

THE LOSS OF MARITAIN'S AMERICA

Jude P. Dougherty

“Schrager Makes Over a Legendary Chicago Hotel” is the headline the *New York Times* gave to its report on the downscaling of Chicago’s Ambassador East Hotel, which opened in 1924 on what is known as Chicago’s Gold Coast. I can’t say I know it well. My father, a Chicago hotelier, took me there as a child as part of a tour of the public spaces of some of Chicago’s great hotels. The Ambassador East is known for its famous dining room, the Pump Room, as well as for the famous who dined there. Now, a few generations after its opening, the Ambassador East is being renovated, downgraded under a new name, the Public. Why? In the words of its owner, Ian Schrager, “The idea is to have a less expensive hotel . . . because I think the country is more complicated now. It is not going to be so much about upward mobility in the future.”¹ A frightening prospect! This contrasts sharply with the America described by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, in his 1958 *Reflections on America*. A different

country to be sure! On both sides of the Atlantic, one hears the refrain, “This is not the country I was born into.” There is a pertinent Scholastic axiom that goes something like this: an entity must preserve its identity if it is to preserve its very being.

In the wake of former prime minister Nicolas Sarkozy’s having grappled vainly with the issue of French identity, one is drawn to that earlier work of Jacques Maritain, who attempted to take the measure not of France but of America in a similarly troubled time. In *Reflections on America*, Maritain, in the spirit of Tocqueville, attempted to capture the American temperament as distinct from that of his native France, indeed, as distinct from that of Europe as a whole. Maritain was lecturing in North America when World War II broke out, and he remained in the United States throughout the war. His *Reflections* may be read as a love letter to America, as an expression of gratitude to his host country and to the people he came to

Jude P. Dougherty is professor emeritus and dean emeritus of the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America. He is editor of the *Review of Metaphysics* and author most recently of *The Nature of Scientific Explanation*.

appreciate. Sadly, the America described by Maritain in his 1958 assessment no longer exists. Some may say that, given Maritain's romantic account, it never existed.²

Maritain characterizes the American spirit as "one grounded in a sense of community, not in a set of abstract slogans or lofty ideals." He viewed the country as "a swarming multiplicity of particular communities, self-organized groups, associations, unions, sodalities, vocational and religious brotherhoods, in which men join forces with one another at the elementary level of their everyday concerns and interests."³ In that light, he could praise Martin Luther King for his Southern leadership and Saul Alinsky as a community organizer. With the principle of subsidiarity in mind, he saw in the "organic multiplicity" of these self-generated independent communities not only efficiency but also a check on the power of the federal government.

Maritain found America to be a classless society in spite of an obvious disparity of income between rich and poor. The common man, in his experience, was neither servile nor arrogant. Maritain praised the ability of the country to integrate newcomers into the larger society, immigrants who entered the country by virtue of their own free choice. Recognizing that the country comprised men of different spiritual lineages, he nevertheless spoke of the United States as a religious commonwealth. He was appreciative of the insight of Will Herberg, a Jewish sociologist, who was writing at the time.⁴ Herberg is remembered for his dictum "To be an American is to be religious, and to be religious is to be religious in one of three ways, as a Protestant, Catholic or Jew." Maritain himself singled out the Jews for playing an essential and indispensable role in the dynamic ferment of American life.

Maritain acknowledged a growing trend toward secularism but hoped for an intelligent cooperation between Church and state. He feared a "temporalized religious inspiration" that could over time become institutionalized in the civic structures themselves, so much so that it would lose its essential supernatural character. With his friend Barbara Ward he believed a recovery of faith in God to be a necessary condition of Western freedom.⁵ "There is," he wrote, "a possibility that in the course of centuries, America may become *embourgeoisée*—a nation interested only in its own material welfare and power." Having said that, he adds, "The realization of such a possibility is, to my mind, improbable." He concludes his tribute with, "The great and admirable strength of America consists in this, that America is truly the American people."

Today, sixty-five years later, any reflective person is apt to notice the difference between Maritain's America and that of the present. A largely uneducated public has instantiated an anti-Christian, socialist regime at the federal level. A number of states now prevent the display of the Ten Commandments in classrooms and in the halls of the judiciary. Saul Alinsky's community initiative, perhaps never fully understood by Maritain, has been used to achieve ends Maritain never envisaged. Martin Luther King's laudable movement inspired Lyndon Johnson's affirmative action legislation with disastrous effects that are now acknowledged. The American character that Maritain lauded has been subverted by a flawed immigration policy and by the anti-Christian, intellectual elite's embrace of what we know as "multiculturalism" and "globalization." The public influence of Christianity has been muted. The once strong Catholic institutions of higher education are barely distinguishable from their state-supported counterparts. Religion

has become so identified with almsgiving that Sunday worship seems at times merely a backdrop for yet another charitable appeal.

Two years after the appearance of Maritain's reflections, Friedrich A. von Hayek published a major work, *The Constitution of Liberty*.⁶ The Austrian economist was then a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Writing as an economist, he saw some things more clearly than Maritain and indeed was more pessimistic than Maritain about the future of the United States. In an earlier work, *The Road to Serfdom*,⁷ Hayek, alarmed by the socialist drift on both sides of the Atlantic, issued what amounted to "a prophetic warning." From the perspective of Hayek, one could well predict Schrager's need to downsize the Ambassador East.

Hayek saw clearly the ruinous economic effects that the nation's drift to socialism would likely bring. Not only that, he could show from the experience of Europe that the egalitarian impulse inevitably leads to coercion and a loss of personal freedom. In both England and the America of that day, he found the same intellectual currents that facilitated the rise to power of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. "When one hears for a second time," he wrote in 1944, "opinions expressed and measures advocated which one has met twenty years ago, they assume new meaning as symptoms of a definite trend: they suggest that future developments will take a similar turn." He continues, "It is necessary now to state the unpalatable truth that it is Germany whose fate we are now in danger of repeating." "The danger is not immediate," he wrote, "and conditions in England and the United States are still so remote from those we have witnessed in Germany as to make it difficult to believe that we are moving in the same direction."⁸ Still, he believed that the socialist policies

endorsed by "our progressive intellectuals are the same as those of the twenties and thirties that created National Socialism."

In *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek speaks to the nature of freedom and its defense, and of the many ways that freedom can be subverted, notably by inattention to the rule of law and, in the United States, by inattention to the nation's founding documents. Without employing the Scholastic language of Maritain, he found the roots of socialism in the positivist's denial that there is such a recognizable entity as human nature and a denial that positive, or man-made law, is accountable to a higher law. Socialism in Hayek's view is based on an ideology in direct opposition to a tradition that for two thousand years has provided a conception of a law that is not man-made but found in nature. He notes that in the 1930s, legal positivism had so conquered Germany that "to be found guilty of adherence to natural-law theories was a kind of social disgrace." He adds, "The possibilities which the state of opinion created for an unlimited dictatorship were already seen by acute observers at the time Hitler was trying to gain power."⁹

Among the gravest threats to freedom that Hayek identifies are the regulatory agencies created by government that are essentially removed from the rule of law, insofar as they possess in one body, legislative, executive, and judicial authority. Once an area of jurisdiction has been marked out for an agency by legislative or other authority, the agency can act without exterior constraint. "Every public officer can act freely according to his own discretion, and the courts will respect his action as final and not inquire into its rightfulness."¹⁰ The only issue any court is likely to recognize is one of jurisdiction. Given the expansion of government, one can find daily, by merely scanning the

headlines, examples of a drama being played out between regulatory agencies and special interest groups, without regard for communal benefit.

In the final analysis, the issue that divides is the nature of the good and how it is to be determined. Like Maritain, Hayek expressed in 1960 the hope that there still exists in the West wide consensus on certain fundamental values. "Though I still regard myself as mainly an economist, I have come to feel more and more that the answers to many of the primary social questions of our time are ultimately to be found in the recognition of principles that lie outside the scope of technical economics or of any single discipline." In a kind of lament, he notes, "A large part of the peoples of the world borrowed from Western civilization and adopted Western ideals at a time when the West became

unsure of itself and lost faith in the traditions that have made it what it is."¹¹

What Hayek intimates time and again from a purely secular perspective, Pope Benedict XVI has been saying explicitly: the West needs to recover a sense of the sacred. Benedict, cognizant of the declining influence of Christianity within the West, has in multiple addresses called attention to the role Christianity has played in shaping Western culture, indeed, in unifying Europe. He has repeatedly called for an intellectual revival that recognizes the church's past role and its continuing necessity as a unifying element to a divided Europe.¹² As Hayek acknowledged without explicitly saying so, it is the church that has carried the intellectual mainstream through the ages and against which the questionable canons of our contemporary intelligentsia are to be measured.

1 *New York Times*, September 14, 2011, B6.

2 Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

3 *Ibid.*, 162.

4 Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

5 Cf. Barbara Ward, *Faith and Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1954).

6 Friedrich von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Republished in 2011 by the University of Chicago Press, in what it calls the "Definitive Edition."

7 Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

9 Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 349.

10 *Ibid.*, 210.

11 *Ibid.*, 48, 49.

12 A recent example is Benedict's reflection on the role the church played in the unification of Italy. Cf. "Pope Reminds Italy of Its Catholic Identity: Reflections on the 150th Anniversary of *Il Risorgimento*," as reported by Zenit.org, March 16, 2011.