

Introduction

On first sight, it may seem that Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jacques Maritain do not have much in common. They came from different countries and cultures, spoke different languages, their religious background was different and their lives and careers developed in quite different ways. Bonhoeffer expressed himself as a theologian, though with a keen eye on secular life and thought, Maritain was a philosopher, though a Christian one. Both men never met personally, neither did they take notice of each other's works. We might say that their intellectual encounter seems more or less accidental. Nevertheless, digging deeper into their thinking and their works, we might recognize certain congeniality. This is especially the case in their thinking about Christian Humanism.

This paper concentrates for Maritain mainly on his book *True Humanism*. It is about the role a new Christianity can play in the moral reshaping of the world. His important studies in political philosophy, such as *Man and the State*, can only superficially be taken into account. For Bonhoeffer, it is difficult to confine on one of his books in particular. We will refer mainly to *Letters and Papers from Prison* and sometimes to his *Ethics*.¹

These books have deeply influenced both Roman-Catholic and Protestant ethics in the first two decades after World-War II. After about sixty years there is still a lot to learn.

On three major points, Maritain and Bonhoeffer come astonishingly close. Therefore, we will investigate what they have to say about

- 1) Resisting against the age of time
- 2) The building of a new Christianity
- 3) The power of aristocratic behaviour.

Before we try to work this out a little more, it might be necessary to review some biographical facts about Jacques Maritain. There seems no need to review the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as we probably all feel familiar enough with him.

Jacques Maritain was born in Paris, France in 1882. He studied both philosophy and biology. Originally, of Protestant background, he became a devoted member of the Roman-Catholic Church in 1906, the year in which Bonhoeffer was born. Only 32, he was appointed at the Institut Catholique in Paris.

At the outbreak of World-War II, Maritain emigrated to the United States of America, where he taught philosophy at Princeton and in Toronto, Canada. Some of his major studies in political philosophy were written during these American years.

Maritain played an important role in the moral and social rebuilding of Europe after the war. His influence on the Humanistic tradition seems undeniable and of great value. He has been one of the main authors of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of the Human Rights* (1948).

When he was 78, his wife Raïssa died and Maritain returned to France to live with the radical religious order *Les Petits Frères de Jésus* to the end of his days. He died in 1973 in Toulouse, France.

1. Resisting against the age of time

If it is true that “writing is resistance” (Lyotard)², this surely fits for Bonhoeffer and Maritain. Their writing could be understood as attempts to formulate an alternative against the chaos of the time they lived in.

Of course, Bonhoeffer and Maritain do realize very well that many moral values that have deeply influenced Western civilization during the ages, such as friendship, mutual understanding, the power of reason and the respect for the human dignity, can be interpreted as non-religious. Therefore, Maritain starts his book by saying that these Humanistic values should be taken serious, as far as they make it possible for every human being to enrich his personal and social life. In modern times, however, this enrichment is endangered by political strategies and ideologies, which focus to destroy these essential humanistic values.

Although he doesn't mention it by name, it is quite clear that Maritain speaks about the national-socialist ideology of his days. To resist this – and every other – inhuman ideology, a strong and lasting true Humanism should be built.

For Maritain, the driving force behind this humanism is the evangelic tradition. He does not expects every citizen being a Christian³, but the evangelic tradition can, to his point of view, only be the first and last point of reference.

Bonhoeffer, too, has always deeply felt the need of resisting against the age of time. His intellectual resistance transformed to a physical one – and death was the bitter outcome.

‘Resisting’ for him had several aspects. First, we have to mention the aristocratic resistance against the downfall of ethics in public and personal life. Second, he felt it as his Christian duty to defend the human dignity against all forces that would try to bring it down. Although his vision on how this had to be done changed during the years, the need to do so has always been there.

2. The building of a new Christianity

Christians do not live outside the world; their task is being Christian in a merely non-Christian world. Bonhoeffer asks if it is still possible to “speak in a secular way about God” (*weltlich von Gott zu sprechen*).⁴

In the years of *Sanctorum Communio*, he strongly believed that the church could be one of the leading forces to change society and to resist against the age of the time. However, as the church failed to do so. During his years in prison, more precisely in a letter of April 30th, 1944, Bonhoeffer began to articulate a new stage of his theological reflection. His conviction is that “we are moving towards a completely religionless⁵ time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore”.⁶

This was in fact not a thesis from his last years. Already in 1928, Bonhoeffer said that even Jesus Christ himself was in fact a 'non religious' person.⁷

It was clear to him that in the centre of the Gospel, we do not find the proclamation of a new religion, but the unexpected Way of God towards man. This is a very unreligious way. For a Christian, not the religious act, but the participation to the suffering of God in Jesus Christ, makes man a Christian. Being a Christian therefore means: being human in the light of Christ.⁸ This is the heart of Bonhoeffer’s ethical theory.

If he had known his works, Maritain would certainly have agreed with Bonhoeffer on this matter. He says that in this disoriented world they live in, Christians are obliged to reach for sanctity and to pull to accomplishment the whole body politic.

The real task for Christians is “to reintegrate in the plenitude of their first origins those desires for justice and that nostalgia for communion” that seems to have been misdirected (*desorienté*). Doing so, they can wake “a cultural and temporal force of Christian inspiration”, able to react on modern times “and to come to the aid of man”.⁹

Maritain describes this temporary cultural force as “temporal fellowships” (*fraternités temporelles*).¹⁰ We might call them political organizations, but have to take into account that for Maritain politics are something intrinsically moral.”¹¹

These fellowships are purely secular in the way they operate and will be “devoted to a long-distance work of transformation” (*une œuvre transformatrice de longue haleine*).¹²

In the beginning, they can’t be more than minorities but will, like leaven (*ferment*), surely start to grow.¹³

3. The power of aristocratic behaviour

It has often been said that Maritain’s plea for temporal fellowships is quite elitist. These fellowships, as people rejecting his theory often say, will most certainly be formed by man of excellent behaviour and probably by man of great intellectual gifts and talents.

I do not agree with this. ‘Elitist’ should not be understood as a material category. It is, on the contrary, a *moral* category. It doesn’t have to do with money, education, social position or whatsoever. To face the threats of time, man should develop a certain inner strength, an aristocracy of mind. The development of this is a matter of courage, and probably faith. Maritain therefore says that in this time of downfall (*décadence*) man should reach for a holy heroism (*héroïsme de la sainteté*).¹⁴

Bonhoeffer, too, feels the necessity to resist and overcome the decadence of this time. He articulates a structure of responsible life (*Struktur des verantwortlichen Lebens*)¹⁵ and speaks about ethics as a way of living (*Ethik als Gestaltung*).¹⁶

In a letter, he introduced the term *Civilcourage*,¹⁷ which pronounces exactly what is meant here: the courage that every member of civil society needs.

Has this courage something to do with aristocracy? Not in the elitist way, mentioned above. In the German pre-war context, aristocracy was a matter of ‘culture’. This can be defined as a collection of moral values¹⁸ that is generated from father to son and from mother to daughter. ‘Culture’ cannot be misused. It has proven its worth during the ages. ‘Civilization’ is something else; people can learn to be civilized, they can learn what to say, what to believe and even what to think. Therefore, civilization can easily be misused for all kinds of purposes. The national-socialist philosophy in Germany in Bonhoeffer’s days is a good example of this misuse.

To resist against this philosophy of destruction and disregards of human dignity, Bonhoeffer was thrown back on his aristocracy of mind. He fought a lonely struggle and he lost. Or should we suggest that he has, finally, won? For he has inspired generations worldwide – and still does.

Conclusions

Both Bonhoeffer and Maritain were men of great inner strength and faith, blessed with lucid intellectual gifts and the power to think and analyse.

However, they were also men of their time. The problems they encountered were of a different order than the challenges our society stands for. We have to find our way in a world that is religiously more complex and much more individual.

We have to face the multicultural and multi-religious society as something we should accept – whether we like it or not.

Bonhoeffer has taught us – and the process of learning still goes on – how important it is to ask what ‘being a Christian within the world’ really means. Another thing we may not let slip out of our minds is his powerful plea for the quality of life and the freedom of personal judgement.

What we can learn from Maritain is much more difficult to say. His political philosophy seems to be a bit caught up by modern times. It may have been new and of great influence in his days, in our age it has become quite ‘normal’ to speak about pluralism, democracy, freedom and social equality. Or is it not?

I think that we should learn to reformulate what ‘aristocracy of mind’ really means. For I believe that there can only be one way for a long lasting plural and multi-religious society: the way of mutual understanding. This understanding can only take shape when respect for each others moral values, and above all the dignity of the human being, is taken most seriously.

It is not the main task of any social or political structure, religion or church to defend itself or to prove its superiority above others. In our 21st century, the biggest threat for world order is the clash of civilizations. International world order based on civilizations in an ‘aristocratic’

way, is the surest safeguard against a permanent loss of moral and human values. Here is a lot to do and a long way to go...

Thank you for your kind attention.

Notes

¹ The exact titles and editions are given below under 'cited literature'.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *l'Inhumain, Causeries sur le Temps*, Paris : Éditions Galilée 1988.

³ *TH*, 105, "not that this is the primary end"; *HI*, 123, "non que se soit son but principal".

⁴ *WE*, 405; *LPP*, 280.

⁵ Bonhoeffer uses 'Religionloses Christentum', 'nicht-religiösen Christentum' and 'weltliche Interpretation biblische Begriffe' (to quote the German expressions) in merely the same context, but not exactly in the same way, as Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Eine Einführung in sein Denken*, Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2001, 226, has pointed out clearly.

⁶ *WE*, 401 – 408; *LPP*, 279.

⁷ Dramm, *o.c.*, 227.

⁸ *E*, 53.

⁹ *TH*, xvi.

¹⁰ *TH*, 266; *HI*, 288.

¹¹ *Man and the State*, 53.

¹² *TH*, 266; *TH*, 253.

¹³ *TH*, 283, "The temporal Christian forces called for by the world are in the phase of preparation, of long-distance preparation: it is impossible that one day they will not issue visibility in the world".

¹⁴ *TH*, xiv; *HI*, 12.

¹⁵ *E*, 256 – 289.

¹⁶ *E*, 62 – 93.

¹⁷ *WE*, 23f.; 5f.

¹⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York etc.: Simon & Schuster 2003 (1996), 41, "Nineteenth-century German thinkers drew a sharp distinction between civilization, which involved mechanics, technology, and material factors, and culture, which involved values, ideals, and the higher intellectual artistic, moral qualities of a society". He makes clear that it is delusory to separate *culture* from *civilization* in the German way. He therefore opts for a definition in which both civilization and culture are described as "the values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance" (referring himself to Adda B. Bozeman, "Civilizations Under Stress" (1975)).

Cited literature

Works by Jacques Maritain

- 1) *Humanisme Intégrale, Problèmes temporels et spirituels d'une nouvelle chrétienté*, Paris: Fernand Aubier 1936. (*HI*).
- 2) English edition: *True Humanism*, London: Geoffrey Bless/The Centenary Press 1946 (4th ed.). (This is the edition I used for this paper, cited as *TH*)

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- 3) *Man and the State*, London: Hollis & Carter 1956; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1951. I quoted the English edition.

Works by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

- 1) *Widerstand und Ergebung, Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus dem Haft*, (Hrsg. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge, Ilse Tödt), Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1998. DBW 8 (Neuausgabe) (*WE*).
- 2) *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Fortress Press (English translation by Reginald Fuller & Frank Clark of the German 1970 text), New York etc.: Simon & Schuster 1997. (*LPP*).
- 3) *Ethik*, (Hrsg. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, Clifford Green), München 1992. DBW 6 (Neuausgabe), München: Kaiser 1992. (*E*).