

Introduction: Jacques Maritain and Contemporary Challenges to Democracy

Laurie Johnston

Abstract: Introducing the collection of articles regarding Jacques Maritain and his relevance for challenges to democracy today, this article describes the complexity and some of the main themes of his intellectual journey. Maritain played a major role in the development of Catholic social teaching on democracy, and can provide moral and spiritual grounding for a renewal of democracy now. He articulates the moral value of democracy as the form of politics that best allows Christians to live out love of neighbor and enemy in concrete ways, while still making an appropriate distinction between the spiritual and temporal spheres. Articles in this volume examine the implications of the friendship between Maritain and Saul Alinsky, William Cavanaugh's interpretation of Maritain's influence (with a response from Cavanaugh himself), and reflections upon how we can critically appropriate the thought of Maritain in the contemporary context, fifty years after his death. The introduction concludes with words Maritain addressed to US Catholics in 1939.

We cannot avoid noting with concern how today, and not only in Europe, we are witnessing a retreat from democracy. Democracy requires participation and involvement on the part of all; consequently, it demands hard work and patience. It is complex, whereas authoritarianism is peremptory and populism's easy answers appear attractive. In some societies, concerned for security and dulled by consumerism, weariness and malcontent can lead to a sort of skepticism about democracy. Yet universal participation is something essential; not simply to attain shared goals, but also because it corresponds to what we are: social beings, at once unique and interdependent.

At the same time, we are also witnessing a skepticism about democracy provoked by the distance of institutions, by fear of a loss of identity, by bureaucracy. The remedy is not to be found in an obsessive quest for popularity, in a thirst for visibility, in a flurry of unrealistic promises, or in adherence to forms of ideological colonization, but in good politics. For politics is, and ought to be in

practice, a good thing, as the supreme responsibility of citizens and as the art of the common good.

—Pope Francis, Presidential Palace Address, Athens, December 4, 2021¹

It is easy to hear echoes of Jacques Maritain in this plaintive defense of democracy by Pope Francis, especially in the assertion that democratic participation befits humans as “social beings, at once unique and interdependent.” Perhaps more than any other thinker, Maritain is responsible for the Catholic Church’s remarkable journey in the twentieth century from deep hostility to strong endorsement of democracy and human rights.² In his books *Integral Humanism* (1936), *The Natural Law and Human Rights* (1942), *The Person and the Common Good* (1947), and *Man and the State* (1951), Maritain presented a democratic vision rooted in Thomism and personalism.³ Together with other “fraternal modernists,” as James Chappel has called them, Maritain laid a foundation for Christian democratic movements and political parties in many countries.⁴ Charting a path between fascism, communism, capitalism, and the extremes of the Enlightenment and French republicanism, Maritain developed a thoroughly Catholic and pluralist vision of society with a limited government and a body politic constituted by many groupings, from the family to religious communities to “a multiplicity of other particular societies which proceed from the free initiative of citizens.”⁵ Along the way, he “made himself the premier interpreter of human rights among Catholics, and indeed almost singlehandedly reinvented

¹ Pope Francis, “Meeting with Authorities, Civil Society, and the Diplomatic Corps,” December 4, 2021, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/december/documents/20211204-grecia-autorita.html.

² John McGreevy (who has kindly authored the afterword for this issue) has helpfully described this journey in Chapter 3 of *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022).

³ Jacques Maritain, *Humanisme intégral: Problèmes temporels et spirituels d’une nouvelle chrétienté* (Paris: Aubier, 1936), later published as *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans. Joseph Evans (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973); *The Natural Law and Human Rights* (Windsor: Christian Culture, 1942); *The Person and the Common Good* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947); *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951).

⁴ James Chappell, *Catholic Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁵ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 11.

them as a Christian tradition.”⁶ Paul Valadier describes Maritain’s subject matter as “Gospel inspiration of politics.”⁷

Fifty years after Maritain’s death, the themes he addressed continue to spark lively debate as Christians attempt to understand the relationship between their faith and political life. It is likely that Maritain would share many of Pope Francis’s concerns about the challenges to democracy around the world today, as articulated in the speech above; Maritain might even note similarities with some of the worrying trends he observed in the 1930s. Economic inequality is undermining the social cohesion and solidarity required to sustain democratic governance. Populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism are on the rise, often accompanied by disregard for the human rights of minority groups and migrants. Political propaganda, social media, and viral disinformation contribute to splintering and polarization in societies, and political leaders attack the press, even in traditionally democratic countries. Authoritarian governments attempt to exert totalitarian control over the civic space. Civil society is also threatened by the overwhelming power of multinational corporations, especially through the colonization of public discourse by tech companies accountable to no one. The coronavirus pandemic provoked deep controversies over how to balance coercive public health measures with individual liberties. And whether contemporary democracies are even capable of responding effectively to the climate emergency remains to be seen. Meanwhile, support for democracy has declined to a striking degree among young people globally, as Yascha Mounk and others have documented.⁸ On an international level, there remains a “democratic deficit” in international institutions such as the UN, WTO, and World Bank. At the same time, growing empirical evidence would seem to justify Maritain’s belief that human dignity is best served by democratic forms of government; from the work of Amartya Sen on famines⁹ to more recent work on the correlation between democracy and improved health,¹⁰ the benefits to human life and the common good can clearly be observed.

⁶ Samuel Moyn, “Personalism, Community, and the Origins of Human Rights,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 85–106.

⁷ Paul Valadier, *Maritain à contre-temps. Pour une démocratie vivante* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2007), 10. “A son sujet, nous pouvons utiliser l’expression provocatrice d’une ‘inspiration évangélique du politique.’”

⁸ Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 2016): 5–17, doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0049.

⁹ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

¹⁰ See, for example, Thomas J. Bollyky, Tara Templin, Matthew Cohen, Diana Schoder, Joseph L. Dieleman, and Simon Wigley, “The Relationships between

Why might Maritain be helpful now? The authors in this journal issue suggest a range of reasons. Among the most important is that Maritain has described the moral and spiritual grounding of democracy. He articulates the moral value of democracy as the form of politics that best allows Christians to live out love of neighbor and enemy in concrete ways. Because it requires making space for those with whom we disagree and limits our ability to coerce others, democratic politics preserves space for human dignity to flourish in community. Furthermore, the limited form of government Maritain envisions permits the flourishing of civic life by means of both subsidiarity and solidarity.

Mary Doak's article in this volume gives a helpful analysis of Maritain's relevance for contemporary debates about democracy. Doak responds to the surprising re-emergence of integralism, a stream of thought which argues that to promote the common good, a government must affirm a particular (religious) vision of the good, and therefore Christianity should be established as state religion (despite the fact that the Second Vatican Council taught otherwise in *Dignitatis Humanae*). If Catholics truly believe that what their church teaches is true (this line of thinking goes), they have a responsibility to ensure that temporal authorities are subject to spiritual authorities, since the spiritual is superior to the temporal. Contra the integralists, Doak affirms that Maritain offers "an intellectually coherent and thoroughly Catholic defense of the substantive good achievable through liberal democracy."¹¹ Maritain's contention was precisely that the truth about God and humans leads him to conclude that Catholics have a *religious* duty to promote democracy and religious liberty; that is how, *concretely*, they fulfill their obligation to obey the natural law and promote the common good of all. As Paul Valadier puts it when writing about Maritain's support for the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights:

The necessity of living together obliges us not to compromise on the truth (as some intransigent Thomists accused [Maritain]), but to admit, perhaps in a spirit of restraint when it comes to deeper ideas, that the good of humanity and peace depend on a shared agreement about concrete issues where the fate of everyone is at stake. It is therefore the truth that leads us to accept the merits of this common platform [of the UDHR] as a source of peace and harmony, but a truth

Democratic Experience, Adult Health, and Cause-Specific Mortality in 170 Countries between 1980 and 2016: An Observational Analysis," *The Lancet* 393, no. 10181 (April 20, 2019): 1628–1640, doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30235-1.

¹¹ See Mary Doak, "Threading the Needle: Jacques Maritain's Defense of a Christian and Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 18.

that does not look down on, let alone scorn, the exigencies of our common life together as individuals and peoples.¹²

This “necessity of living together” requires more than mere agreement about concrete issues, though; Doak notes that Maritain saw *civic friendship* as vital for the healthy functioning of democracy, something urgently needed in this era of political polarization.

Doak’s chapter is a reminder that in the face of temptations towards authoritarianism, integralism, or Christian nationalism, it is important to affirm democracy not just as a useful technique, but as something with real moral value. To be sure, democratic governments in the US and elsewhere have often failed to deliver on their promises in many ways, at great cost to the human dignity of their own citizens as well as the dignity of citizens of other countries. But the solution is more, not less, democracy. Anything in human life that consumes more than its fair share of power is both an affront to the sovereignty of God and a threat to the common good. As Maritain wrote in *Christianity and Democracy*, “How could the people be expected to obey those who govern unless it is because the latter have received from the people themselves the custody of the people’s common good?”¹³

While Doak’s retrieval of Maritain is timely and helpful, applying Maritain’s ideas to today’s challenges remains a complex task. For example, Maritain’s language about creating a “New Christendom,” with Christians as a vivifying (as opposed to ruling) force, sounds strange in a Euro-American context perhaps better described as post-Christian than post-Christendom. It is not unusual to find that the politicians who make the most explicit appeals to Christianity in public life are in fact the ones who are the least Christian. But the issue of Maritain’s terminology is only a small part of the problem.

Drawing on Maritain’s thought is complex because his intellectual journey was complex, taking him from the far-right Action Française in the 1920s to the left in the 1930s, to an eventual skepticism of all totalizing systems. His geographical journey was also complex, shaped by frequent international travel, then exile in the US with his

¹² Paul Valadier, *Maritain à contre-temps*, 31: “La nécessité d’une vie commune oblige non pas à transiger sur la vérité (comme le lui reprocheront des thomistes intransigeants), mais à admettre, peut-être dans la détresse par rapport à des ententes plus profondes, que le bien de l’humanité et la paix passent par l’accord commun sur des bases concrètes où se joue le sort de tous. C’est donc la vérité encore qui conduit à admettre le bien-fondé de cette plate-forme commune, source de paix et d’harmonie, mais une vérité qui ne regarde pas de haut, encore moins avec mépris, les exigences de la vie commune entre personnes et peuples.”

¹³ Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), 34.

wife Raïssa, then time in Rome as French ambassador to the Holy See. He was deeply affected by the rise of totalitarianism in Europe, the brutality of World War II, and the ugliness of anti-Semitism, but also moved by the hopefulness of the American democratic experiment and (short-lived) emergence of democratic leadership in Chile and elsewhere. Along the way, he engaged with a remarkable number of interlocutors on multiple continents—corresponding with everyone from the popes, Charles de Gaulle, and Thomas Merton to Saul Alinsky—as discussed in the articles that follow here. The very range of his thought, though, means that his readers risk merely confirming their own biases if they fail to understand the entire corpus of his thought; thus, Maritain's blessing has been claimed by political thinkers of many stripes. The story of Maritain's thought, therefore, must also be told as the story of its reception and effects—which were immense and varied. While it would be unfair to hold a thinker responsible for every problematic appropriation of her ideas, on the other hand, one should not ignore the consequences; Maritain himself was certainly sensitive to the consequences of ideas, including his own.

Maritain's recent reception, especially in the US, has been significantly affected by a work written twenty-five years after his death: William Cavanaugh's *Torture and Eucharist*.¹⁴ Three of the authors here take up Cavanaugh's interpretation of Maritain, particularly with regard to the impact of Maritain's thought in Chile. In each case, the authors address questions about how to understand the relationship between the spiritual and temporal, church and state, and Christian discipleship and secular political engagement. Maritain was concerned about how to preserve the integrity of the temporal, political sphere of life against undue encroachment by religious authority, while also maintaining the importance of Christian responsibility to promote the common good, including via politics. His theological task was to help the church come to terms with a new post-Christendom understanding of itself and its mission in the temporal sphere. In so doing, he emphasized the distinction between spiritual and temporal authority to a degree Cavanaugh has found to be problematic. At certain points during the Pinochet regime in Chile, Cavanaugh argues, this stark distinction helped prevent the church from sufficiently playing its role as a moral judge of political realities—notably the practice of torture. Such a "ghostly" vision of the church's mission grants the state free rein in temporal affairs, and the state soon makes an idol of itself—as all nation-states are prone to doing, in Cavanaugh's account. Gilbrian Stoy points out that ironically,

¹⁴ William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

such a sacralization and expansion of the state to consume the body politic is precisely what Maritain also feared.¹⁵

Still, Stoy agrees with Cavanaugh that Maritain's "temporal plane" is too starkly distinguished from the spiritual realm, and therefore this presents an eschatological difficulty. It is important to maintain the real—but relative—importance of the temporal sphere as something which has a share in the salvation to come (transformed, but not destroyed, by grace). Christians acting in the temporal sphere do so with an aim that is not merely temporal but also referred to God (which is why Maritain attempts to introduce the notion of a third plane, overlapping between the temporal and spiritual—an attempt Stoy sees as misguided). Stoy suggests that by emphasizing a Thomistic understanding of human nature as endowed with openness—real, but imperfect—to God, we can more rightly understand the relationship of the political realm to the spiritual.

Travis Knoll firmly defends Maritain's legacy against Cavanaugh's criticisms, offering, as a counterpoint, historical evidence from Maritain's time in Argentina and Brazil.¹⁶ There, Knoll shows Maritain's influence to have led Catholic intellectuals *away* from nationalism and authoritarianism—though with limited effect in Argentina. His audiences there did not necessarily share his opposition to Franco in Spain, an opposition which, for Maritain, was *necessitated* by the proper separation of the temporal and spiritual planes. In Brazil, Maritain's influence was somewhat more fruitful, helping Catholic thinkers like Alceu Lima and Helder Camara to take strong positions in favor of democracy and against authoritarianism. These different trajectories provide important context for understanding the missed opportunities in Chile Cavanaugh describes.

While Knoll engages Cavanaugh's argument about Maritain primarily with a historical lens, and Stoy a strictly theological lens, Brian Boyd's article addresses Cavanaugh's arguments from a theological perspective particularly attentive to our contemporary context.¹⁷ Boyd seeks to push back against some of the skepticism Maritain has faced from political theologians (partly because of Cavanaugh) because, as he puts it, "Maritain remains a vital resource for theologians who seek to avoid both, on the right hand, a resurgent integralism and Christian nationalism and, on the left hand, a

¹⁵ See Gilbrian Stoy, CSC, "Jacques Maritain, 'Pure' Nature, and the State's Teleological Crisis," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 37–58.

¹⁶ See Travis Knoll, "Distinct but not Separate: Rethinking Maritain's Distinction of Planes to Recover his Democratic Potential," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 59–85.

¹⁷ See Brian Boyd, "Rescuing Maritain from his Reception History: A Reappraisal of William T. Cavanaugh's Critique in *Torture and Eucharist*," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 86–105.

relativizing of the Gospel in what Maritain called ‘kneeling before the world.’”¹⁸

Boyd acknowledges that Maritain was (understandably) naïve about the nature of the modern nation-state, whose claims to sovereignty will always undermine subsidiarity and lead inevitably to idolatry—that is, self-aggrandizement beyond the temporal realm into the realm of the absolute. Boyd goes on to suggest, however, that Cavanaugh has underestimated the degree to which Maritain *did* envision a role for the church in shaping the temporal realm, and emphasized the transformative power of the virtue of charity for Christians’ activities in the “earthly city.” These activities might require Christians to dirty their hands; as Maritain writes, “The fear of soiling ourselves by entering the context of history is a Pharisaical fear. We cannot touch the flesh of the human being without staining our fingers. To stain our fingers is not to stain our hearts. The Catholic Church has never feared to lose its purity in touching our impurities.”¹⁹ However, this does not mean abandoning sanctity, nor that charity ceases to shape Christian engagement; Boyd compares this statement to Pope Francis’s admonition that good pastors ought to “smell like the sheep.”

This comparison is unconvincing to Cavanaugh, who has written a detailed and gracious reply to Boyd’s article.²⁰ Cavanaugh points out that this passage follows directly after a section in which Maritain treats the tragic necessity of political violence for the cause of justice. Claiming that “dirty hands” are unavoidable is precisely the type of argument utilized by political actors who draw too stark a distinction between their Christian vocation and their political role. Cavanaugh is sensitive to the ways this logic has been used in situations like Chile under Pinochet in order to sideline Christian ethics as irrelevant; he wants instead to emphasize that the call to Christian charity is something that must be lived out in *all* spheres of life.

Cavanaugh acknowledges that there is much more to Maritain’s approach and appreciates the nuances Boyd brings to the fore by drawing upon some of Maritain’s later writings. Still, Cavanaugh remains hesitant about Maritain’s usefulness as a resource for political theology today, given the very disparate ways in which his influence seems to have led. After describing some of the many directions various Christian Democratic parties have taken in subsequent decades, Cavanaugh concludes: “The variety of positions associated

¹⁸ Boyd, “Rescuing Maritain from his Reception History,” 86.

¹⁹ Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 249.

²⁰ See William T. Cavanaugh, “Revisiting Maritain in the Present Context—A Response to Gilbrian Stoy, Travis Knoll, and Brian Boyd,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 106–120.

with Maritain's followers indicates to me that the political relevance of the Gospel remains underspecified in Maritain's thought."²¹

Perhaps the political relevance of the Gospel is clearer if we read Maritain alongside his friend Saul Alinsky, the dean of community organizing, as two of the authors in this journal suggest. Nicholas Hayes-Mota writes that such a reading illuminates "the practical implications of Maritain's democratic philosophy, as well as its inherent radicalism."²² For many years, Maritain was a close friend and correspondent with Alinsky, and deeply admired the work of his Industrial Areas Foundation. In a complementary article, Brian Stiltner describes the friendship between the two men as a moving testimony of affection and collaboration across differences.²³ Such friendships are "both the form of the common good and the path to it," Stiltner writes.²⁴ Maritain reviewed Alinsky's 1946 book *Reveille for Radicals* in glowing terms, and then also cited it directly in *Man and the State*.²⁵ He explained that the accomplishments of Alinsky's movement "open a new road to real democracy, and show us the only way in which that deep need for communion which today stirs up men threatened by technocratic civilization, can be satisfied in freedom and through freedom, in and through genuine respect for the human person, in and through actual and living trust in the people."²⁶

Hayes-Mota explains that Maritain and Alinsky shared a commitment to what might be called "democratic personalism."²⁷ Stiltner describes what the two men had in common as a practice of "humane regard."²⁸ What Maritain saw in Alinsky's approach was a means of engagement in the temporal sphere deeply compatible with the Gospel, notwithstanding the fact that Alinsky was an atheist and a Jew. Maritain acknowledged the irony, writing to Alinsky:

You—being a Jew (whom I consider a Christian at heart, a better Christian perhaps than I am) committed to the quest of justice on

²¹ Cavanaugh, "Revisiting Maritain," 118.

²² See Nicholas Hayes-Mota, "Partners in Forming the People: Jacques Maritain, Saul Alinsky, and the Project of Personalist Democracy," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 123.

²³ See Brian Stiltner, "Community Organizing for Democratic Renewal: The Significance of Jacques Maritain's Support for Saul Alinsky and His Methods," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 146–168.

²⁴ Stiltner, "Community Organizing for Democratic Renewal," 152.

²⁵ Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946).

²⁶ Maritain's review is reproduced in *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky*, ed. Bernard Doering (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 18–20.

²⁷ Hayes-Mota, "Partners in Forming the People," 221.

²⁸ Stiltner, "Community Organizing for Democratic Renewal," 152.

earth—are giving priority to the first of love’s requirements, and offering your life for the temporal salvation and emancipation of mankind. . . . You act and fight also . . . for the recovery by man of his inner, moral dignity—that is to say, finally, even if you do not have such a purpose in your mind, for his spiritual redemption.²⁹

Here we see Maritain gesturing towards the porosity of the division between two planes, the spiritual and temporal. He is describing a social and political movement as a form of both temporal salvation *and* spiritual redemption. Democratic organizing that begins from relationships among a people and sees their concrete concerns as the beginning of a quest for the common good *is*, in fact, Christian love at work in the world. It is both a moral vision and a practical project.

Stiltner points out that in his book *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky used a quote from Maritain’s *Man and the State*: “The fear of soiling ourselves by entering the context of history is not virtue, but a way of escaping virtue.”³⁰ It is striking to note how similar this quote is to the controversial one above about “staining our fingers” that provoked the debate between Boyd and Cavanaugh about the possible use of political violence. Alinsky’s use of this quote about “soiling” casts a slightly different light on that debate. Despite the accusations of his critics, Alinsky never advocated violence. It would be more accurate to say that he (and also Maritain) are referring instead to the use of power, force, or coercion when they describe “soiling” or “staining.” Catholic social teaching has rarely discussed power in clear ways (including colonial power, as Alex Mikulich points out in his article here).³¹ But without frank discussions about power, including the immense disparities of power that exist in the world today, there is little hope for democratic renewal. As Stiltner puts it, “Elites left to their own devices have little interest in practicing a politics of the common good. Community organizations carry the promise of forcing them to do so.”³² Both democracy and community organizing are based on the recognition that shared power is more *just* than power concentrated in the hands of a few. Stiltner concludes with a case study of an interfaith community organization in Connecticut whose recent political victories show that what Alinsky called “democratic faith” is not misplaced.

Even though Alinsky’s approach to organizing is focused on local issues and begins from direct personal relationships, both he and

²⁹ Maritain to Alinsky, 5 November 1962, in Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 94.

³⁰ Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971), 25–26; see Maritain, *Man and the State*, 63.

³¹ See Alex Mikulich, “Catholic Social Teaching: Toward a Decolonial Praxis,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, special issue 1 (2024): 194–219.

³² Stiltner, “Community Organizing for Democratic Renewal,” 148.

Maritain see implications for larger scale social and political change. Hayes-Mota points out that, when reviewing Alinsky's *Reveille for Radicals*, Maritain wrote that grassroots participatory democratic movements can awaken an awareness of the common good that becomes much larger in scope. In Maritain's words, "A small community, thus organized from within as a living whole, becomes definitely aware of its power of initiative and its common good, [and] naturally develops into concrete awareness of the common good of the nation and the common good of the international community."³³

Promoting "the common good of the international community" is no small challenge, and Kevin Ahern's article takes up the problem of global governance today, asking what insights Maritain and Pope Francis offer. Acknowledging that Maritain's utopian vision of a world state has its limitations, Ahern nevertheless calls attention to Maritain's vision of a world political *society*. Maritain sees a pluralist and democratic global society as an important counterweight to Machiavellian notions of state sovereignty that, today, are ill-suited to dealing with our many transnational challenges. Pope Francis agrees, but emphasizes the need for organizing *from below* in order to counteract the many forces threatening the climate and vulnerable peoples (perhaps he too has read Alinsky). This is connected to an appeal for global siblinghood across the boundaries of the nation-state.

Finally, Alex Mikulich asks us to step back and consider the very nature of the conversation about Catholic social teaching in general, including Maritain's thought.³⁴ Drawing on Frantz Fanon among others, Mikulich argues that theology has been deeply malformed by the "colonial matrix of power," which means that a decolonial approach is an absolute necessity; there is little point in writing about justice, human rights, or the common good so long as a Eurocentric, white supremacist approach goes unacknowledged and uncorrected. Mikulich points to a critical review James Baldwin wrote of Maritain's *The Person and the Common Good* in which he complained that it is "unhelpful to be assured of future angels when mysteries of the present flesh are so far from being solved."³⁵ Maritain may in fact have agreed with Baldwin in many ways; he wrote in *True Humanism* that "It is vain to assert the dignity and vocation of human personality if we do not strive to transform the conditions that oppress man."³⁶ But while

³³ Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur*, 19.

³⁴ Mikulich, "Catholic Social Teaching," 195.

³⁵ James Baldwin, "The Person and the Common Good by Jacques Maritain," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010, originally published as "Present and Future," *New Leader*, March 13, 1948), 264–266, cited in Mikulich, "Catholic Social Teaching," 202.

³⁶ Jacques Maritain, *True Humanism* (New York: Scribner's, 1938), 87.

acknowledging the ways in which Maritain moved the church beyond a feudal paradigm, Mikulich is calling for a truly radical reckoning with the paradigms that continue to shape Catholic social teaching. We must, he says, “shift from applying abstract universals and philosophical idealism to the priority of geopolitical praxis with and for *les damnés*,” and “shift from anthropocentrism to a primary focus on land and earth democracy.”³⁷ Indeed, Catholic social teaching today must move beyond Maritain’s integral humanism or Christian personalism and find its way towards integral *ecology*.

This year marks an election year in the United States, so it is appropriate to conclude this introduction with some of Maritain’s words to Americans in particular. During his time in the US, Maritain found much to admire in American democracy; what he observed in the United States helped shape his influence on the Catholic Church as a whole. He was also a friendly critic, never failing to challenge as well. In 1939, the editors of *Commonweal* published an interview with Maritain, which included the following interchange:

CW: What do you think of the position of Catholics in the United States?

JM: I think that much is expected of Catholics in America and that at the moment they have an incomparable opportunity to serve the common good. May it please God that they do not miss this opportunity!

CW: Perhaps you could be a little more precise on this subject?

JM: One always wishes many good things for those whom one loves. I should prefer that you make your own self-criticisms. From my conversations I gather the impression that the hopes of many Catholics among you are principally concerned, it seems, with the following: to intensify the intellectual, metaphysical, and theological life of Catholics . . . to affirm more and more an apostolic rather than a political conception of religion, that is to say a conception which is truly Catholic (which before being “anti-communist” and, to the same extent, “anti-fascist” and “anti-racist,” is the calling of everyone to eternal life).³⁸

The interviewers also asked a question which must have been very acutely felt in 1939, but remains sadly relevant today:

CW: Many of us today are troubled by the question of how we can prevent the domination of the world by force and the fear of force. By what means can this be done?

Maritain replied with just two words:

³⁷ Mikulich, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 216.

³⁸ Editors, “An Interview with Jacques Maritain,” *Commonweal*, February 3, 1939, www.commonwealmagazine.org/interview-jacques-maritain.

JM: “By sanctity.” **M**

Laurie Johnston, PhD, is Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Emmanuel College in Boston. She also serves as Executive Vice President of the Sant’Egidio Foundation for Peace and Dialogue. A social ethicist, she has written and edited works on just war theory, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and political theology.

Grégoire Catta, SJ, is Assistant Professor of Theology at the Facultés Loyola Paris (formerly Centre Sèvres). He has served as the Director of the Service National Famille et Société at the Conference of Catholic Bishops of France, and is the author of numerous works, including *Catholic Social Teaching as Theology* (New York: Paulist, 2019).