

JOHN J. CONLEY, S.J.

Introduction

Disputed Questions of Redemption



Jacques Maritain's *Redeeming the Time* is a collection of essays treating a wide diversity of philosophical subjects.¹ Topics covered include metaphysics, politics, religion, semiotics, mysticism, progress, love, skepticism, and anti-Semitism. Prominent philosophers treated range from Pascal to Bergson. In his foreword to the English translation of his work, Maritain himself recognized the disparate nature of the issues analyzed by the various essays. But he insisted that the work still possessed an underlying unity: the essays apply the perennial truths of Thomistic philosophy to the pressing social issues of his time, the tormented period of the Depression and the early years of World War II. "I believe . . . that philosophy attains its aims, particularly in practical matters, only when vitally united with every source of light and experience in the human mind. Thus it becomes able, in its own intellectual domain, to ransom the time, and to redeem every human search after truth, however it wanders, in manifold, even opposite ways."² As the essays unfold, Maritain uses the philosophical realism of Aquinas to correct erroneous views on equality, justice, religious tolerance, progress, and the Jews that were current at the time. The originality of Maritain's version of Thomism appears in his sympathetic but critical analysis of Bergsonian intuition and in his use of the term *connaturality* to explore the phenomenon of mystical knowledge.

1. See Jacques Maritain, *Redeeming the Time*, translated by Harry Lorin Bisse (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1944). An earlier version of this translation was published as *Ransoming the Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941).

2. *Ibid.*, v.

Maritain's *Redeeming the Time* inspired the collection of philosophical essays we are presenting in our new anthology *Redeeming Philosophy: From Metaphysics to Aesthetics*. Maritain's book remains the prime reference and point of continuity for the authors in this volume, but not all provide a philosophical commentary on the actual text of Maritain. Each of the essays, however, follows Maritain's fundamental project in *Redeeming the Time*: the use of the resources of philosophical realism, as found in the works of Aristotle and Aquinas, to challenge and redeem a certain defect in contemporary social relations or in contemporary philosophy. Using the different analytical methods of philosophy, theology, history, literary criticism, and political science, the authors develop a realist critique of contemporary theories of human nature, Christology, equality, gender, and education. Walker Percy and contemporary American feminists now enjoy the critical realist analysis Maritain had once employed to interpret Pascal and Bergson.

I. From Metaphysics to Aesthetics

Despite their diversity, the five metaphysical papers all exhibit the "personalist" turn which characterized much of the Thomistic philosophy developed in the twentieth century. Analysis of being-in-itself is conjoined with analysis of the subject who comes to know being and of the various paths of cognition by which the noetic agent arrives at the recognition of being itself.

John F. X. Knasas studies the human person as an abstractor of being. Rather than passively gazing upon being or dispassionately analyzing its nature or implications, the dynamic subject abstracts being from the external world and forms an internal concept of being that incorporates the awe and other passions provoked by the recognition of being as such. In her study of contemplation, Heather M. Erb sides with Maritain and Aquinas in arguing for the link between mystical knowledge and dogma. Even natural mysticism, apparently spontaneous and free from dogmatic commitments, operates within a community marked by at least implicit religious doctrines. In his study of the metaphysics of Yves Simon, longtime friend of Maritain, Daniel De Haan argues that the transcendentals are already present in the act of sensation when the noetic agent grasps the *species in medio*. The agent is an intentional actor rather than a passive blank slate in the presence of the external material world. James Capehart's paper turns to questions of philosophical anthropology. In a defense of hylomorphism,

he rejects the theory that the human person is an incarnate spirit; such an approach smacks of angelism and minimizes the properly corporeal dimension of humanity. Similarly, he rejects the claims of some Thomistic commentators that Aquinas himself had held the “incarnate spirit” view. In his commentary on the last essay in *Redeeming the Time*, “The Natural Mystical Experience and the Void,” Michael Novak relates Maritain’s theory of the void to the nihilism found in existentialists of the period, notably Sartre and Camus. He demonstrates how Maritain’s combat against this nihilism through the path of mysticism can illuminate contemporary citizens who often experience a vertiginous void before the dazzling array of choices offered by a consumer society—choices which concern religious affiliation, moral commitments, family arrangements, and sexuality as much as they concern food, fashion, and recreation.

The theological essays similarly cover a wide spectrum of topics: Christology, moral controversies, the sacraments, and the practice of theology itself. They explore how Maritain’s brand of Thomism might assist the church in understanding the theoretical and practical controversies which have roiled her since Vatican II.

Roger W. Nutt transfers the metaphysical question of essence to the field of Christology. He underlines that Aquinas insisted there was a single divine essence uniting and animating the two natures (divine/human) in Christ. He criticizes treatments of Christological essence which subtly downplay Christ’s unity. James F. Keating’s essay insists on the duty for Catholic theology to be credible in every generation. He criticizes the tendency of some contemporary theologians, appalled by the hostile anti-Christian nature of elite opinion, to form a Neo-Scholastic cocoon impervious to external intellectual trends and questions. He uses ecclesiastical history to argue that the quest to show that the faith is reasonable to its cultured despisers has always been one of the church’s prime intellectual objectives. Bernard Doering studies Maritain’s position on the most controversial moral issue in the church toward the end of Maritain’s life: contraception. Analyzing the letters exchanged on the subject between Maritain and Cardinal Charles Journet, a prominent Swiss theologian, Doering explains why Maritain was not convinced by the natural lawyers’ traditional arguments but also why Maritain attempted to provide convincing reasons for priests to support Paul VI’s defense of the ban on contraception in *Humane Vitae* (1968). Turning to the practical life of worship, John J. Conley uses the semiotic

theory of Maritain to probe the practice of the sacraments in their reformed version established in the wake of Vatican II.

History is the focus of Randall Smith's paper. He criticizes the gradual erosion of meaning in the ancient Judeo-Christian version of history. This linear version of history, which replaced the cyclical account of history more common among the pagan Greeks, was a history marked by hope, since it conceived history as a series of milestones pointing toward the coming of the Messiah, the return of Christ, the parousia, and the divinely-graced new heaven and new earth. But as faith in Christ declined, hope gradually vanished and the linear history now stumbled on under a veil of nihilism. The Victorian agnostic writer Matthew Arnold becomes the literary symbol of the educated person who can no longer find meaning in the claims of religion and finds disenchanted nature of little solace. According to Smith, only a revival of faith, focused on Christ and his grace, can bring authentic hope to contemporaries who now tend to choose the quiet nihilism of self-indulgence or the violent nihilism of political utopianism.

Aesthetic and literary concerns were always central in the philosophy of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. The novelist Léon Bloy, the painter Georges Rouault, the dramatist Henri Ghéon, and the surrealist Jean Cocteau became close friends and correspondents with the couple. Their salon at Meudon became the center of many artists and writers associated with the *Renaissance catholique* of the interwar years.³ The essays presented in our current anthology emphasize the literary influences on and of Jacques Maritain as his work became diffused throughout the francophone and Anglophone worlds.

Commenting on the essay "The Mystery of Israel" in *Redeeming the Time*, C. A. Tsakiridou questions the nature of the defense of the Jews and the critique of anti-Semitism developed by Maritain. In his portrait of Israel as a people doomed to endless exile and the sufferings of an elect nation, Tsakiridou detects the unbenign influence of the black mysticism of suffering championed by Maritain's early mentor, Léon Bloy, and his later colleagues, Georges Rouault and Jean Cocteau. In an exercise in literary history, John Marson Dunaway studies the specific influences of Maritain on two American writers: Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor. Responding to "Sign and Symbol" in *Redeeming the Time*, Joshua Hren estab-

3. For a discussion of the large artistic circle of the Maritains, see Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystical Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919–1933*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

lishes a parallel between the semiotics of Maritain and that of the American novelist Walker Percy. In particular, he addresses the fascination of each author for the limits of language as a method of self-communication.

Throughout his life Maritain was involved as a public intellectual in various causes of social reform. His writings on education tried to heal the fissure between the Catholic Church and the anticlerical republic on the question of French education. He was a principal influence on the Declaration of Human Rights drawn up at the founding of the United Nations. Somewhat to the consternation of other Thomists, he attempted to provide philosophical justification for the parliamentary democracies which had survived the totalitarian nightmare of the middle of the twentieth century. Inspired by Maritain and more broadly by the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition he represents, several essays in our collection develop a critique of contemporary social practices and theories from the perspective of philosophical realism. Education, equality, peacemaking, and economic justice pass in review.

Anne M. Wiles's study of education explains how Maritain places human personality at the center of his philosophy of education. Samantha Bertrand reaches further back to Aristotle to indicate how Aristotle properly prized formation to become a gentleman as the principal end of education. She champions this Aristotelian emphasis on character formation as a necessary, humanistic corrective to the more functionalist practices of education current today. Bernadette E. O'Connor uses Maritain's essay, "Human Inequality," in *Redeeming the Time* to correct several distorted theories of equality defended by some contemporary American feminists. On a more mystical note, Nikolaj Zunic argues that the quest for peace can only find fulfillment in the peace and harmony achieved within the individual mind. Purely political efforts to eradicate conflict will only disappoint. In his study of the Thomist philosopher Yves Simon's economic philosophy, Thomas R. Rourke argues that Simon focused the modern drive for economic equality on the struggle to remove institutionalized forms of unequal exchange.

II. Prospectus

The essays collected in this volume, all authored by members of the American Maritain Association, indicate the particular issues which will probably preoccupy Thomistic philosophers in the near future.

First, the question of the person recurs in many of these essays. The definition of the human person remains a political as well as a metaphysical controversy. How is personhood reconciled with the hylomorphic definition of human nature? How does human personhood differ from the angelic and divine? What are we to make of our close relationship to other simians, a closeness made ever more obvious through new genetic discoveries? The onset and cessation of human personhood remain philosophical questions which are currently ripping apart national and international society. Educating for virtuous personhood is a noble goal, but just what are the methods which advance or obstruct such a project?

Second, Thomism has a particular service to offer the church in her current theological reflection. In a time of vague spirituality which concedes much to idiosyncratic experience, Thomist authors stress objective precision as they discuss the natures of Christ and the visible marks of the true Church. In contradistinction to a purely internal mysticism, Thomists focus on the specific traits of the sacraments, right down to form and matter. During a time when moral reflection tends to emphasize intention and circumstance, Thomist ethics underlines the moral significance of the specific human act.

Third, the Maritainian variant of Thomism in particular refuses to limit philosophical analysis to the study of propositional phrases. In the world of human symbolic expression, poetry, music, and painting become the object of extensive philosophical exploration. The locus of truth cannot be reduced to scientific discourse alone. Beyond the artistic symbols created by humanity as expressions of the rational soul lies the silence of the mystic, much explored by Maritain and his disciples under the rubric of con-naturalness. Rather than being marginal, such silent knowing constitutes the highest knowledge of the human person, the moment at which the sublime simplicity of God begins to possess the human soul, otherwise so scattered.

Finally, the Thomist authors gathered in this collection indicate the various ways in which Thomism constitutes an exercise in being a public intellectual. The philosophical argument is never far from the medieval *disputatio*. Thomists will continue to use the resources of philosophical realism to contest the distorted theories of human nature which have sanctioned our ambient culture of death and reduced education to vo-tech drills. In this new age of *in vitro* fertilization and the iPad, the old Thomist quarrel with modernity's illusions of progress fights on.