

# JACQUES MARITAIN AND CHARLES PÉGUY: A REASSESSMENT

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Since the untimely death of Charles Péguy (1873-1914) in the first weeks of the First World War in the Battle of the Mame, numerous writers have been preoccupied with his life. All of the major accounts have dealt with Péguy's relationship to Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and the influence of the Maritains on Péguy's attitude toward Christianity.

The account by Jean and Jérôme Tharaud may be, as some have said, sensationalist; nevertheless, the many pages which this early account devotes to our topic demonstrates that the young Maritain was an influential figure for Péguy in the eyes of contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Another first-hand account by Daniel Halévy shows Maritain's importance in Péguy's spiritual struggles. Indeed, in an Addendum to his book, Halévy makes an appeal to Maritain to tell his side of the story.<sup>2</sup> This response was made, seemingly to the satisfaction of Maritain, by his wife Raissa as part of her autobiographical work *Les grandes amitiés*. Here Maritain is portrayed as highly apologetic for any misunderstandings between himself and Péguy to the point of taking all responsibility for the breakdown of their friendship and for any pain which Péguy may have suffered as a consequence. Péguy scholars today accept this stand as a point of fact and moreover extend Maritain's "responsibility" into the sphere of his being the cause of certain of Péguy's spiritual and even familial strifes. Pie Duployé's *La religion de Péguy* represents such a view. The conversations Duployé held with Maritain around 1964 did nothing to change this view; rather they reiterated and strengthened the stand found in *Les grands amitiés*. Maritain in the preface and annotations to the Péguy-Maritain correspondence published in 1972 once again upholds a view of himself as "responsible" and "to blame."

The full correspondence and Maritain's journal, *Notebooks*, were not available to Duployé in 1965. These, along with a considerable number of other sources, can significantly reshape the debate over the Péguy-Maritain relationship. Henry Bars has given a short response to Duployé;<sup>3</sup> however, much remains to be done in terms of presenting an account which does not take at face value Maritain's acceptance of blame.

The first known letter between Maritain and Péguy is one addressed to the latter on March 13, 1901. Here Maritain compliments Péguy on his article "Casse-cou," but suggests that Péguy was too hard on Jean Jaurès. Maritain politely chastises Péguy: "You know very well that he [Jaurès] does not 'demand for the present day that one be a materialist and an atheist'....Did he not say... 'With respect to my concerns, I have never taken sides against or disdained high religious aspirations, which under the diversity of myths, symbols, and dogmas have supported the human spirit'?"<sup>4</sup>

Also at this time, as part of the activities at Péguy's shop, Raissa and Jacques began attending the Bergson lectures at the Collège de France in the fall of 1901: "One day, having seen that our disillusionment was complete, he [Péguy] took us to hear Bergson." Raissa goes on to describe how the great hall could not hold the crowd, so with Péguy, George Sorel, and Psichari they came early to get seats. Not long after, the Maritains would credit Bergson's philosophy as being an influence which led to their conversion. Later Bergson himself would be at the centre of a controversy not only in the Church, but also between Maritain and Péguy.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after, Maritain began working for Péguy; the first certain date of his employment is October of 1904. Letters between Péguy and Maritain deal with Maritain's work in finding source material for the *Cahiers*, although his major task was that of a proof-reader.

As for Maritain's marriage, his mother recounts that Péguy and Jeanne, Jacques' sister, pleaded with her for the prompt marriage of Maritain. Favre wanted a delay of two years while Maritain could get his *agrégation* in philosophy. She even went so far as to say that "the surprise was, for her, very jolting."<sup>6</sup> The marriage occurred without her cooperation as this letter of Thursday, November 24, 1904, from Maritain to Péguy on the eve of the Maritains' wedding, shows: "You know that my mother is leaving for Brittany tonight....I hope to be able to replace you this afternoon for the ceremony on Saturday."<sup>7</sup>

Favre's account skips this fact and shows her anti-religious bias once again: "November 1904, marriage of Jacques: civil marriage, like that of Jeanne: something very natural for Péguy, who also had a civil wedding."<sup>8</sup>

The first record of Maritain's financial assistance to the *Cahiers* is a letter from Péguy to Maritain on the day of the latter's wedding: "Therefore, can you give Bourgeois one thousand francs cash Wednesday morning at nine?"<sup>9</sup>

Later Maritain and Péguy concocted a scheme to win Favre's approval for a loan of 10,000 francs to Péguy; Maritain had come into the money through the death of his father. A first letter sent to Favre by Péguy on May 15, 1905, spoke generally of his financial difficulties and hopes. The second arrived a few hours later:

"Dear Madame,  
 Jacques has thought up and is completely convinced,  
 without my having given him the least suggestion, a  
 solution which will be in every respect perfect and  
 definitive; do you approve of this solution?"<sup>10</sup>

It is unclear whether it was only Favre's moral approval which they were seeking, or, since another letter also refers to the need for her approval, if she in fact controlled a certain financial trust for her son; it should be remembered that as yet Maritain was under twenty-five years of age.

Maurice Reclus believed that the loan was for 10,000 francs and adds that the money was "evidently lost" to Maritain. Later letters suggest that some sort of repayment schedule was in effect, but it is unclear as to how much of this was towards Maritain's wages which were in arrears or how much was towards the loan.<sup>11</sup>

A letter of a few months later, in August of 1905, shows that Favre had loaned Péguy an additional 10,000 francs and that the sum was being repaid with interest. The most important religious development in this period was the Maritain's relationship with Léon Bloy. The first communication between them took place after the Maritains read about Bloy in a newspaper article in June of 1905. Bloy then received a letter from them containing 25 francs.<sup>12</sup> In a few months the Maritains were attempting to republish Bloy's *Le salut par les Juifs*. Initially, Péguy was also to be involved by having the work appear in the *Cahiers*. But the issue is clouded by Bloy's urging that he wanted it understood that the money he was receiving was an advance on the edition of *Salut* which Péguy truly intended to publish. Maritain tried to obtain money from Péguy to this end.<sup>13</sup> By January of 1906, the project was underway with the cooperation of Péguy's printer who would in part finance the deal.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of 1906 Péguy's cooperative attitude toward Bloy was beginning to erode. As Raissa recounts, with obvious reference to the Maritains' growing attachments to Bloy, "unhappy differences grew up between Péguy and ourselves: and we came to know how easily he could be unjust (a thing very natural in a temperament like his), and how jealously he could wish to keep his friends for himself alone."<sup>15</sup>

The next period of interest, before turning to Maritain's trip to Péguy's home, is that of June, 1906, through May, 1907, the period of the conversions of Maritain and Péguy. Maritain's conversion was definitely decisive in that he broke with a former way of life and immediately took up new activities. Péguy's conversion, however, did not involve any immediate or radical changes in behavior; changes were largely attitudinal. And whereas Maritain found a home in the established Catholic Church, Péguy never lost his anti-clerical bend.

On June 11, 1906, the Maritains along with Raissa's sister, Vera, were baptized in the Church of Saint-Jean l'Evangeliste in Montmartre, Paris, by Abbé Durantel.<sup>16</sup> The ceremony took place one year after the Maritains met Bloy, and he, although apparently not an insistent proselytizing character, was definitely the effective cause. After some initial hesitations concerning the truth of religious values, the Maritains were by April, 1906 decidedly eager to convert. Raissa's family was shocked by the conversions of their only two daughters when they eventually learned of them; although the family had been influenced by France's cultural milieu and by a popular scientific positivism since moving to Paris, they had observed pious Jewish practices while in Russia approximately ten years earlier.

As for Maritain's family, his mother was not informed of the conversion. This fact in itself bespeaks an anti-religious pressure. As for Maritain's only other immediate family member, his sister Jeanne, soon she too would convert to Catholicism.

The date of Péguy's conversion is most often given as March 5, 1907. Yet this is not the record of any conversion experience; rather it is the first of a number of confidences Péguy made that he had returned to the faith; and this first confidence was to Maritain.

Maritain returned to Paris on his own for a visit in March of 1907. The reaction he got from Péguy on this trip, however, was somewhat different, as his journal entry shows: "Lunched with Péguy at my mother's. Overwhelmed with joy at what he tells me about himself (he has made the same journey as us). 'The body of Christ is larger than one thinks.'" <sup>17</sup> Because Péguy requested secrecy, Raissa testifies: "After his confidence to Jacques, Péguy's secret had been strictly kept by us and by Dom Baillet, and by Péguy himself...." That was the case until Péguy broke the secrecy to Joseph Lotte.<sup>18</sup>

Given that after Péguy's confidence to Maritain the two had a new understanding of their friendship in terms of a mutual faith, three important letters of the spring of 1907 show how they tried to work out an even stronger friendship. Péguy writes on May 15, 1907 that he needs Maritain to work during the summer and goes on to say:

"I also need for us to talk regularly during this time. You are an essential part of my system and I very much need, in order to complete the eighth series, a general examination. "I have not overwhelmed you with demands this year. I am sure that you will not refuse me this."<sup>19</sup>

Later that month, May 24, 1907, Péguy expanded on these ideas:

"During this time we can chat and discuss as much as it becomes necessary. Not because I would like to return to

the decisive conversation that we had while you visited us in Paris. On the contrary, I want to push all that ahead and henceforth organize our friendship in detail. To give you a particular example of what I intend by this, I have friends who for several years have taken refuge on the Isle of Wight and since that time I have had almost no news of them, except one thing which I will show you. It seems to me that it should fall on you to finally re-establish with them my spiritual communication."<sup>20</sup>

Maritain's response to all this is curiously cautious, given that he said he was "overwhelmed" to have heard Péguy's news. Considering that a letter of January, 1907, implies that Péguy was in considerable financial debt to Maritain, the latter may have been wary of any further business dealings with Péguy.

Péguy's attitude toward religion was definitely not settled. He told Maritain that he wanted secrecy in order, as he later said, to be able to prepare his readers for the new Christian direction of his journal. Indeed, the concern was not unfounded since he was to lose a large number of subscriptions in later years as a direct response to the explicitly Christian material he wrote.

Two events figure prominently after Maritain's return from Germany: first, the trip by Maritain to the exiled monks of Solesmes on the Isle of Wight to see Père Baillet on behalf of Péguy; and second, Maritain's visit to Péguy's family in Lozère.

The origin of the first of these missions was Péguy's request that Maritain establish a "spiritual" contact with his old classmate Baillet. After describing the state of affairs to Baillet, however, Maritain was charged with the counter-mission of telling Péguy to have his children baptized. It seems that much was made of Maritain's "embassadorial" role, as this term and such language as "to represent Baillet among you" was used by Maritain and Péguy until 1910.

The second event, which was originally to have been carried out by Maritain's sister, Jeanne, was a far more critical one since it occurred after heightened tension had set in between Maritain and Péguy. As Duployé's account of the incident goes, which he said he confirmed with Maritain around 1964, when Maritain arrived in Lozère he said that if the Church meant nothing to Mme Beaudouin, Péguy's mother-in-law, and Charlotte, his wife, then why not let Péguy baptize his children? Mme Beaudouin answered that she told Péguy that she herself had been baptized and that since one apostate in the family was enough, she could not allow her grandchildren to live through such a drama. Moreover, the Beaudouins had honoured Péguy by allowing him into their republican family. In marrying Charlotte, he had married the revolutionary cause and to become a Catholic

would be quite simply to apostasize.<sup>21</sup> Maritain's journal entry from this date, July 22, 1909, confirms this in more straightforward terms: "Visit to Mme Beaudouin and Mme Péguy. Complete failure."<sup>22</sup> In the days that followed, Péguy twice sent Favre to Lozère in order to calm his family.

At this point I would like to draw a number of conclusions which I feel substantially challenge the traditional interpretation of the Péguy-Maritain relationship.

First, Favre maintains throughout her article on Péguy that the strained relations between herself and her son were caused by his religious beliefs, and so far scholars have assumed this to be the case. If, however, Favre's statements are accurate, they reveal that a strong break with her son first came about because of his marriage.

Second, contrary to the perception that the Péguy-Maritain disagreements lay purely in the spiritual realm, I believe they had a strong financial undercurrent. Raissa recounts that Péguy was hurt by Maritain's letters from Heidelberg which "savored of anxiety and criticism."<sup>23</sup> Péguy's requests, however, were not only that Maritain should help him put his spiritual life in order but that Maritain should also work with him constantly at the *Cahiers*.<sup>24</sup> Maritain's response is most unexpected and amounts to his more or less saying that he would prefer to remain at an arm's length.<sup>25</sup> The only explanation for this is to be found in previous letters between Maritain and Péguy's secretary which show that Maritain was owed not only the 10,000 francs but also back wages.<sup>26</sup> Since this sum was never repaid and Maritain had to work at editing jobs which he avowedly disliked, it must be concluded that this financial factor remained an irritating undercurrent throughout their spiritual disputes.

Third, concerning Maritain's trip to Lozère, Raissa, Favre, and virtually all of Péguy's many biographers depict this visit as having pushed Péguy's evolving spiritual orientation into a critical confrontation with his family. The conversions of Péguy's entire family after his death give the impression that they too were in a spiritual evolution. Yet, this was clearly not the case. Shortly before the trip in question, while Maritain was dining in Lozère Mme Péguy announced that her husband was "suffering a violent attack of Catholicism."<sup>27</sup> Even the most partisan of biographers reveal a familial situation of tension in which Péguy's brother-in-law had assumed the position of father. Maritain walked into an explosive situation at Lozère, one Péguy felt he himself was no longer capable of facing.

Fourth, although the two men did have at least one congenial meeting in later years, a certain bitterness did arise. Péguy's bitterness can be seen in this report of Maritain: "Péguy told...[Psichari], as he told my mother, that he had sent me to the Isle of Wight in order that I might get in touch with Catholics of better quality than Léon Bloy. Sad double game."<sup>28</sup> Raissa's account suggests that the Maritains accepted this as true.<sup>29</sup> If indeed they did, then their interpretation of Péguy's entire spiritual awakening of the

years 1907-1910 would have changed radically. All of Péguy's vacillations, including investigating a *sanatio in radice*, having his children baptized without the consent of their mother, and Maritain's trips and many letters to the Isle of Wight on Péguy's behalf must then have appeared as a sort of cat-and-mouse game. The Maritains thought they were leading Péguy to the Church while Péguy was attempting, at the instigation of Maritain's mother, to lead the Maritains away from the Church. Only the Maritains' extreme frustration at Péguy's waverings could have made them consider this a possibility, since Péguy's letters to Maritain in May of 1907 show that at least at the beginning Péguy was sincerely seeking the Maritains' spiritual support.

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## NOTES

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11. A. Martin, 34.
12. J. Maritain, p. 75.
13. A. Martin, 38.
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27. R. Maritain p. 215.
28. J. Maritain, pp. 57-58.
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