

NATIONALISM, POSITIVISM
AND
CATHOLICISM

The Politics of Charles Maurras and
French Catholics
1890–1914

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INTRODUCTION

'Maurras is driven by two obsessions, to combat Romanticism and to combat the Revolution. They are, for him, a break with our traditions. And so with pitiless clairvoyance he seizes on everything that encourages this double disorder.' So wrote Maurice Barrès in 1905 of his friend, Charles Maurras.¹ Barrès's remark was percipient enough: nonetheless, the author of *Le Culte du moi* could have added that, in Maurras's eyes, romanticism and the ideas of 1789 were but two aspects of the same ill, namely an individualism that exaggerated the dignity and significance of the individual person to the detriment of the social and political order of which the individual is a mere part. Individualism was the central obsession of Maurras that encompassed all others and, indeed, in his concern with what he viewed as the maladies of the narcissistic conscience and the egocentric self, his more important aesthetic, political and religious ideas assumed a coherence and interdependence that preclude a sharp delineation of the political element of his thought.

It was with a view to combating the pernicious effects of individualism, especially in the political sphere, that, from about the time of the Dreyfus Affair, Maurras nurtured the idea of an alliance between Positivists and Catholics. This was a development on Maurras's part of Auguste Comte's bizarre idea, at the close of his life, of forging an alliance with the Jesuits, the outcome of which was a comic fiasco. Maurras, however, within the framework of the Action Française, had somewhat more success. Admittedly, in the years before the First World War, when Maurras's idea had some currency, only one notable from the dwindling band of orthodox Comtists,

Antoine Baumann, was seriously associated with the Action Française, while, of the practising or believing Catholics in the movement, Léon de Montesquiou was the sole person of any importance to show a deep understanding of and sympathy for Comte's system. Yet, in a much looser sense, Maurras, as ideological leader of the Action Française from as early as the close of 1899, may be regarded as having succeeded remarkably well in uniting in a doctrinaire political movement – where at least lip service was paid to Comte – a number of intelligent men, of whom some were of a decidedly anti-theological and anti-metaphysical disposition and some others serious Catholics.

Whatever the actual success of the desired alliance, it assumed another significance in the context of Maurras's own expressed thought. That such an alliance was not only desirable but also possible from Maurras's standpoint, the standpoint of a self-declared agnostic and profound admirer of Comte, was above all a form of avowal that his own political ideas were quite compatible with those legitimate and proper for a Catholic. And this was a conviction that he voiced regularly.

The plausibility of this same conviction was challenged by Marc Sangnier in 1904 when he pointedly contrasted the political options afforded by the 'Monarchal Positivism of the Action Française' and the 'Social Christianity of the Sillon'. This initiated a long polemic between himself and Maurras, which formed the subject matter of the book, *Le Dilemme de Marc Sangnier*, that Maurras published at the end of 1906, precisely at the moment the Law of 9 December 1905 providing for the separation of Church and State came fully into force.

The appearance of Maurras's book inspired or provoked Pedro Descoqs, a French Jesuit who was later to gain some minor distinction as a Scholastic philosopher and theologian, to write a detailed work, *A travers l'œuvre de M. Ch. Maurras*, which was published in serialized form in the Jesuit review, *Etudes*, in 1909. In spite of serious reservations about certain aspects of Maurras's thought (some of which had already been expressed by Etienne Lamy in 1907 and 1908 in the pages of the Catholic review, *Le Correspondant*), Descoqs found a significant degree of compatibility between many of Maurras's ideas and Catholic doctrine, and he therefore gave guarded approval to Catholic participation in the Action Française.

Such a judgement from the authoritative *Etudes* was not to go unanswered. In 1910 Descoqs's thoughts on this matter and Maurras's ideas in general were subject to scathing and hostile attacks by Maurice Blondel and Lucien Laberthonnière – sometimes loosely or incorrectly described as 'Catholic Modernists' – in articles written for their own review, *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*. The controversy thus started, once described by Henri Massis as the sole theologico-political debate worthy of Maurras,² continued until 1913 and spawned books by all three polemicists, namely Blondel's privately circulated *Catholicisme social et monophorisme* (*monophorisme* being a neologism coined by Blondel himself to denote a too clerical and unilateral imposition of Christian faith), Laberthonnière's *Positivismisme et catholicisme à propos de l'Action française*, and Descoqs's *Monophorisme et Action française*. Also involved at the periphery of the controversy were, on Laberthonnière's side, the historian and journalist Pierre Imbart de la Tour, and on Descoqs's side, his fellow Jesuit Yves de La Brière, later a professor of international law at the Institut Catholique in Paris as well as one of the minor villains in Julien Benda's *La Trahison des clercs*.

These, in brief, are the ideas and events that form the subject matter of this present work, whose time span is one of some twenty-five years, from about 1890 (when Maurras's doctrine of nationalism started to take shape) until the eve of the First World War.

As has already been indicated, Maurras's enthusiasm at the turn of the century for Comtian Positivism was not to fire the Action Française movement. And the Catholic controversy proved one that was quickly forgotten in the face of the terrible reality of war. Nonetheless, today, historical attention to Maurras's idea of an alliance between Positivists and Catholics, as well as to the controversy that surrounded it, may serve to throw light on a number of questions meriting clarification or elucidation.

First, there is the question of Maurras's nationalism and his own appreciation of Positivism. The nature and extent of Maurras's intellectual debt to Comte has long remained obscure. For instance, W.M. Simon in his general survey, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century*, claimed that Maurras was influenced hardly at all by Comte. Yet Maurras himself had

claimed that his debt to Comte was great. Both cannot be right. On the hypothetical supposition that there was an intellectual debt, the problem poses itself of in what way, if at all, Maurras's nationalism was linked in his own mind to his appreciation of Positivism.

Related to this last question is the further question of the place of Maurras's nationalism in the intellectual context of nationalism throughout Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Elie Kedourie, in his book *Nationalism*, has outlined what might be termed the spiritual dimension of doctrinaire nationalism, and, in particular, he has pointed out the importance of Kant's self-styled Copernican revolution in metaphysics and ethics for later European political thought, and how the subjectivism of a certain post-Kantian tradition was a factor making for the essential romanticism of doctrinaire nationalism (notably in Germany). But Maurras himself abhorred Kantianism and all German idealism, and he viewed his own nationalism as a political option in favour of a set of aesthetic and social values that were above all classical and therefore the antithesis of all that was romantic (and Germanic). He liked to stress that there was a great divide separating his type of nationalism from that of Fichte. Yet the question remains of what credibility to accord to Maurras when he conveys the impression that his nationalism was resolutely pre-Kantian in its philosophical presuppositions and profoundly anti-romantic in its timbre.

To seek to pin down the spiritual or intellectual quality of Maurras's nationalism is also of interest in a wider context. During the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, there was no dearth in Europe of ideologues of one form or other of political absolutism. And Maurras, who from the time of the Dreyfus Affair distinguished himself as an ardent defender of *raison d'Etat*, must be ranked amongst their number. It is only a just appreciation of his nationalism that can show to what extent his particular political absolutism was based on some definite coherent thought structure rather than on mere personal inclination or prejudice.

Whatever the exact nature of this nationalism, it is evident enough that, in doctrinal terms, there was something problem-

atic about Maurras's rallying call to all good Positivists and Catholics to join together to promote their common interest. And it is not to be wondered that it was the source of controversy.

Thus, any attentive reader of Maurras's writings published prior to, say, the Separation Law of 1905 could not but pose the question of whether Maurras's particular mixture of insistent anti-individualism and intense Hellenism was at all compatible with views of worldly activity derivable from Christian conceptions of the nature and end of man.

Yet, in answer to any such questioning, Maurras himself could point to his own public admiration of Aquinas and, in particular, of the Angelic Doctor's achievement in appropriating for the purposes of Christian theology not only Aristotle's metaphysics but Aristotle's social and political thought as well. He could also point to the fact that, at the very time of the Catholic controversy over his Positivism, the two officially most prominent French neo-Thomists of the day, namely the Rome-based Jesuit cardinal Louis Billot and the Dominican Thomas Pègues, had both openly manifested their sympathy for his political thinking. Especially to their liking had been Maurras's dismissal of liberal democracy: there were accordingly references to Maurras in the second volume of Billot's *Tractatus de Ecclesia Christi*, entitled *De habitudine Ecclesiae ad civilem societatem*, which was published in 1910, and also in Pègues's article, 'La Théorie du pouvoir dans saint Thomas', which was published in the *Revue thomiste* in 1911.

The sympathy of such neo-Thomists as these, as well as of lesser lights, was the object of some reflection by Etienne Gilson in his autobiographical work, *Le Philosophe et la théologie*, and he evinced surprise at the apparent connection between certain of their interpretations of Aquinas's thought and their predilection for Maurras's political theorizing.³ More recently, Pierre Thibault, in his book *Savoir et pouvoir: philosophie thomiste et politique cléricale au XIX^e siècle* (prefaced by Emile Poulat, who stresses the continuity between the pontificates of Leo XIII and Pius X), has suggested an answer to Gilson's perplexity: the revival of Thomism by Leo XIII, argues Thibault, was dictated by clerical or quasi-political reasons rather than by any dis-

passionate love of philosophy, and in the framework of this general thesis Thibault lets it be understood that it was no mere coincidence that such an ideological restoration saw Maurras on the side of Thomism and Blondel and Laberthonnière opposed to it.⁴

All this raises the question of to what extent this controversy about Maurras's Positivism, to which Blondel and Laberthonnière were party, entailed some more basic controversy about Thomism. This is a question that it is all the more natural to pose given that at the turn of the century Blondel was not a popular figure in certain neo-Thomist circles, that Laberthonnière had published in 1904 a book, *Le Réalisme chrétien et l'idéalisme grec*, in which he pointed out a sharp opposition between Greek and Christian philosophy, and also that Laberthonnière towards the end of his life became quite obsessively anti-Thomist.

Whatever the significance in the controversy of different attitudes towards Thomism, there is the more basic question – once the protagonists' main arguments have been identified – of how to place these same arguments in a proper historical context. Clearly Maurras's own conviction that his Positivist politics was compatible with Catholicism involved certain assumptions about the relation between politics and religion, in particular about the specificity and relative autonomy of politics as a sphere of human activity and also about the relation between Church and State. And these assumptions were indeed debated by Descoqs, Blondel and Laberthonnière. It remains, therefore, to set their differing ideas off from one another against the wider background of the history of political and ecclesiological thought.

Another aspect of the controversy is the mere fact of the involvement of Blondel and Laberthonnière. For diverse reasons, Blondel and (to a lesser extent) Laberthonnière are figures who have been the subject of considerable scholarly attention both in France and elsewhere. Yet there has been little historical effort to see what their involvement in this particular controversy represented.⁵

Thus, it has sometimes been pointed out that Blondel was personally acquainted with Maurras – this was at a time when both were youngish men, when Maurras was making his way

through the literary cenacles of the Paris of the late 1880s and early 1890s, and when Blondel was preparing his Sorbonne doctoral thesis, *L'Action*, which was to win for him his philosophical fame or notoriety. But little has been said or shown about their actual relation with one another. Largely unanswered is the question of to what extent their acquaintanceship involved any real intellectual contact or exchange, as is also the question of what actually was the background to the stand that the author of *L'Action* took against Maurras and the Action Française. Meriting some further attention, in the context of this particular subject matter, is the admiration for Maurras of that great friend of Blondel, Henri Bremond, an admiration that was to sour with the passage of years and was eventually to turn to hatred in the 1920s, notably at the time of Bremond's election to the Académie Française (a success largely due to the active support of Barrès).

Laberthonnière's criticisms of Maurras and the Action Française were even more vigorous than those of Blondel. His participation in the debate appeared also more dramatic, for shortly afterwards, in 1913, he was forbidden by the Holy Office to publish any further work (his later philosophical and theological writings were published posthumously through the efforts of Louis Canet, the Gallican-minded religious affairs adviser at the Quai d'Orsay between 1921 and 1946). Since his death in 1932 Laberthonnière has been accorded some reputation as a philosopher who stood for a Christian *personnalisme*: given a certain vagueness in matters political of the more well-known *personnalisme* of Emmanuel Mounier, it is pertinent to ask with respect to *Positivism et catholicisme* whether Laberthonnière did in fact have a relatively clear idea of the nature and boundaries of politics. Even before the cruel fate that was his in 1913, Laberthonnière had long reflected on the nature of authority in the Church, and thus it is also of interest to determine whether such reflection had any significant effect on his conception in *Positivism et catholicisme* of the relation that should exist between Church and State.

In addition, there is the question of the connection between, on the one hand, Blondel and Laberthonnière, and, on the other, Sangnier. Since it was Sangnier who had first questioned

the compatibility of Maurras's Positivism with Catholicism, Blondel and Laberthonnière were at least indirectly backing him when they entered into controversy with Descoqs. Jeanne Caron in her major work, *Le Sillon et la démocratie chrétienne*, has claimed, taking issue with Etienne Gilson, that there was indeed a close affinity between the philosophizing of Blondel and Laberthonnière and the politicking of the charismatic leader of the Sillon movement.⁶ This, it would seem, is a claim that merits some attention in a study of Blondel's and Laberthonnière's polemic against Sangnier's rival, Maurras.

To look over the heads of those involved directly or indirectly in the controversy, there is the problem of the evolution of the early Action Française movement. Despite much serious research, notably by Eugen Weber, it is still not altogether clear how within the space of about fifteen years, from the Dreyfus Affair to the outbreak of the First World War, the Action Française changed from being a small intellectual coterie, whose common denominator was neither Catholicism nor political conservatism but simply nationalism and anti-Semitism, into a full-fledged extra-parliamentary political movement whose main audience was decidedly on the parliamentary Right and one of whose main distinguishing marks was a widely advertised and intolerant clericalism. It cannot be within the scope of the present study to write, with this question in mind, yet another history of the Action Française. Nonetheless, some additional light may be thrown on this particular metamorphosis of Maurras's movement.

A related question is that of the attitude of the Jesuit order in France towards the Action Française. Hannah Arendt in her chapter on the Dreyfus Affair in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* depicted the French Jesuits at the turn of the century as strongly anti-Semitic and anti-Dreyfusard. And, as has already been indicated here, it was in the Jesuit *Etudes* that there appeared in 1909 a qualified apology for Maurras and the Action Française. Yet, in 1926, when Pope Pius XI condemned Maurras and his movement, he was supported by *Etudes* and the French provinces of the Jesuit order with little hesitation or apparent volte-face. Furthermore, during the Second World War, when a certain Maurrassian traditionalism that favoured

clericalism was in vogue in Vichy France, some of the most intellectually distinguished members of the order – Pierre Chaillet, Gaston Fessard, Henri de Lubac, Yves de Montcheuil – were to be found in or on the side of the Resistance.⁷ In view of all this, there is room for clarification concerning the significance of the *Etudes* articles of 1909 for the Society of Jesus itself.

Finally, it can be pointed out that Maurras's marriage of Positivism and Catholicism at the turn of the century stirred ripples whose movement continued long after the First World War.

Thus, there are the cases of such writers as Jacques Maritain, Georges Bernanos and Julien Benda, who reacted strongly in different ways to Maurras's idea of the relation between politics and religion.

Maritain, whose first association with the Action Française a few years before the First World War shortly preceded his espousal of Thomism, was effectively the co-founder with Maurras in 1920 of the *Revue universelle* (managed and edited by Jacques Bainville and Henri Massis), and he was also the author in 1925 of a polemical book that had a definite Maurrassian bias and flavour, *Trois réformateurs: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau*. Then came the Vatican condemnation of the Action Française, which, whatever its immediate causes, was formally a condemnation of many of Maurras's more important writings, and it proved a turning point in Maritain's life. In 1926 Maritain wrote a qualified apology for Maurras, *Une opinion sur Charles Maurras et le devoir des catholiques*; in 1927 he turned his back on Maurras by writing *Primauté du spirituel*; and afterwards followed his creative period as a political philosopher on quite un-Maurrassian lines, a period to which belonged *Humanisme intégral* in 1936, *La Personne et le bien commun* in 1947, and *Man and the State* in 1951.

Bernanos, whose passions and prejudices are to be linked with the names of Edouard Drumont, Léon Bloy and Charles Péguy, had served as a *camelot du roi* in the ranks of the Action Française before the First World War. His moment of truth with respect to Maurras's Positivist admiration of Catholicism came much later when, on the island of Majorca during the Spanish Civil War, he was faced with the harsher aspects of the alliance of Francoism and clericalism. Neither his record of and

meditation on this experience, *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*, published in 1938, nor his two books of 1939, *Scandale de la vérité* and *Nous autres français*, are to be properly read without some reflection on their essential reference to Maurras's Positivism.

Then there is Benda's famous work of 1927, *La Trahison des clercs*, which carries as epigraph Renouvier's words 'the world is suffering from the lack of faith in a transcendent truth'; one of the major treasons, Benda's accusation ran, was that of Maurras, for he had sought to infuse political activity with a religious and mystical dimension in a denial of all transcendence (and this through recourse to Comtian principles).

Benda's book had followed on the heels of the Vatican condemnation. And this official rejection by Rome of the services of Maurras's Positivist politics was, in retrospect, a milestone in the relations between Church and State in Republican France. Inasmuch as it was also a definite rejection of Maurras's idea of the Church as the bastion of Order, it was perhaps a milestone too for contemporary Roman Catholicism. Certainly, some forty years later, there were many in France who were retrospectively to see Blondel and Laberthonnière as harbingers of the new spirit associated with the Second Vatican Council.⁸ Whatever the accuracy of this hindsight, there can be no doubt that Blondel at least, by virtue of his philosophical writing and reflection, exerted a profound influence on French theology in the first half of the twentieth century.

Lastly, it may be remarked that it was the First World War (when Maurras's nationalism lent itself well to the national war propaganda effort) and the Second World War (when the Vichy regime, supported by Maurras, descended to the ignominy of complying with the deportation of Jews) that were to provide the tragic backgrounds against which Maurras could be depicted first as a slightly daemonic figure and then as a downright demonic one. This study seeks to explore only the earlier period, prior to the summer of 1914, when the Positivist underpinning of Maurras's nationalism was most clearly enunciated and when the intellectual tensions it provoked on the side of the Catholic Church in France were perhaps most strikingly apparent.