

Virtue and the Politics of Pluralism in the Thought of Jacques Maritain

Jacques Maritain is often considered the preeminent advocate of democratic pluralism in twentieth-century Christian political thought. Though associated early in his career with antidemocratic movements such as Action Français, Maritain experienced a political conversion following the papal condemnation of this movement and became the foremost theorist of non-confessional democracy within the tradition of twentieth-century Catholic political theory. His political philosophy remains highly relevant in contemporary debates concerning Catholic integralism, with many contemporary advocates of a return to a confessional regime directing their criticism of democracy precisely at Maritain, whom they regard as the philosophical architect of the Church's alleged embrace of liberal democracy since the Second Vatican Council.¹

In this paper, I consider the question of the coherence of Maritain's theory of democratic pluralism as an alternative to the integralist demand for a union between church and state, and I will argue that there exists an important tension between his democratic political theory and his moral philosophy that undermines his defense of the non-confessional regime. Specifically, as we shall see, his understanding of the relation of the political virtues to the theological virtues implies that the former cannot be possessed without the latter, and hence that the political good—that is, the full or “integral” development of the human person through the cultivation of virtue—is possible only to Christians. But if man cannot rightly order political society to its proper good without possessing Christian virtue, then the integralists would seem to be right in asserting that a confessional regime, that is, a regime in which the truth of the Catholic faith is publicly acknowledged and Catholic believers enjoy privileged participation in political society, would seem to be best. The lesson for political theory, then, is that the defense of a democratic, religiously pluralistic political order requires an account of the political good as accessible, at least in principle, to unaided human nature and hence to all citizens who seek to live lives of genuine moral virtue.

¹ See, for instance, Thomas Pink, “Jacques Maritain and the Problem of Church and State” *The Thomist* 79 (2015): 1-42.

Let us begin with a brief overview of Maritain’s defense of democratic pluralism. In works such as *Integral Humanism* and *Man and the State*, the French philosopher makes the case that in the modern age, non-confessional democracy is the regime best suited to realizing the ideal temporal order, an ideal which Maritain believes is grounded in the principles of Aquinas’s political philosophy. This ideal political order consists in a regime that promotes the temporal common good of acquired virtues such as prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude while respecting the supratemporal ultimate end of the human person.² By the very fact of fulfilling its proper obligation to promote virtue, the state realizes its obligation to respect man’s supratemporal end and contributes to rightly disposing man to this end. In the Middle Ages, this ideal temporal order, Maritain observes, was concretely realized in the “sacral regime” in which the state was the “temporal arm” of the Church.³ But in the modern age, this ideal is best realized within a democratic political order which, though animated by the spirit of the Gospel, is non-confessional and extends religious freedom to believers and non-believers alike.⁴ Such a state, Maritain reasons, is, in an age which values human freedom and rejects coercion of conscience, most apt to foster the temporal common good of virtuous living and thereby dispose man to his supernatural end of beatitude with God.⁵ Thus, for the French philosopher, Christians ought to strive in the public square to bring about a regime in which the religious freedom of all is recognized—without the juridical privileging of one church over another—and in which political collaboration between Catholics and non-Catholics in pursuit of the common good can take place.

Maritain’s argument for a non-confessional political regime, however, stands in fundamental tension with his understanding of the political good, and particularly of the achievability of the political good without grace. This emerges from a consideration of his understanding of the relationship between the natural, acquired virtues (which are, in the view of Maritain, *political* virtues), and the supernatural infused virtues of Christian revelation: principally faith, hope, and charity. Now, within the Thomistic

² Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans, in *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*, Vol. XI (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 236-238, 258; *idem*, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 171.

³ Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 243-249; *idem*, *Man and the State*, 157-160.

⁴ Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 255-263; *idem*, *Man and the State*, 159-162.

⁵ Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 257-258; *idem*, *Man and the State*, 160-162.

tradition of moral philosophy with which Maritain self-identifies, the acquired virtues are considered “imperfect” without charity. This claim goes back to Thomas himself,⁶ but it has been interpreted in divergent ways by later Thomistic thinkers. For Aquinas himself, only through charity are we directed to the ultimate end of human nature—the vision of God—and hence only insofar as virtues are informed by charity can they be considered “perfect.” Acquired virtues without charity, even when fully possessed by a moral agent, are inherently imperfect, their imperfection consisting in their intrinsic lack of ordination to the ultimate end of man’s nature. Beginning with the Spanish Dominican Domingo Báñez (1528-1604), a new interpretation of Aquinas’s dictum that acquired virtues without charity are imperfect arose. For Báñez, to say that acquired virtues without charity are imperfect does not mean, as it does for Aquinas, that even when these virtues are fully developed they are still imperfect precisely on account of their lack of ordination to our nature’s ultimate end; rather, for Báñez, acquired virtues without charity are imperfect in the sense that, without the supernatural virtue of charity, they cannot be fully developed *as acquired virtues*. In other words, to have fully developed natural virtue (that is, perfect virtue), one must have Christian charity.⁷

The Spanish Dominican’s argument is that, lacking charity, we cannot be rightly disposed to our supernatural ultimate end, without which, on account of the effects of original sin, we cannot be rightly disposed to our *natural* end. In turn, without being properly disposed to our natural end, we cannot have acquired prudence (which requires a right estimation of our natural end), and without acquired prudence, we cannot have the other acquired moral virtues. On the contrary, without such prudence, we have only untutored inclinations to good acts which do not amount to virtues since, lacking prudence, we may act on these inclinations *imprudently* and thus in a way contrary to virtue. Therefore, insofar as one does not have charity and a consequent ordering to one’s supernatural end, one has only imperfect virtue, that is to say,

⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, Q. 65, a. 2; *idem*, *Summa theologiae* II-II, Q. 23, a. 7; *idem*, *De virtutibus* Q. 5, a. 2.

⁷ Thomas himself never made such a claim; on the contrary, he asserted that there were acquired virtues “in many of the pagans,” though, even as fully developed acquired virtues, they were still imperfect on account of their inherent lack of order to the ultimate end of human nature. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, Q. 65, a. 2.

raw inclinations to acts which, considered in themselves, accord with reason. But insofar as an agent has charity, he has perfect virtue, because charity imparts a disposition towards man's ultimate supernatural end which in turn enables the cultivation of fully developed acquired virtue, that is, acquired virtue integrated with acquired prudence and hence *perfect* virtue.⁸

In subsequent generations, Báñez's solution was appropriated with minor refinements by prominent Scholastics such as John of St. Thomas (1589-1644)⁹ and the Baroque Carmelite theologians and Thomistic commentators collectively known as the Salmanticenses,¹⁰ from whom it passed to the eighteenth-century Thomistic commentator Charles-René Billuart¹¹ and ultimately to the twentieth-century Thomist Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.¹² Maritain, in turn, adopted the view directly from Garrigou-Lagrange, and it is thus possible to trace the precise genealogy of this understanding of the imperfection of acquired virtue directly from Báñez to Maritain.¹³ As with the aforementioned Scholastics, Maritain argues that acquired virtue is imperfect—that is, cannot be fully developed in a subject—without charity. This is because an agent cannot possess prudence, and hence the other acquired moral virtues, without the ordination to our supernatural

⁸ For Báñez's argument, see Domingo Báñez, *Commentaria in Secundam Secundae Angelici Doctoris S. Thomae*, Q. 23, a. 7 (Venice, 1587), 1191-1200.

⁹ See John of St. Thomas, *Cursus theologici in Primam Secundae D. Thomae*, Disp. XVII, a. 2 (Lyon, 1663), T. 2, 178-181. John's primary contribution to the development of the Bañezian view is a more nuanced description of the status of the imperfect "virtues" or inclinations to good acts in an agent lacking charity. Elaborating a more detailed doctrine of habits than that of Báñez, John explains that the distinguishing feature of fully developed acquired virtues which are connected through prudence is the fact that they are *difficile mobilis*, that is, stable dispositions which reliably produce actions achieving the mean of reason and which are not easily lost by the subject. By contrast, "imperfect" acquired virtues, that is, the inclinations to virtuous acts which exist without prudence and charity, sometimes produce good acts in a particular agent, but these dispositions are unstable and easily corrupted.

¹⁰ The Salmanticenses were a group of seventeenth-century Carmelite theologians at Salamanca and Alcalá who produced a magisterial commentary on Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. Much of the commentary was written in the early and middle decades of the seventeenth-century. It was revised in later decades, with the final volume appearing in 1704. For the Salmanticenses' understanding of the imperfection of acquired virtue, see Salmanticenses, *Cursus theologicus Summam Theologicam Angelici Doctoris D. Thomae complectens*, Tractatus XII (*De virtutibus*), Disp. IV, dub. 2 (Paris, 1878), T. 6, 388-389.

¹¹ Charles-René Billuart, *Summa sancti Thomae hodiernis Academicarum moribus accommodata*, Diss. II, a. 4, ¶3 (Arras, 1867), T. 2, 410-411.

¹² Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, "L'instabilité dans l'état de péché mortel des vertus morales acquises," *Revue Thomiste* 42 (1937): 255-262.

¹³ The view held by Maritain and the later Scholastic thinkers continues to find contemporary proponents, most notably the philosopher Thomas Osborne. See Thomas M. Osborne, Jr. "The Augustinianism of Thomas Aquinas's Moral Theory," *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 279-305.

end that charity provides, since ordination to our supernatural end is required for ordination to our natural end, which in turn is the prerequisite for acquired prudence.¹⁴

The implication of Maritain's position on the imperfection of natural virtue without charity—an implication of critical importance for his political philosophy of democratic pluralism—is that the *political* good (i.e., perfect or fully developed acquired virtue) cannot *in any case* be attained without the charity infused through supernatural grace. Now, Aquinas himself recognized the *de facto* difficulty of acquiring natural virtues without the divine *gratia auxilians* that helps us overcome the inherent disorder in the human will that follows from original sin.¹⁵ But he nonetheless allows the possibility in principle (and, as his comment concerning the existence of natural virtues in “many of the pagans” suggests, in historical fact as well) that *natural* virtues can in principle be achieved *naturally*, that is, without supernatural grace and charity. But the view of Maritain and the later Scholastics denies this claim. On the contrary, to attain fully developed natural virtue one must have grace and charity, and the political good thus requires *as a matter of principle* supernatural aid for its attainment.

The practical implication is that only Christians—and only those in a state of grace at that—can be good citizens or even have a right apprehension of the political good to be pursued by the state, since only through grace can they be oriented to the *natural* end of acquired political virtue that is the proper aim of the state, and only through grace can they have the *natural* prudence required to obtain the civic good. Maritain comes close to explicitly admitting this in several places in his works. In *Integral Humanism*, for example, he writes that in order to “direct as [one] ought the multitude toward the temporal common good,” it is necessary to be “purely and simply *bonus vir* [a good man]...But to be a man purely and simply good and virtuous [that is, a man who possesses perfect, fully developed acquired virtue], constituted firmly in a state of moral rectitude, this presupposes in fact the gifts of grace and of charity, those ‘infused virtues’ which properly merit...the name of Christian virtues.”¹⁶ Similarly, in *Man and the State*, Maritain writes

¹⁴ For Maritain's argument, see Jacques Maritain, *Science et sagesse* (Paris: Labergerie, 1935), 241-255.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, Q. 109, a. 2.

¹⁶ Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 259.

that the influence of the Church in society carries temporal existence “to a higher and more perfect level *in its own order*,” the reason being that without the supernatural grace dispensed to mankind through the activity of the Church the good of the temporal, political order cannot be attained.¹⁷

But if it is true that the political good is in no case achievable on the purely natural plane—indeed, if grace is needed to know what the political good is and how to realize it—then how is a regime of democratic pluralism defensible? If the achievement of the political good of human flourishing through virtuous living is only possible to those in a state of sanctifying grace, then why should non-Christian citizens who do not possess such grace¹⁸ have a share in political participation? And, even more importantly, why should the Church through which this grace is diffused *not* enjoy a juridically privileged place in society? If the natural good of the body politic requires its assistance as a matter of principle, then the truly just and healthy regime would, it stands to reason, be the regime in which the Church is privileged—and in which tolerance of dissent would be quite restricted.

There is, then, a tension at the heart of Maritain’s political philosophy. On the one hand, he holds up as the ideal regime a regime in which Christian and non-Christian citizens enjoy full political participation, in which no one religion enjoys legal privilege, and in which freedom of conscience is considered sacrosanct. And yet, on the other, he presents us with an understanding of the political good as requiring in all cases the help of grace—and, more concretely, of the Church through which grace comes. Maritain’s politics, in other words, is a fully theological politics that cannot coherently be reconciled with his conception of the best regime as a regime that is religiously pluralistic in nature.

¹⁷ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 164-165 (emphasis added). The same understanding is also found in *Science et sagesse*: “Civil life in effect belongs of itself to the natural order, but this natural order of civil life is itself participatively elevated by the fact of its reference (explicit or only ‘lived’) to the supratemporal ends of human persons, *a reference without which the civil or temporal order does not have its proper [i.e., natural] rectitude*.” The “reference” to the supratemporal end required for the “natural rectitude” of the temporal order comes only through grace and charity. See Maritain, *Science et sagesse*, 355 (emphasis added). The translation is mine.

¹⁸ Even if we assume implicit faith in some of these citizens, it is unlikely that many would have it, and Maritain himself does not claim that it would be widespread.

What, then, is the lesson for contemporary reflection on the question of church-state relations, and particularly for the possibility of a defense of democratic pluralism? The narrow lesson is that Maritain's philosophy cannot be appropriated by defenders of such a regime without substantial theoretical modification. But more importantly, the tension I have described suggests that making a case for democratic pluralism requires elaborating a conception of the political good as attainable on the basis of *nature* alone (even if, in a post-lapsarian world, the attainment of this good is rare and difficult without grace). In other words, to defend a political regime which does not juridically privilege one religion and which allows for a robust degree of religious liberty, one must articulate a theory of the political good as a natural good which, at least in principle, is available to all citizens and which under certain circumstances can best be advanced in a non-confessional political context. This task, of course, presents its own challenges, principally in preventing such a regime from seeing itself as self-sufficient, as needing no help from religion and indeed as possessing custody over a superior good to that of religion. The modern secular state has often succumbed to this temptation, and the writings of the medieval thinker Marsilius of Padua—for whom the primacy of the natural good of peaceful civic existence licenses severe curtailment of religious freedom on the part of the state—reminds us that it is a perennial danger of positing a political good that does not require the aid of religion for its realization.¹⁹

And yet, I do not believe the task is impossible, and that it can in fact be done by a return to Thomas's own writings. Though a full exposition would require far more elaboration than is possible here, for Aquinas the political good is naturally attainable, and in his view man can know *naturally*—that is, through unaided philosophical reason—that this good is *incomplete* and subordinate to a *supratemporal* good which is not realizable through political action in this world.²⁰ As a good that transcends the present

¹⁹ For Marsilius's view of the end of the state as consisting in the purely natural good of peaceful living, see Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of the Peace*, Discourse I, ch. 1-4, trans. Annabel Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Discourse II of the treatise is an extended treatment of the supremacy of state authority over nearly all aspects of religious life and practice that is needed to realize this natural good.

²⁰ To briefly summarize my interpretation of Aquinas, which I explain in detail in my monograph *Scholasticism and the Theologico-Political Problem* (in process), Thomas holds that it is philosophically demonstrable that all temporal goods, including acquired virtue, are imperfect, i.e., that they cannot satisfy human nature's desire for its complete, terminal end and perfection (see, for instance, *Summa theologiae* I-II, Q. 3, *passim*; and *Summa contra gentiles*, III,

life, it is necessarily a good which pertains to the religious sphere, and inasmuch as reason can know such a good as higher than the political good, the state—even the non-confessional state—can know that it is obliged to respect religion as the arena in which man pursues his ultimate end.

ch. 25-51, especially ch. 34, 48). However, it is a fundamental axiom of natural philosophy that a being's natural desire for its proper end and perfection cannot be "frustrated" (i.e., incapable of fulfillment and termination), and hence the philosopher—even the non-Christian philosopher—must conclude that the perfect, ultimate end in which man's natural desire is fulfilled is reserved for the next life (Aquinas, *Sententia libri ethicorum*, I, l. XVI, Litzinger trans. ¶202). Thus, for Aquinas, it can be *philosophically* demonstrated that the political good is subordinate to an ultimate good which can only be realized in the afterlife when the soul exists immortally (which immortality is also rationally demonstrable). As a transcendent good attainable in the hereafter, it is a good which necessarily belongs to the sphere of religion, and thus the state can naturally recognize inherent limits on its own authority vis-à-vis religion since the latter has custody over a superior good.