégral*), and *QC* (*Questions de conscience*).

OEC VII (ed. 1988): *CC* (*Le crépuscule de la civilisation*), *DHLN* (*Les droits de l'homme et la loi naturelle*), *JP* (*De la justice politique*), *AD* (*À travers le désastre*), and *CD* (*Christianisme et démocratie*).

OEC VIII (ed. 1989): *DBàTh* (*De Bergson à Thomas d'Aquin*), *PPH* (*Principes d'une politique humaniste*), *M* (*Messages*) and *PJ* (*Pour la justice*).

OEC IX (ed. 1990): *RetR* (*Raison et raisons*), *PBC* (*La personne et le bien commun*), and *HE* (*L'homme et l'État*).

OEC X (ed. 1985): *PPhH* (*Pour une philosophie de l'histoire*) y *RA* (*Réflexions sur l'Amérique*).

OEC XII (ed. 1992): *PG* (*Le Paysan de la Garonne*).

² *HI*, OEC VI, 298.

³ *DBàTh*, OEC VIII, 35.

⁴ *RA*, OEC X, 906.

⁵ *PJ*, OEC VIII, 666.

⁶ “I spoke about a new Christendom. Likewise, I could have spoken of a new democracy. Since, for those who go to the bottom of things ... the name of democracy is not other thing than the profane name of the ideal of Christendom” (*M*, OEC VIII, 426).

⁷ *CD*, OEV II, 719.

⁸ *HE*, OEC IX, 548.

⁹ *CD*, OEC VII, 738. In this respect, Europe and the United States are –according to the French philosopher– in quiet different circumstances. He says: “Maybe because in America Christianity has taken on diffuse and diluted shapes, often to the point of being nothing more than a sentimental ingredient of human morality, it is that the divorce between the democratic principle and the Christian principle has never made itself as intensely felt here as in Europe, where minds are divided between a Christianity which is irreducibly formed in its structure and its doctrine, but which has been separated for too many years from the life of the people, and opened and militant infidelity or hatred of religion. America’s problem is to place its Christianity once again within the reach of divine exigencies, and to raise up the religious and spiritual potential of its democracy to the height of the cross of Christ. Europe’s problem is to recover the vivifying power of Christianity in temporal existence, and to put an end at one stroke to the wave of anti-Christian barbarism and the wave of antidemocratic enslavement. Here and there a radical change is needed, a resurrection of the spiritual forces, a new knighthood emanating from the peoples” (*CD*, OEC VII, 717).

¹⁰ Some years earlier, Maritain had already written that the pluralistic structure of a civilization “relaxes and distends his unity but do not destroy it”. The unity to which he refers –he insists– is not a “unity of an essential or constitutional character guaranteed from above by the profession of the same doctrine and the same faith. Though this is less perfect, and material rather than formal in character, it is none the less real; it is a unity of becoming or of orientation which springs from a common aspiration and gathers elements of heterogeneous culture (of which some may indeed be very imperfect) into a form of civilization which is fully consonant with the eternal interests of human personality and with man’s freedom of autonomy” (*RTL*, OEC V, 385).

¹¹ *HE*, OEC IX, 611.

¹² *CD*, OEC VII, 728-729. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 854). On this point, see, among other texts: *DHLN* (OEC VII), *PBC* (OEC IX) and *HE* (OEC IX, esp. chaps. IV y V).

¹³ *CD*, OEC VII, 732-733. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 856-857). About this issue, these are some of the main texts: *RTL*, OEC V, chapter I; *PPH*, OEC VIII, chapter I; and *DBàTh*, OEC VIII, chaps. III and IV.

¹⁴ *CD*, OEC VII, 728. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 854). Further on this point, among many other texts, see: *Th*, OEC II, chaps. VII and VIII; *HI*, OEC VI, 439-442; *RetR*, OEC IX; and, in general, *PPhH*, OEC X.

¹⁵ *CD*, OEC VII, 729-730. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 854-855). About this theme, see also: *AD*, OEC VII, chap. III; and esp. *HE*, OEC IX, chap. I, and *RetR*, OEC IX, chap. VII.

¹⁶ *CD*, OEC VII, 730. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 855). Maritain develops this point, among other texts, in *PPH*, OEC VIII, chap. III.

¹⁷ *CD*, OEC VII, 730-731. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 855-856). For a greater development of this issue, see: *PPH*, OEC VIII, chap. II; and *HE*, OEC IX, chaps. II y V (IV).

¹⁸ *CD*, OEC VII, 731-732. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 856). About this question, Maritain reflected extensively and deeply. See, for instance, *RC*, OEC IV, chap. III, n. 11; *RTL*, OEC V, chap. III; *JP*, OEC VII, chapter VI; *PPH*, OEC VIII, chapter V; *HI*, OEC IX, chapter VI; *HE*, OEC IX, chapter III and *PPhH*, OEC X, chap. II (VI).

¹⁹ *CD*, OEC VII, 733-734. (Also, *PJ*, OEC VIII, 857). On this point, one can read, among other texts, *PPH*, OEC VIII, chap. IV.

²⁰ *PPH*, OEC VIII, 288.

²¹ *PPH*, OEC VIII, 289. (About the relationship between natural virtues and charity, see *ScetSg*, OEC VI, 152-167).

²² *PPH*, OEC VIII, 302.

²³ *QC*, OEC VI, 26-28.

²⁴ *CD*, OEC VII, 762.