Father Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P., and the Refutation of Anti-Semitism in Vichy France

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The Reverend Father Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P.[1] (1897-1954) is most often remembered for his remarkable impact on religious art and architecture in France. In the early part of the twentieth century, when the mass-produced, sentimental plaster saints and painted Stations of the Cross known as *l'art de Saint-Sulpice*[2] proliferated, Father Couturier insisted that the Roman Catholic Church call upon the great architects and artists of the day to design and decorate its buildings. In an essentially non-religious age, this was a practice that would require considerable humility, he acknowledged, since choosing to work with artists who were "closest to life," least academic, and most inspired, necessarily meant calling upon few practicing Christians but many non-believers.

Father Couturier pithily summarized his position as, "Better a genius without faith than a believer without talent." In an interview in *Harper's Bazaar,* he elaborated: "We knew very well that some of these artists were not strictly practicing Christians; that some were separated from us by serious divergences of a political as well as of an intellectual order. Trusting in Providence, we told ourselves that a great artist is always a great spiritual being, each in his own manner..." (December 1947, 121-122). Father Couturier did persuade many artists, including atheists, communists, and Jews, to undertake ecclesiastical projects that bore little obvious relation to the predominant concerns of their life work. Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger, Jacques Lipschitz and Jean Lurçat (among several others) contributed to the first project Father Couturier supervised after his return to France in 1945 from his wartime North American exile, the decoration of the new church at Assy in the Alps. Fernand Léger continued his collaboration with Couturier by designing a band of stained glass windows for a modest new church built by parishioners in the heavily damaged industrial town of Audincourt. Under Couturier's auspices, Le Corbusier designed the new Dominican convent, La Tourette, in L'Arbresle near Lyon. Perhaps most famously, Couturier worked closely with Henri Matisse on the celebrated Chapel of the Rosary at Vence.[3] All these artists – and many others – found it not only inspiring to work with Couturier, but deepened their friendships with him long after the initial projects that enlisted their services had been completed. Through his continued engagement with them, and through resuming his editorship of the journal *Art sacré* after World War II, Father Couturier pursued his exploration of the relationship between art and religious experience with great audacity. Although he was attacked by anti-modernists within the Church near the end of his life, discussions on the renewal of sacred art have invariably returned to Father Couturier's writings time and again (Billot 1981, Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1986, Weber 1989, de Lavergne 1992).

My own encounter with Father Couturier occurred in the course of researching the role that exiles from occupied and Vichy France played in the 1940s in Quebec. I discovered how Father Couturier dedicated himself to the distinct but interrelated goals of supporting young proponents of non-figurative art in French Canada against their detractors, and building support in North America for the Gaullist *France-Libre* movement. Indeed, French Canada held a special attraction for Couturier, and not only because in its traditional aspects it was much closer to his native milieu in provincial France than anything else he encountered in North America. More importantly, Couturier saw a unique opportunity in Quebec to lend his authority to a group of young, daring artists who were creating their own synthesis of the major modernist currents: cubism, surrealism, and expressionism (Davis 1974, Guilbaut 1983). Eventually, I would publish an essay that traces Couturier's "civic presence" in Quebec during the War (Schwartzwald 1990).[4] Once my project was completed, however, I found it difficult to set aside my interest in Marie-Alain Couturier. Like many others, I was struck by his unwavering loyalty to spiritual and intellectual liberty.

In preparing my essay, I spent months at the Archives Marie-Alain Couturier in Paris, poring over hundreds - perhaps thousands - of pages of letters, sermons, press articles, radio addresses, diary entries, and miscellaneous notes and jottings. The broadest selection of these are available as *La Vérité blessée*[5] (1984), assembled by Marcel Billot, then Director of the archives. The volume includes texts written over a fifteen-year period, beginning with Father Couturier's crossing to North America in the closing days of 1939 with the world again at war and ending in 1953, a few months before his death. The variety of public and private sources from which the selections are taken, as well as their virtuosity of style and intellectual force, render *La Vérité blessée* a comprehensive, compelling portrait of Couturier.

Father Couturier addressed issues that reached well beyond the crisis of sacred art in his time. These coalesce around a series of topics that are hardly foreign to a contemporary ear: Not only the relationship between art - especially abstract art - and spirituality, but an equally profound reflection on democracy and fascism, and especially the thirst for order; not only the relationship between national schools and an international style in art, but more generally the relationships between universalism and religious and national specificities. Traversing all these questions is a reflection on the situation of Jews in the twentieth century and the responsibility of Christian religious when speaking about Jews to their faithful. This reflection begins in theology, continues in politics - especially those of French clericalism and anti-clericalism, - and finds its deepest expression in response to the conflagration of the Second World War, where anti-Semitism is not only at the heart of Nazi atrocities but, as Couturier quickly comes to realize, at the core of policies pursued quite autonomously by the regime at Vichy.[6] In fact, Couturier comes to see a culture of anti-Semitism as central to France's undoing: *this,* and not some presumed Jewish-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy, a favorite mantra of the French Right in the 1930s, lies at the heart of the moral bankruptcy that hastens the collapse the Third Republic. Recognizing these truths led Couturier to act in

ways during the Second World War that earned him the profound respect and gratitude of exiles, refugees, and the disenfranchised.

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Father Couturier's journey from the provincial town of Montbrison in south-central France to Paris and a lifetime of internationally renowned accomplishments is at once typical of the itinerary that many of France's most celebrated citizens have taken from the provinces to the capital, yet unique in its contours. While there was little in his upbringing that presaged a future in the priesthood, this is not to suggest that Catholicism was somehow a distant force in Couturier's childhood. On the contrary, everything leads to the conclusion that it constituted the very culture of his native region. In a land profoundly marked by fundamental, unresolved divisions that stretched back to the Revolutionary events a hundred years earlier, here was "France, elder daughter of the Church," for whom national identity was defined in terms of ancestry and faith. In other words, the conviction that "Frenchness" and Catholicism were inseparable and themselves tied to a fundamentally rural way of life would have seemed almost self-evident in Couturier's milieu. Demographically and economically, it was representative of a France whose pre-modern visage lasted well into the twentieth century. Not until 1931, for example, did the urban population surpass that of rural areas - and only if one defines as urban any community of more than 2000 people! In many smaller communities, agriculture remained dominant with three-quarters of land workers owning modest parcels, an average eight hectares in 1929. Manual workers represented only one-third of the population in 1931, and over half of these labored in plants of fewer than one hundred employees (Berstein 16ff). As for Pierre Couturier's (he would take the name *Marie-Alain* upon becoming a religious) own family, it belonged to the densely constituted middle class, in its case owning a mill to which surrounding farmers would bring their grain.

With the French middle classes at the turn of the century haunted by the twin menaces of "socialist leveling" and "capitalist voracity"[7], many local elites regarded the democratic and parliamentary underpinnings of the Third Republic itself as all too risky. In ways that foreboded Pétain's État français during the Second World War, many partisans of the parliamentary parties of the Right that enjoyed large support in rural areas spoke fondly of "organic" regimes that combined central authority derived from principles of lineage with regional autonomy exercised by those that "belonged". For many in these milieus, the Dreyfus Affair that shook France in the closing years of the nineteenth century had furnished more than sufficient proof of the Republic's disorderly conduct. Of course, it is true - and important - to recall that for many anti-Dreyfusards, the Captain, falsely accused of passing military secrets to Germany, was guilty *because* he was Jewish (or Jewish and *therefore* guilty). But if "Jewish guilt" was redundant, precisely because in their minds the two words were synonymous, what was truly scandalous for them was that the fate of a "mere" Jew could so imperil the great institutions of the country, especially the army. Léon Blum, the Socialist intellectual and future *Président du Conseil* of the first Popular Front government,

would recall in his memoirs of the Dreyfus affair that "[t]he parliament and the country had divided into two entrenched camps separated by a deep gulf. Public passions were violent, but no one was fighting any longer for or against Dreyfus, for or against the revision of the judgment against him; now one fought for or against the Republic, for or against 'militarism', for or against the laity of the State" (Blum 148).

In the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, the French anti-Semitic press flourished. It was particularly well-represented in the provinces, where *La France juive*, for example, sold 80% of its 800,000 daily copies. Even the "independent" provincial press was "largely won over to anti-Semitic theses" (Birnbaum 114). In early 1898, demonstrations took place demanding that Jews be purged from the state administrations they supposedly dominated, an obsession that would return under the Vichy regime. Extra-parliamentary *ligues*, committed above all "to the defense of Catholicism against internal enemies, especially Jews," and whose name nostalgically recalled those of the anti-Protestant campaigners of the sixteenth century, exploited anti-Semitism as the most satisfactory formula for crystallizing an unwieldy package of social and class resentments. [8]

The most formidable of these *ligues* was undoubtedly the Action française, founded in 1899. It would come to exercise a special attraction on both Pierre Couturier and his brother Jean. For the group's principal theorist, Charles Maurras, the Dreyfus Affair was "an experimental verification" of the inability of republican institutions to resist "individualism" and "foreign pressures". In his view, parliamentary democracy was not only decadent, but had been foisted upon France in a conspiracy engineered by the four "confederated estates" that were hostile to the three traditional estates of the Ancien régime. These invasive estates were the Protestants, the Jews, the Freemasons, and the *métèques,* or immigrants. In the words of French historian Michel Winock, Maurras insisted that the national persona had to assert itself as an "absolute, intolerant, protectionist identity [...] Of what did being French consist? A composite of Romanity, Catholicity, clarity of expression, all of which made up an order - a classicism." (Winock 130).

Royalism was also central to Maurras' vision. In fact, a counter-revolutionary tradition had existed in France since the suppression of the constitutional monarchy and the execution of Louis XVI in 1793. Royalism was, of course, merely one of the forms this tradition took throughout the nineteenth century, but Maurras' royalism was unique: it claimed to be based not on loyalty to any particular dynasty, nor even to the divine right of kings: "Maurras set out to justify royalism positivistically, with his reason. It was in the name of natural laws that he defended a right of survival against the forces of death" (Winock 132). His *intégrisme* saw Catholicism as the glue that bonded France, and that could be diluted only at great risk. This open disregard for a *theological* justification of royalism smacked of opportunism and eventually cost the Action française the approval of the Vatican. In late August 1926, it issued the first in a series of condemnations in the form of a newspaper article: "Catholic by calculation and not by conviction, the men who lead the Action française use the Church, or at least hope to use it; they do not serve it because they reject

the divine message whose propagation is the mission of the Church" (in Winock 144). Shortly thereafter, Catholics would be forbidden from reading the group's newspaper and, on December 29, 1926, from belonging to the group itself. [9]

Couturier's involvement with the Action française evolves from youthful enthusiasm while an art student in Paris in the early 1920s, to an initial taking of distance imposed by religious obeisance, to a profound doctrinal, political, and ethical hostility. As a youthful World War I veteran shocked by his exposure to infantrymen from the popular classes, the group's taste for hierarchy and order appealed. For the young Couturier, republicanism is a revolt against the natural order: "Liberty, equality, in all of that there's nothing but pride and revolt. Will we ever get back to hierarchy and discipline?"(*Dieu et l'art dans une vie*, 62).[10] In 1922, he writes to his brother Jean that he's become a monarchist, and corresponds regularly with him about plans to establish a chapter of the Action française in Montbrison. Certainly, Maurras' claim to be reasoning out of "common sense" would have appealed to Couturier's pragmatic formation as an *homme du terroir*, in which "good" ideas were above all useful ones that demanded prompt implementation.[11] So, too, would the group's predilection for *action*: while in Paris, Couturier serves in the Camelots du roi, the armed youth wing of the Action française. Its militants often stood guard over Maurras himself and the group's printing press, a target for raids by left-wing youth groups and militias. At the same time, both Couturier brothers express concern in their correspondence about the Action française's expedient loyalty to Catholicism. Pierre is particularly critical of Maurras' "positivism" and the absence, in his theory, of any moral imperative for the behavior of the state. As for the Action française's notorious anti-Semitism, neither brother refers to it at this point in their correspondence.

The papal ban on the Action française is issued just as Couturier is entering the novitiate, and it is in this context that his first taking of distance from the group occurs. In January 1927, he writes to his mother: "If in the past the Action française could be for some of us a great and true light, today it is entirely the opposite: it hides the light" (DAV 85-86). There is more than a whiff of the "official line" in this abrupt response, and indeed other correspondence from the period shows that obeisance alone could not overcome the personal and ideological sympathies Couturier continued to harbor for Maurras and his disciples. In the summer of 1927, he begs not to have to pronounce upon the group, claiming that as "a simple religious, I believe *that's* my political duty. This will never stop me from praying, and occasionally working for, the restoration of the very Christian and ever beloved king, for the Action française, and for its leaders who remain very dear to me" (DAV 87). But by 1931, the moderating effects of his Dominican training[12] are clearly visible in a letter written to a relative who still belonged to the group. Couturier protests that "[b]eing very poorly informed of (political) events and skeptical as to the objectivity of people on the Left and the Right, I prefer not to say anything. And being a priest, I must belong to everybody, and anything that may alienate me from people, from wherever they may be coming, is forbidden to me as an infidelity to my vocation. These are serious matters

for which I will have to answer at God's tribunal" (DAV 132-133). In fact, Father Couturier's distancing from the Right is a gradual process during a decade when, in the words of historian Michel Winock, the Action française "contribute[d] all its talent to leveling conservative opinion before Hitler's demands" (Winock 146-147)[13]. His final rupture with the Action française would occur only as a result of its infamous behavior under the Nazi occupation a decade later.

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When Father Couturier disembarked at New York City in January 1940, it could hardly have occurred to him that he would not see France again until August 1945. Accepting an invitation from the French Catholic church in New York City to preach during the Lenten season, he set out only after his offer to serve as a French military chaplain met with no response. His subsequent decision to extend his North American sojourn into the spring so that he could deliver a series of lectures at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal seemed to involve little more than a minor postponement of his return to France.[14] In these early months of the war, or *la drôle de guerre*, as they came to be known, an air of unreality settled over France in the absence of any significant military engagement with the enemy. Of course, the situation changed rapidly with the German invasion of France in May and June, 1940. As the forces of the Third Reich occupied northern and eastern France, most of the Atlantic coast, and Paris itself, the French government fled to Bordeaux. France would sign an armistice with Germany on June 22, and on July 10, the Chamber and Senate would vote to dissolve the Third Republic and name Maréchal Phlippe Pétain, hero of the First World War battle of Verdun, the head of a new État français, with the power to draw up a constitution. The capital of this "free" state under the armistice would be the spa town of Vichy, not too far, as it happens, from Father Couturier's native Montbrison.

Shortly after the dissolution of the Republic, Couturier writes impatiently to his brother, "You can guess with what *curiosity* the slightest information is awaited, since we who are abroad have the impression of not understanding a thing!" (July 20, 1940).[15] Holding feuding politicians largely responsible for the collapse of the Third Republic, he hesitates to condemn the military leaders who had commanded him in the First World War: "I cannot hear talk, without being offended, of the Maréchal of France's treason and cowardice from people who are in no position to judge, and when in any case we are still lacking complete information about the events. I would like to believe in the loyalty of Maréchal Pétain and Général Weygand" (LVB 28). In the early fall of 1940, a new (undated) letter to Jean indicates to what degree his royalist sentiments had been revived by the defeat: "For a moment I had thought that the monarchic restoration was going to take place, and it seemed to me this would be the truly wise solution, assuring a maximum of stability and making possible certain audacities indispensable even to a vanquished people."

On October 23, Hitler promises to give France a place in the "new Europe" as a reward for collaborating with the Reich, and a week later Pétain delivers his message to the French explaining the necessity of compliance. Jean's assurance to his brother that Hitler will

be lenient if the French cooperate suggests that the Maréchal is being taken at his word, but he further rationalizes collaborating by pointing to the family's dwindling supply of wheat (AC, November 20, 1940). In fact, Jean's letter from Montbrison is nothing less than a glowing panegyric to the new regime, celebrating the overthrow of the Republic and the German campaign against Britain. A laudatory description of Vichy's program follows a few weeks later, exulting in the repression of the Freemasons and Communists. Like many, Jean sees the defeat of France as the necessary prerequisite to his country's regeneration, and he urges his brother to support Pétain and his cause while abroad (AC, December 10, 1940).

Jean's enthusiasm is not particularly unusual for the period, and especially for someone of his milieu. Pétain's presentation of himself as a man of order was met with grateful acceptance by those who sought to redress the "'excesses" of the 1930s. The Right loathed the Popular Front coalition of Socialists, Communists, and Left Radicals that governed France from 1936 to 1938. It regarded the government's social reforms as treasonous and was outraged that its *Président du conseil* was none other than the Jew and Dreyfusard Léon Blum.[16] Under Vichy, those parliamentarians of the Third Republic, mostly but not entirely from the Left, who attempted to reach North Africa in the hope of continuing to govern were arrested as deserters, while Blum and Édouard Daladier, the *Président du Conseil* of the second Popular Front government and leader of the "left" faction of the Radical Party, were taken into custody. The day Daladier saw Blum arrive at the fortress-prison where he was being held, he wrote in his diary: "They are tracking down the Jew, the Socialist, the man who signed the Matignon accords[17] […] The plutocrats are avenging their fear of 1936" (Daladier 39).[18] Indeed, Maurras referred to Hitler's victory over France as a "*divine surprise*", an unexpected and glorious occasion to sweep away the bane of the Republic. And when Jean Couturier writes enthusiastically to his brother in America about Maurras' visit to Montbrison where he dined with him one evening, he boasts not only that the Jews and Masons are finally being made to pay for their crimes, but that the ideas of the Action française are being royally received in Vichy's bureaus and ministries (AC, October 17, 1941).

Vichy exhorted the French to a "*Révolution nationale*", a term that sympathetically evoked the accomplishments of reactionary regimes in Germany, Italy, and Spain, while insisting that France must look only inward - and not to the materialistic British or Americans - for its salvation (Azéma 148-149). Jean-Pierre Azéma characterizes Vichy's cultural revolution as "the rejection of individualism, the refusal of egalitarianism, a very closed conception of nationalism, a project for national regroupment, a defiant stance toward industrialism, anti-intellectualism, a rejection of cultural liberalism" (Azéma 199). Notoriously, the État français replaced the Republic's motto of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* with that of *Travail, Famille, Patrie*. As Azéma puts it, the Far Right would have "the satisfaction of seeing France governed as it dreamed of for ages [...] Partisan and pluralistic politicization were succeeded by the cult of the Maréchal and the reign, in principle without any power-

sharing, of an administration that was itself at [the Maréchal's] orders. An almost unhoped for politico-institutional revolution!" (*Ibid.*, 204).

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In North America, Father Couturier encountered numerous individuals who were particularly delighted by Vichy's National Revolution. In Montreal, many in the cultural and political élites that first greeted him espoused a conservative nationalism that sought to protect French Canada from the corrosive influences of Anglo-Saxon materialism and Jewish "contamination." Clericalist and corporatist, this elite saw in Vichy a heaven-sent opportunity to rectify the destruction wrought by the Revolution, and to restore France to the true Gallican values that had been preserved over the centuries...in Canada! The sentiments expressed by journalist Roger Duhamel in *l'Action nationale*, a journal whose name was deliberately evocative of Maurras' *l'Action française,* were typical of this élite in the months following the installation of the Vichy regime. Duhamel applauds Pétain for "clearing the Jews out of administrative functions, where they had certainly come to take up too much space," but he also celebrates the program of the National Revolution in general: "Isn't it true that up until now the Vichy regime has adopted measures that merit our sympathy? On the whole, French Canadians applaud this magnificent labor of re-creation; they rejoice that Maréchal Pétain has made it clear that there is no longer a place for lies or illusions. France lives on..." (Duhamel 68).

Father Couturier would discover soon enough that Quebec in the early 1940s was not uniformly in thrall to reactionary ideologies. A more progressive "social Catholicism" had already taken root through the founding of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Laval University in Quebec City and the seminars of the Dominican Institutes. Couturier was introduced through Jacques Maritain, himself living in New York City, to "the lively group of young Montrealers who published the liberal-Catholic journal *la Nouvelle Relève* ." The Éditions de l'Arbre, the house associated with the review, "published a series of important resistance tracts [...] which would eventually be parachuted into France and circulated underground by anti-fascist resistants" (Hellman xix, in Simon). Other critics of the period were secularists, and even socialists and communists. French exiles in Montreal and Quebec City- with Father Couturier prominently among them - bolstered the case against Vichy within these circles, especially among the young. So, too, did the transfer of publishing rights from Paris to Montreal during the Occupation. Unprecedented access to the works of modernism and even the Enlightenment – most of which appeared on the Church's Index of prohibited books and whose circulation had thus been limited in Quebec – nourished a growing hostility toward Vichy's reactionary program.

When, and how, did Father Couturier become a partisan of *la France-Libre*? Based on a survey of his correspondence, sermons, and articles, the answer is indisputably "very quickly," in fact much more quickly than many others who would later be lionized as resistors to the German occupation and as opponents of Vichy. At the beginning of December 1940, Father Couturier receives letter of appreciation from Jules Romains, the

President of PEN international and the founder of a chapter for European refugee writers in the United States where he, too, would spend the war years. Romains, who began broadcasting anti-Vichy speeches to France via the BBC in August 1940, was also a member of the pro-Gaullist France Forever group in New York City, and in the letter he expresses satisfaction with the positions the Dominican father was now taking on events in France: "I have heard people speak of you in Canada in terms that were very agreeable for me to hear. We are traversing a period where every man is counted. The test is severe, and only a very few can make it. They may come from very different regions of thought, but from now on, they will experience for each other a certain special nuance of esteem, a certain unconventional fraternity, where the depths of character and the soul will have their say" (AC). In New York, Father Couturier's Dominican brothers became so perturbed by his pro-Gaullist *parti pris* that he was asked to leave their convent, [19] and the future Cardinal (then Archbishop) Spellman would prohibit him from preaching in the churches under his jurisdiction. Undaunted, Couturier preached in non-Catholic churches in Harlem, where he formed friendships with the renowned singer Ethel Waters and the photographer/novelist Carl Van Vechten, among others. And on January 18, 1941, the Dominican Father Thomas Delos, himself an outspoken partisan of *la France-Libre* and a visiting lecturer in the reform-oriented Faculty of Social Sciences at Laval University in Quebec City, writes candidly to Father Couturier: "[U]nless the reconstruction of France takes place on entirely new bases, I cannot conclude that we shall be returning. On the contrary, I feel [...] that in France today, you would have a very restricted possibility of acting, or perhaps none at all" (AC).

Father Couturier's opposition to Vichy crystallizes around a series of betrayals: of France's ally, Great Britain; of refugees; of France's own historic legacy; and of Christian principles. Moreover, Couturier recognized that Vichy's pervasive anti-Semitism was not merely a rhetorical expedient serving "larger" ideological purposes, but a foundational element of Vichy's National Revolution. Referring to Vichy as "the harsh ransom of the Dreyfus affair,"[20] Couturier charged that the regime, like the anti-Dreyfusards a half century earlier, had perverted the very concept of national honor. In this spirit, he deplored the armistice, which he considered a betrayal of Great Britain. Couturier took this position in spite of his "not very great admiration for the moral concepts that still preside over the destiny of the British Empire [and] the harshness of British self-interest" (LVB 89). Nevertheless, he insists that "one doesn't quarrel with friends when they are in trouble" (LVB 83), and that loyalty to Britain was consistent with "the Christian tradition of honor for nations as for men" (LVB 94). [21]

Father Couturier is especially outraged by Vichy's persecution of those who had fled the Nazi regime from 1933 onward. He writes that of all the wounds inflicted by the armistice, the greatest was the handing over of political refugees to the Nazis by the French government, including many German Socialists and Communists. [22] He also reacts vehemently to the dissolution of the Masonic lodges, an attitude, which certainly surprises at first glance. Although unsympathetic to the Masons, he sees in this repressive measure a

denial of an essential dualism in French national identity. For Couturier, France is a unique admixture of "that indivisible power of clarity and emancipation which, each in its turn, has given us the ordered splendor of the monarchy and the great flame of the revolution [...] that heritage of saintliness and audacity, of intellectual rigor and revolutionary freedom" (Couturier 1947, 30-31). It is in this spirit that he writes to his family, "I cannot but protest when *maman* writes, 'France was rotten'...Sadly, I see [her] starting to do to the Republic what it once did to the Monarchy, the systematic campaign to discredit and defile the past. It's in exactly the same spirit, and it's nasty partisan politics. Naturally, there was rot and evil, as in every country in every period. But there was much good and much holiness, too. In our time of misfortune, let us at least maintain our respect for what we have been and whose immense influence I am able to see [in America…]" (AC, April 5, 1942).

The letter excerpted above appears to be the first after a period in which Couturier decides to no longer respond to his family. Jean came to wonder whether the family's letters from France were being received at all. When Couturier finally breaks his silence, it is clear that not only his family's observations about France in general, but about Jews in particular, deeply offend him. He pleads: "As concerns the Jews, I beg of you, remember that you are Christians, that charity tolerates no anti-Semitism, and that even if certain measures seem politically inevitable among those who have been conquered, at least let us maintain the integrity of our hearts. Justice and clarity first of all - but anti-Semitism offends them both. I know very well that these ideas are not fashionable today, but Christianity is Christianity - and really, don't you think there is enough hatred in the world [...] and enough persecution? As for me, I have admirable Jewish friends and fully intend to be loyal to them" (AC).[23]

In a similar spirit, and from the very beginning of his North American sojourn[24], Father Couturier expresses irritation with the religious sectarianism of many of his hosts. Unlike most of his religious brethren, Couturier had already responded with equanimity to the militantly secularist policies of the Third Republic: "What the Church lost in external freedom, it won in internal freedom - very precisely, in spiritual freedom" (LVB 25). He condemned the tendency of clerics toward "servility [...] a disposition toward submitting to power, and which ranges from conformism to extreme docility," (LVB 26) and to "clericalism [...] the corruption of spiritual authority into areas where it has no business [and to which] clerics, intellectually and practically accustomed to dogmatic solutions, are quite inclined" (LVB 27). [25] Father Couturier understood how Vichy aroused both temptations in the Church. Consequently, Couturier's withering riposte to the question frequently put to him during his first few months in North America, "How many Catholics are there in the new Rightist government that has succeeded the Popular Front?," is hardly surprising: "We prefer a Jew in office who knows his job to a Catholic who doesn't. It hasn't really been that wonderful for us in the past 'to have Catholics' in power, even honest Catholics, which doesn't necessarily go without saying" (LVB 18). Indeed, Couturier responds provocatively by pointing to the "*apport direct*," or direct contribution, that both Masons and Jews have made to France (LVB 35). Both, he maintains, are an integral part of French culture, unlike

the "intrinsically bad political and social principles" of Vichy: "fascism, Nazism, anti-Semitism, and respect for force and 'success' " (LVB 90). In New York City, Father Couturier would make a special point of counseling Jewish refugees, observing in a letter to his *France-Libre* companion Élisabeth de Miribel that "this is the right thing, and [it] is only just that the time of a French priest be given to them almost entirely, since they are persecuted from all quarters, and in France itself..." (AC, November 1941). And in what may be regarded as a corollary, he observes in 1942 that "[if] a French child on French soil can be called a dirty Jew, then it must be equally acceptable for French children on foreign soil to be called 'dirty French', for one would be every bit as unjust as the other" (LVB 75). [26]

Of course, to say that Father Couturier "counseled" Jewish refugees in New York is immediately to raise the issue of proselytism. The controversy surrounding the recent canonization of the nun Edith Stein, born a Jew in 1891, a convert to Catholicism in 1922, and murdered at Auschwitz in 1942, has given particular poignancy to the question of how the Holocaust has been regarded in the Christian vision of Jewish loss and salvation. In Couturier's case, an intimate friendship with the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain and his wife Raïssa, herself a Jewish convert to Catholicism, placed him in proximity to an intellectual and artistic milieu where proselytism, often successful, was common enough and directed at both Jews and Protestants – and even at lapsed Catholics! In North America, this friendship would result in at least one instance where Father Couturier was instrumental in the conversion of a Jewish family: in *Dieu et l'art dans une vie*, Father Couturier's fellow Dominican, Father Régamey, refers the reader to a passage in the psychoanalyst Karl Stern's *Pillar of Fire* (1951), where he recounts Couturier's role in the conversion of his wife and children after being recommended to the family by Maritain. Couturier would officiate at their baptism in Montreal on Pentecost (June 1), 1941 (DAV 254).

Couturier's written record on the conversion of Jews, however, reveals a consistent refusal to capitalize on their vulnerability and misfortune. Instead, his reflections are framed within a larger discourse on the failings of Christian Europe and a condemnation of anti-Semitism. In his Christmas sermon of 1941, Father Couturier asks, "If the pariahs of all lands, the Negroes and the Jews, decided to believe us and came to hear and to see [...] the word of the Gospel, how many of them would even dare pass through the door [...] for there is, alas, a clerical anti-Semitism that is much more widespread than we dare admit" (LVB 54-55). In most of his writings about anti-Semitism, Couturier excoriates the clericalist milieu he knows so well, and it is in relation to this audience, among whom anti-Semitic sentiment was all the more insidious for being so banalized through consensus, that his formulations need to be understood: "When one hears priests incapable of speaking about politics or culture, or even commerce and money, without insulting or accusing Jews, one feels the need [...] to protest in the name of Christianity, in the name of the priesthood which these clerics betray. Without pretending that problems don't exist, or denying that in almost every land some Jews have been exactors, cruel, malfeasant, one feels the need to say that one wants nothing to do personally with anything anti-Semitic..." (LVB 36). The emphasis here is on the fact

that *some* Jews, like some Christians, behave badly, but this cannot be a pretext for anti-Semitism. Or, as Couturier would say elsewhere, "No shameful act ever committed by a Jew has not at some time or other been equaled by a Christian" (LVB 75). For Couturier, it is as individual human beings that men and women sin, and not as Jews or as Christians: "Yes, they have all those faults and all those sins. It's true, I am familiar with all of them: they are the same as those of Christians, our own - exactly the very same ones" (LVB 36).

* * *

Confronted with the atrocities of the Third Reich at the war's end, Father Couturier writes:

> We all felt diminished in our own eyes, part of a sullied and humiliated humanity. In the heart of the struggle, we had this great sorrow. We were ashamed for Germany [...] Let us simply yield to the facts, to the reality. In the heart of Europe, there is evil, and this evil will be there for a long time to come – and it can be contagious. An entire people, consciously or not, contaminated, were prepared to put up with these abominations, to begin them all over again, to forget them, to pardon them. A civilized people. A civilized people could tolerate such things for fifteen years! -could permit itself to benefit from them! (LVB 137)

Surveying the devastation before him in his native France and throughout the world, Father Couturier wonders why *order* was able to prevail as such a compelling imperative for so many people and lead to such disastrous, disorderly consequences? He is forced to conclude that "in each one us there is a lurking fascist or racist, a man ready to abuse the principle of authority, or even just the pride of authority; a man ready to betray, to surrender the inalienable rights of the human being to prejudices of color or race" (LVB 91). In this, the Second World War was more than a conflict among nations. As early as 1942, Couturier characterizes the war as "revolutionary," meaning a war in which "the victory of Germany over France was at the same time the victory of some Frenchmen against other Frenchmen" (LVB 86). Couturier blames the cowardice of the European democracies, unable to respond to the needs of the poor and the oppressed, for rendering fascism a palatable option for so many desperate people: "It's through such neglect that we gaily prepare slavish souls, and lead the poor to become weary and disgusted with freedom" (LVB 85).[27]

In the final analysis, Marie-Alain Couturier's transformation from a young *maurassien* to a defender of *la France-Libre* and an intrepid transgressor of sectarian, class, and ideological lines may be ascribed to a fundamental principle: Observing how the world can finally be divided into two kinds of people - those who cherish freedom above all else, and those who don't - he affirms, "As for myself, I love only freedom, and as I get older, I couldn't care less about the rest" (LVB 167). But this freedom is not only "toward everything and against everything;" one also has to remain "free in relation to oneself," observes Couturier, for "there is no enslavement worse than internal enslavement or subservience" (LVB 167-168). In what must be regarded as an interrogation of his own youthful yearning for order and hierarchy, Couturier comes to believe that the really meaningful choices in life are "authority or justice", "security or audacity" (LVB 94). In his vigorous refutation of the anti-Semitism

of Vichy France and its admirers, Father Couturier chose justice and audacity again and again.

Notes

[1] O.P., Order of Preachers, or Dominicans.

[2] Because the *corporations* that produced and sold these religious items were located in the vicinity of the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. The style extended to all aspects of church decoration. As Joanna Weber explains, this *church art* "functions independently from concurrent artistic experimentations and expressions. [T]his art seldom has a life of its own. Instead, church art becomes derivative of previously successful, and living, styles and forms" (Weber 2).

[3] For this project, Father Couturier served as fundraiser - particularly among Americans, - consultant on stained glass, - a medium in which Couturier had much experience but with which Matisse had never before worked, - and as the model for the mural of Saint Dominic in the chapel itself. Matisse and Couturier also maintained a passionate correspondence over issues of art and spirituality (Matisse, Couturier, Rayssiguier, 1993).

[4]By considering the full range of his activities in Quebec from 1940 to 1945, my objective was to correct the assumption, widely held by Canadian researchers as well as by their French colleagues for whom it might be a more understandable prejudice, that Father Couturier's presence could be essentially characterized as a matter of one-way influence. The term "civic presence" was suggested to me by Marcel Billot, Director of the Archives Marie-Alain Couturier in Paris.

[5] When cited, it will be referred to as LVB. All translations from French in this essay are my own.

[6] "Of the 140,000 deportations carried out from France, there were approximately 70,0000 French and foreign Jews and 70,000 non-Jews. [T]here were only 2000 survivors in the first group and 40,000 in the second" (Faye and de Vilaine 245). It is now well-documented that the Vichy regime instituted anti-Semitic measures, including the banning of Jews from the civil service and the obligation to wear the yellow star, well before these were demanded by the Nazis.

[7]For an analysis of these middle-class anxieties, see Serge Berstein. p.16ff.

[8]Anti-Semitic Leagues gained new force in the years before the First World War, following the radical separation of Church and State and the proclamation of the Ferry laws for universal, compulsory, secular education. (Birnbaum 123)

[9] Significantly, Pope Pius XII revoked the ban on the Action française in 1939 as part of his campaign in favor of "Christian unity, which pushed Catholics to support the strategies of France's enemies" (Hellman xiv, in Simon 1988).

[10] *Dieu et l'art dans une vie* (1965), a selection of Father Couturier's writings up to 1945 edited by his fellow Dominican, Father Régamey. When cited, it will be referred to as *DAV*. This compilation contains many editorial observations by Father Régamey and an opening section on Couturier's childhood and youth.

[11] The considered yet forceful nature of Father Couturier's articles and sermons belies a self-characterization he offers in 1932, where he claims to "emit only simplistic ideas. Undoubtedly, this is because I'm an artist, a kind of man of action, and that in order to make use of ideas, I reduce them to the role of instruments which are *practical* for me" (DAV 134). While it is true that Father Couturier would have never seen himself in the role of a *penseur*, it is equally true that there is never any evidence of intellectual expediency in his writings.

[12] In an article from 1934, Father Couturier expresses admiration for the balance struck by the Order of Preachers, affirming that the Dominicans are neither pure contemplatives like the Carthusians, Benedictines or Cistercians, nor pure activists, but properly speaking "apostolics, that is contemplatives who spread (*rayonnent*) their contemplation [...] The share given over to intelligence must be greater for us. Normally a Dominican tertian (*tertiaire*) must be more educated, more intellectual than others" (Couturier 1934, 209).

[13]Winock continues: "They were exemplary 'Munichers'[...] It wasn't the war itself that horrified these neo-pacifists, for all their books show the opposite to be true. It was the 'Judeo-Bolshevik' war against Hitler into which [these groups] wanted to precipitate France" (146-47).

[14] Couturier assures his brother Jean that he will be coming home immediately thereafter, "in total ignorance of what will be done with me. I have no idea whether I will be mobilized or not." In an undated letter from New York City, most probably from early 1940.

[15] Letters not marked "AC" (Archives Couturier) were kindly provided by Father Couturier's nephew, Pierre.

[16]Jean-Pierre Faye, in a conversation with Anne-Marie de Vilaine, recalls the experiences at his *lycée* in the 1930s that led him to become passionately interested in the question of anti-Semitism: "There were corteges, sometimes against Léon Blum, who was the object of anti-Semitic invective [...] And so an enigma arose for me: How could this divine people, recognized as such in books that were solemnly given to me to read, be the same as the one reviled in the street because the *Président du Conseil* of the French Republic was named Léon Blum?" (Faye and de Vilaine 18).

[17] The agreement with the trade unions that ended the 1936 general strike in return for concessions over wages and social benefits.

[18] The Vichy regime mounted a spectacular show trial in Riom, in which the two former heads of government figured as the star defendants. It was soon suspended, then canceled by Pétain himself, when it became clear that the government could not prove its case. Instead, the accused were deported to Germany, where they lived as political hostages adjacent to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Both Daladier and Blum survived the war.

[19] Élisabeth de Miribel, who was sent to Canada by De Gaulle to organize support for *la France-Libre*, recalls: "His Dominican brothers in New York didn't want to keep him at their convent because of his Gaullist views" (de Miribel 65).

[20]For his part, Maurras evoked the notion of revenge when he was found guilty of collaboration after the Liberation: "It's Dreyfus's revenge!" he infamously exclaimed.

[21] Father Couturier refers to Saint-Louis (Louis IX) as an example. The monarch returned several provinces conquered by Philippe-Auguste to the English in the Treaty of Abbeville (1259). Couturier acknowledges that this decision may have been against France's interest, but safeguarded its honor. Couturier observes that the Church had since "canonized St. Louis and Joan of Arc, but not Cardinal Mazarin and Cardinal Richelieu" (LVB 94).

[22] "In the conditions of the armistice, there was one point that wounded us more than all the others: the handing over of political refugees. This clause struck us as dishonorable" (LVB 34).

[23] In a sermon prepared for Easter that year, Father Couturier returns to this theme, this time publicly: "We are with those who are oppressed and persecuted [...] but we are also with them because they are what they are: our brothers and our friends. We have many friends among those who are accused today, and we remain loyal to the friendship we have always had for them because we believe that they have not forgotten, either, the friendship they had for us" (LVB 71-72).

[24] Father Couturier's time in North America was spent mainly in New York City and Montreal, but he also resided for significant amounts of time in Baltimore and Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. His travels also took him to Jacksonville in Florida, Texas, Wyoming, and rural Quebec.

[25] As an example of American clericalism, Father Couturier singled out Father Coughlan's weekly publication, *Social Justice*. Like the Catholic priest's radio shows, it intermingled denunciations of Roosevelt's economic policies with anti-Semitic diatribes.

[26] This observation appears to have roots in the experiences of those close to him. "Weil's nephews," he notes, referring to the essayist and mystic Simone Weil. "Jewish children insulted by their schoolteachers" (LVB 75).

[27]In his Bastille Day speech of 1943, this quest for freedom is translated into a vivid defense of the French Revolution. It is extraordinary, given his earlier monarchism, that Father Couturier now insists that "all that is good and just in the social and political order over the past 150 years has been won by taking the same direction as the Revolution of 1789, and never by going in the opposite direction" (LVB 107).

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