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Maritain and Gilson on the Challenge of Political Democracy

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This collection of essays is dedicated to reflecting on the achievements of Jacques Maritain in political philosophy, especially considering *Man and the State*, the series of lectures he gave at Chicago. These 1949 lectures went a long way toward integrating the political and social themes he had been developing since the 1920s in works such as *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, *Integral Humanism*, *Scholasticism and Politics*, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, *The Person and the Common Good*, *Freedom in the Modern World*, *Christianity and Democracy* and "The End of Machiavellianism," an article in *The Review of Politics*.¹

This was a tremendous production, and this along with his writings on epistemology, philosophy of art, ethics and metaphysics inspire awe and admiration.

In proposing to bring to your attention some of the reflections on politics of Maritain's friend and co-worker in the Thomistic revival, Étienne Gilson, I undertook a task which proved more difficult than I had originally imagined; for in contrast to the volume of Maritain's writings, what was available in Gilson's *oeuvre* proved rather slight. Gilson not only reflected on the political issues of his time in various talks he was invited to give to different groups, he participated in the politics of post-World War II France and so his reflections, while slight, had some grounding in his practical experience. But these talks were not published as books, and the many articles he wrote for French papers and periodicals, such as *Le Monde* and *Sept* were not available to me.² What I did have were photocopies of his own typed speeches sent to me by Fr. Fred Black, CSB, the archivist of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto.

¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, trans. J. F. Scanlan. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1939); *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952); *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Scribners, 1943); *Freedom in the Modern World*, trans. Richard O'Sullivan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936); *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950); *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. Mortimer J. Adler (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960); *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame: University of (Notre Dame Press, 1966); *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame: University of (Notre Dame Press, 1973).

² Étienne Gilson, *Pour un Ordre Catholique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934). This work was a strong rhetorical work Gilson addressed to his fellow Catholics in France whom he believed were neglecting their opportunity to participate in the French politics of the 1930's, and consequently were leaving the contemporary civil scene to be

To appreciate the similarities and differences of Maritain and Gilson, who were great friends and who admired each other very much, it is well to consider their different origins and ambitions. Thanks to Fr. Laurence Shook, the author of the Gilson biography,³ this was beautifully done in an article which appeared in a 1979 *Notes et Documents*.⁴

Maritain, born in 1882, was the son of Paul Maritain, a lawyer, and Genevieve Favre, the daughter of the great statesman of the Third Republic, Jules Favre. It was an intellectual not a religious family, the father being something of a liberal Catholic and the mother a Protestant. In this atmosphere of the salon, and what Shook calls the *haute* or *grande bourgeoisie*, Jacques was well to do enough to embrace the social causes of the workers far from his own status enjoying the ideals of a Tolstoy as he began university life occupied with the causes his mentor, Charles Péguy, espoused.

Gilson was born in 1884 into a *petite bourgeoisie* family of no distinguished lineage that would be comparable to Maritain; it was, however, a hard-working, practicing Catholic family. Gilson, a bright son, was drawn to studies and early on conceived the ambition to become a teacher in the French educational system—with all the financial security a position as a civil servant, a *fonctionnaire*, could promise.

Where Maritain and his fiancée, Raissa, the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants, were disappointed in the Sorbonne, Gilson threw himself into the opportunity he had to succeed within the system. He worked hard to climb the steps which eventually led to his first teaching positions within the French educational organization where, as I understand it, all was ultimately controlled by the Ministry of Education in Paris. Gilson's middle class background was such that he was pleased to be employed in an educational system where one began teaching in some provincial city looking toward Paris as the ultimate rung on the ladder of success should one be so fortunate to return to the Sorbonne or a comparable institute of learning.

This is not the place to review Gilson's climb to the top by listing a series of teaching posts. I shall rather go on to several extra academic events which must have shaped his political reflections. Like most other healthy French youths at the turn of the century, Gilson took his year of military training at the age of eighteen. Then he went on with what we think of as his graduate studies. Like Maritain,

dominated by other parties who had only a confused and caricature understanding of what Catholics stood for. It was, as if, in the post-revolution era Catholics had abdicated their responsibility to stand up and be counted for the political positions to which they should give support. Given the intellectual and moral tradition the Church had developed, he particularly argued that Catholics had failed to have the impact they might have in the field of education, and he was attempting to rally them to do something in this cause. Gilson invited those of his readers who were persuaded by him that it was time to take action toward bringing Catholic educational principles to the contemporary social milieu to give their support to the Dominican Fathers' journal *Sept*. By aiding the journal Gilson believed there would be a focal point for Catholic intellectuals to work to change what had become, no longer a Catholic France, but a secular, pagan France dominated by free-thinkers and anti-clerics.

³ Laurence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984).

⁴ *Notes et Documents* (Rome) 17 (October-December, 1979), p. 12ff.

Gilson attended and was fascinated with the lectures of Henri Bergson. Particularly exciting were Bergson's affirmations of the validity of metaphysical thinking.

Embarked on his career and hard at work on his dissertation on Descartes, Gilson was called to military service in 1914 with the outbreak of what became World War I in 1914. In the light of his later work in philosophy I have always found it interesting that his specialty was machine gun instruction. He came also to serve in the trenches, and in the historic battle of Verdun, he was almost killed. He was captured and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of war, where in addition to polishing his German he made use of the chance to learn Russian from fellow prisoners.

In June 1940, during World War II, Gilson was home in France when it collapsed and surrendered to the German army. He was approached several times during the occupation by the Nazi authorities but he refused to co-operate with them. Instead he devoted his energies to teaching and the revision of his writings. The famous fifth edition of *Le Thomisme* appeared in 1944. With the liberation of Paris in the late summer of 1944, he was able to make contact again with some colleagues in North America.

Here also is when what might be considered his political activity began. The government of Charles de Gaulle made him a member of the French delegation that went to San Francisco in April 1945 to work on the creation of the United Nations. Gilson's remarkable language skills (he was quite fluent in English and could understand and speak Russian) proved of great help to the delegation. With the completion of the conference it was a great joy to him that he was able to stop in Toronto and renew his friendships with colleagues at the Institute on his way home.

Returning to France in late summer 1945 and looking forward to returning full-time to teaching he was again prevailed upon to serve his country as a participant in an October London conference on education and intellectual co-operation. This conference later became the originating organization of UNESCO. Once more he was gaining experience with international politics. Incidentally, about the time Gilson was preparing to go to San Francisco for the United Nations, Charles de Gaulle appointed Jacques Maritain French ambassador to the Vatican in March, 1945.

Maritain's influence on European politics in that post-war period was significant. In the different countries there were active Communist parties which benefited from the fact that some of their members had established heroic records during the occupation as members of the Resistance. But balancing them were the Christian Democratic parties which had been inspired by Maritain's writings, and these parties were, in fact, forming the governments of the Netherlands, Belgium, West Germany and Italy. In France, the party took the name of Mouvement Republicain Populaire (MRP) led by such ex-professors as Georges Bidault and Maurice Schumann.

In fact Gilson was invited to stand for election in 1947; he consented but lost the nomination. However, there was some provision whereby the MRP could

appoint a certain number of members to a Senate-like Counsel, and in 1947 Gilson was appointed. He served two years, 1947-1949, during which he found himself in the middle of the legislative process and party politics; years he considered his least productive in a political sense. He felt as if he had accomplished nothing.

In an interview some years later he said:

What I realized most is that there is no difference between being a senator and being nothing. In a few cases I risked giving advice to some minister, but I was not listened to ... I feel I got nothing at all out of my experience as a senator. It might have been better had I been able to do something ... but I felt no satisfaction. For the most part, in France, deputies and senators don't count for much.⁵

While his actual experience of politics was disappointing, his participation in the political process provided an occasion for Gilson to crystallize his thinking about political democracy.

In Canada during the fall semester, 1947, he accepted the invitation of two groups to speak on the philosophy of liberalism. The first group was a National Summer Conference of the Liberal party at the McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario and the second was the Political Science Society, at the University of Toronto. While they were two different talks, the structure and the message of the talks was the same: how political democracy must work for economic democracy, not in the Marxist way of State Capitalism, but by using state power to promote the economic welfare of the various societies, such as the families and unions, to better achieve social justice.

Now that sentence summarizes, but does not do justice to, some twenty-five pages of closely reasoned text of which I will give a precis in a moment. But before I do I shall make a couple of comments to set the scene.

First, unlike Maritain in *Man and the State*, Gilson does not give a deep analysis of political terms such as: body politic, sovereignty, state and so on. He uses ordinary political words in an ordinary, conversational way. He does at one point use the distinction between "individual" and "person," and here his clarification is along the same lines as Maritain as they both reflect traditional Thomistic teaching.

Second, remember Gilson is speaking in 1947, just two years after the end of World War II. The Western nations had not had time to enjoy their military success before they were confronted with a militant Marxism that came to fruition in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Even from within various European countries vigorous Marxist political groups rose as opposition parties to the Christian Democratic governments. Gilson was most concerned with the threat of Marxist successes even at the polls.

Gilson's 1947 lecture begins with the recognition that democracy with its promise of political liberty had been generally successful in the civilized countries. Now people have the vote and can choose their governments. But this political

⁵ Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 275.

equality has not brought social and economic equality; while many have political liberty they have not economic liberty; some have and enjoy much greater power than others in virtue of their economic status. This, he recognizes, is the strength of the Marxist critique of capitalistic social system. Gilson is not attracted to Marxism: "I quite agree that Marxism is a plague, but so long as we don't know what germ is the cause of a catching disease, we are unable to stop it ... If we want to remove Marxism we should first remove its cause."⁶

In other words Gilson takes the temptation for Marxism on the part of many workers very seriously; he sees further that the solution the Marxists propose to gain economic equality leads to the denial of political liberty, and so that is no solution. We must, he argues, invent an alternative to unfettered capitalism and Marxism, and that alternative is the full realization of political democracy. "...The creating of social and economic democracy will mean nothing else than our firm resolution to carry justice everywhere into all orders of human relations. Such is the full meaning of the word: Democracy."⁷

This assertion provides the occasion for Gilson to clarify for his audience the distinction between "individual" and "person" which, as I have mentioned he does in such a fashion as Maritain would approve. Gilson concludes: "I would say that fully to own oneself is, for every human person, the very essence of its own liberty."⁸

Keep in mind Gilson is speaking as a philosopher, not a member of a political party; he is also a Frenchman addressing a Canadian audience, and he is careful to keep a certain level of abstraction—and not to identify with the political program of any party in any country—yet he does not want to be so abstract that his thinking could be dismissed as pious generality. It is here that he turns to the groups we belong to as social animals, especially our families, and speaks of the obligation of the state to protect and foster such groups, including our professions and churches, so that they can function well and enable us to become worthy of being human persons.

While he repudiates Marxism, which could cancel human or personal liberty, Gilson is concerned with providing some area for state intervention that would enhance the common good. "... The proper function of the modern State is to insure the common good of all, by putting at the disposal of various social groups all the legal and technical means which they need in order to achieve themselves their own ends."⁹

He sees the state's role as being the protector and helper of those social groups outside of which there can be no personal liberty. Again it is the family he has especially in mind as it has the first responsibility to feed, clothe, house and educate its children. And Gilson is not against State intervention to preserve the economic

⁶ This is from a photocopy of the text Gilson typed himself for delivery to the Political Science Society, Toronto, pp. 7-8. The original is in the Gilson Archives, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

functioning of a country in crisis situations. He makes reference to two situations: a coal laborers' strike in Great Britain in 1947 and a railroad workers' strike in France that same year. He approved of using state power to end what could be regarded as economic anarchy. Again it is the State's role to promote conditions of social justice.¹⁰

Reporting on Gilson's lecture at McMaster University, Shook states: "Gilson's address drew a tremendous response from his audience. He reported to Thérèse [his wife] that 'never have I received such an ovation' " and one journalist who attended reported some young liberals were moved to dedicate themselves to a life of public service."¹¹

Let us now compare Maritain and Gilson on world government.

With respect to the problem of world government, or as Maritain prefers to call it, "a genuinely political organization of the world," Maritain is cautiously favorable in *Man and the State*. He quotes approvingly his friend Mortimer Adler's 1944 book *How to Think About War and Peace*¹² and agrees with the basic argument that absent some world organization we are doomed to international anarchy. The price of peace is some sort of world government; however, the investment nations have in their political autonomy remains for the time being a barrier to such an organization. It is recognized that in a different way there is a world economic interdependence, and no nation is self-sufficient. For Maritain the logic of the fact that no nation is a perfect society complete unto itself dictates a conclusion of some sort of World State despite contemporary obstacles towards its achievement.¹³

Some twenty years later, in 1970, Mortimer Adler was editor-in-chief of *The Great Ideas Today*, a yearbook sold to purchasers of the Britannica set, *The Great Books of the Western World*. The purpose of the yearbook was to relate the so-called great ideas to the events of the contemporary world. To that end, a theme, often a question or controversy, would be chosen as an organizing principle and leading thinkers would be invited to contribute their thoughts to some aspect of the question. Thus their essays would constitute a symposium on the topic. In 1970 Otto Bird, Adler's assistant at that time, wrote Gilson to invite him to contribute his thoughts on "the world community, not world government—where it stands today, the chances for its further development and obstacles to it, the necessity for it, its feasibility etc..." Gilson, then in his mid-80's, was living in retirement in his country home, Vermenton, and the honorarium for the essay (\$1,000) was inviting. So he set to work and wrote a dozen typewritten pages which were never published, since there was apparently a change of mind on the part of the editors. The manuscript exists amongst Gilson's papers in Toronto, and I shall

¹⁰ This is from a photocopy of the text Gilson typed himself for delivery to the Political Science Society, Toronto, p. 22. The original is in the Gilson Archives, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto.

¹¹ Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, chap. 8, p. 279.

¹² Mortimer Adler, *How to Think About War and Peace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944).

¹³ *Man and the State*, chap. 8.

use it as an indication of his mature reflections on this issue. To summarize, Gilson was much more skeptical and pessimistic on the feasibility of a world community than Maritain had been.

Perhaps here is the place to mention that Gilson had given a series of lectures at Louvain University, Belgium, in 1952, which were published as *Les Métamorphoses de la Cité de Dieu*¹⁴ in which he explored the role of Christendom in the universal community of men. He examined the different forms the concept of a universal community had taken in the Western tradition, citing the writings, not only of Augustine, but Roger Bacon in the 13th century, Dante in his *De Monarchia* and so on.¹⁵ The book was never translated into English, and in a note to Bird, Gilson refers to it saying: "The book fell still born from the press; it has taken it nearly twenty years to get out of print." In *Les Métamorphoses* Gilson was somewhat more optimistic of an ecumenical project of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam working together.

On the "world community" Gilson was quite pessimistic. "The chief obstacle to the founding of a world community lies in the artificiality of the project. Of itself, nature would not produce such a community, only human minds can think of it and, if needs be, proceed to the elimination of those of the actually given societies of which the destruction is required on order to make room for the universal one."¹⁶

A few lines later Gilson continues:

To substitute an artificially conceived world community for the teeming multiplicity of the national groups would be to lessen the culture of the earth in both quantity and quality. The history of past civilizations shows this to be true.¹⁷

Gilson seemed to believe that even a united states of Europe (something that today one can say is being created with the creation of a common currency) would be "positively frightening." He says:

One can lay down as a sort of rule that the fecundity of world culture is directly proportional to the number of its centers and in inverse ratio to their sizes. To the question, where does the project of a world community stand today? The obvious answer suggested by the preceding remarks is that it exists only under the form of a pious wish unsure of the exact nature of its object ... True societies are born, not made.¹⁸

There is more, of course, but this indicates the contrast between the optimism of Maritain and the realism of Gilson on this matter.

An account of Gilson's political thinking would be incomplete if no reference were given to what his biographer, Shook, calls "*l'Affaire Gilson*." In 1950, a year after his wife, Therese, had died of leukemia he returned to his teaching in Toronto,

¹⁴ Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1952.

¹⁵ Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 315.

¹⁶ The original paper is in Gilson's Toronto Archives.

¹⁷ Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

and in the course of the year decided to resign his Paris professorship at the Collège de France. He had been working on Duns Scotus for some time, and along with this book, his lectures and seminars dealt with different aspects of Scotus' thought.

What I shall report here is almost entirely taken from Shook's biography of Gilson, and I shall largely be summarizing his account.¹⁷ At the invitation of his old friend, Gerald B. Phelan, Gilson went in late November, 1950, to give a short series of four lectures sponsored by the University of Notre Dame Medieval Institute. Along with the lectures there was a busy series of luncheons and dinners to celebrate Gilson's visit, and winding up the parties was a dinner hosted by a Professor James Corbett and his wife, Suzanne, on a Saturday evening. As the give and take of the conversation flowed Gilson presented his position of "neutralism" as the best course for France in this era of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States.

This was not an off the cuff remark; in a series of articles in *Le Monde* earlier in 1950, Gilson had argued that were there to be an armed conflict between the United States and Russia, France should try to remain neutral. To better put this in context it has to be remembered how challenged the free world had been by the success of communist takeovers in Eastern Europe and China, and the tensions arising in Korea and Greece. Also, Gilson had been a prisoner of war in World War I and had lived through the Nazi occupation of France in World War II. Gilson feared what he considered a real possibility of war between the United States and Russia and the consequences for his country, his family, and himself. In those days NATO was still in formation, and Gilson had little confidence that France could resist invasion if a military conflict occurred, and he was afraid the USA could not protect France.

With hindsight we can recognize that Gilson was mistaken; NATO and the deterrence of the bomb helped to keep what peace we had during this Cold War period, but do not forget the United Nations' armies were fighting in Korea. The United States was fully engaged in the Korean conflict, which had begun the previous June, and, at best, was just holding its own in that conflict.

The day following that dinner party Gilson, Phelan, and Peter O'Reilly drove to Milwaukee where Gilson presented a lecture at Marquette University. The lecture was one of those he had just given at Notre Dame. He then returned to Toronto on December 4th to enjoy the company of Jacques Maritain, who had just arrived to spend a short visit. On December 12th, Gilson wrote the French Ministry of Education to announce his decision to retire from his professorship at the Collège de France, something he was quite entitled to do, however, he did it without first discussing his intent with his Parisian colleagues. From their point of view, he appeared to be deserting France for North America, and it was not a welcomed move.

¹⁷ Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, pp. 301-10.

A few days later, December 15, 1950, the Catholic weekly *Commonweal* published an "Open Letter to Étienne Gilson" by Waldemar Gurian, distinguished professor of political philosophy at Notre Dame, the editor of *The Review of Politics*, and a regular contributor to *The Commonweal*. While complimenting Gilson on his Scotus lectures he accused him "of spreading the sad gospel of defeatism." Gurian continued: "You have stunned those whom you have met with your prophecy that France will be occupied by the Red Army without much resistance and that the United States will not do much about it." There is more, of course, but that is enough for our purposes: the article was picked up and reprinted in the French press, as well as other papers and journals and Gilson was treated like a traitor. It stunned the poor man (he was in his late sixties) and he was devastated by the controversy. Of course some rushed to his defense but *The Commonweal* refused to publish a retraction even after it became clear that Gurian had not himself attended the social event on which he based his article but had apparently written it upon hearing the gossip of someone else who had been present at the dinner conversation.

Gilson was deeply hurt and while Phelan and others who were there put out the correct version of what was actually said, Gilson had to suffer the humiliation of seeing his distinguished reputation damaged. More than that, the feelings in France ran so hotly against him that when his colleagues at the Collège de France gathered to vote on what his pension would be he was denied it. Later the pension was restored and later also Gurian wrote Gilson to apologize for the harm he had done and for the way he did it. As Shook reports it, the "*l'Affaire Gilson*" was a depressing event that damaged his reputation in France.¹⁸

Gilson, as I have indicated, did not offer a fully developed political philosophy such as Maritain offered, but he took his role as a philosopher and Catholic citizen seriously. And when invited he not only participated in the political life he shared his reflections. Most of these reflections were in French daily papers which are not easily accessed in the English speaking world. However thanks to the Gilson archives in Toronto I have tried to present a sample of Gilson's thinking about political democracy in comparison to that of Jacques Maritain.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 310. Anthony O. Simon at the Maritain conference in Colorado Springs in 1998 spoke informally of the role his father, Yves R. Simon, had played in prompting Gurian to write his apology. It was Yves Simon who composed a letter of apology and forced Gurian to sign and send it to Gilson.