

**Jacques Maritain's book *Antimoderne* and its representations
of modern thought (1922)^{1 2}**

***A obra Antimoderne de Jacques Maritain e suas representações
sobre o pensamento moderno (1922)***

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Abstract

This article seeks to present the representations of modern thought elaborated by Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and published in his book *Antimoderne*, in 1922. It is considered that this work marks a change in Maritain's thought, that is, his adherence to neo-Thomism and his engagement among Catholic intellectuals, in France. The comprehension of Maritain's appropriation and interpretation on neo-Thomism is a fundamental element in understanding his critique of modern thought. Based on the intellectual history and in dialogue with some contributions of the cultural history, we seek to make the connection between life and work in Maritain's trajectory. Thus, the work in question is an explanatory factor for a period of the intellectual's life trajectory.

Keywords: Catholic intellectuals, Neotomism, *Antimoderne*, Jacques Maritain.

Resumo

Este artigo procura apresentar as representações sobre o pensamento moderno, elaboradas por Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) e publicadas na sua obra Antimoderne, de 1922. Considera-se que essa obra assinala uma mudança no pensamento de Maritain, isto é, a sua adesão ao neotomismo e o seu engajamento entre os intelectuais católicos na França. A compreensão da apropriação e da interpretação do neotomismo por Maritain constitui um elemento fundamental no entendimento de sua crítica ao pensamento moderno. Com base na história intelectual e em diálogo com algumas contribuições da história cultural, busca-se realizar a conexão entre vida e obra na trajetória de Maritain. Desse modo, a obra em questão situa-se como um fator explicativo de um período da trajetória de vida do intelectual.

Palavras-chave: Intelectuais católicos, Neotomismo, *Antimoderne*, Jacques Maritain.

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Introduction

“En particulier, la manière de philosopher des modernes, parce qu’elle implique dès le principe mépris de la pensée de générations précédentes, doit être appelée barbarie intellectuelle.”³

Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne*, 1922, p. 19

The book *Antimoderne* (1922), by Jacques Maritain⁴ (1882-1973), presents a fierce critique of modern thought. Therefore, it has fundamental importance in understanding the critique of modernity presented by neo-Thomist philosophers, in the context of the 20th century. It was precisely through this work⁵ that Maritain began the process of appropriation and interpretation of neo-Thomism. Thus, the publication marks the transition of his ideas from Bergsonism to neo-Thomism; in addition, it indicates his engagement among Catholic intellectuals in France. Another relevant aspect cannot be disregarded: throughout this book, Maritain laid the foundations of Catholic “antimodernism” in his time, being acknowledged, years later, as the leader of Catholic intellectuals (neo-Thomists) worldwide. According to Gomes and Hansen (2016), the cultural practices of the intellectuals constitute a form of political action. Intellectuals, as taught by Gramsci (2006), Bourdieu (2009), and Said (2005), are not disinterested individuals disconnected from social groups. Maritain's critique of modern thought was disseminated by other thinkers in several countries with a Catholic tradition, including Brazil. This results in the prominence of a study on the book, without which it will be difficult to understand the Catholic intellectuals' critique of modern thought.

According to Maritain (1922), the studies published in the book were produced “in a space of a dozen years” and in an “oratory, if not a little declamatory tone” (p. 13). Luigi Castiglione (1979) completed this information by maintaining that the work was written “between 1910 and 1921” (p. 5), and is included as a publication after *La philosophie bergsonienne* (1913), *Art et scolastique* (1920), and *Théonas* (1921). According to Castiglione's interpretation, the

³ “In particular, the manner of philosophizing of the moderns, since it implies the principle of contempt for the thought of past generations, must be called intellectual barbarism.”

⁴ Maritain was born into a republican and antiliberal family. He had no religious education and was not baptized. He converted to Catholicism as an adult, alongside his wife Raïssa. His godfather was writer Léon Bloy. Further information at: <http://maritain.org.br/>

⁵ The chapters of the book are arranged as follows: *Avant-Propos*; *La Science Moderne Et La Raison*; *La Liberté Intellectuelle*; *De Quelques Conditions De La Renaissance Thomiste*; *Connaissance De L'Être*; *Réflexions Sur Le Temps Présent*; *Ernest Psichari*.

book showed “a new Maritainian soul,” which was described by León Bloy (1846-1917) in his diary *Le pèlerin de l'absolu* (1914). Maritain was introduced as a philosopher emerging from Bergsonism. His “provocative” book would be an example of his “new spiritual wealth,” “sprouted from the light of Christ,” and of “his all 'new philosophical springtime' that opens to the knowledge of Thomism” (p. 6). Still, *Antimoderne* indicated Maritain's “new ardor of thought,” in which he defended “the primacy of the spiritual,” an argument that would later be completed by the book *Humanisme intégral* (1936) (p.6).

The purpose of this study is to understand a moment in Maritain's trajectory through his work. François Dosse (2009) suggests that his intellectual trajectory and biography pose many questions to the historiographical work, such as problematizing: “his life and time” (p. 55); “his life and work” (p. 80); “his life and thought” (p. 361). Our work falls into this field, seeking to overcome the dichotomy — so often present in the historiographical discourse — between the life and the work of the intellectual. The work produced by Maritain may be an indication of his political and social engagement. This helps us understand his life trajectory. The point is understanding his life through his work. Similarly, the work constructed representations and interpretations that were “enshrined” in the intellectual field (Bourdieu, 2009). As a result, there is a pressing need to criticize these “crystallized” representations and interpretations, markedly present in the discourse of the intellectuals. Thus, the approximation desired by Robert Darnton (1990), between intellectual history and cultural history, becomes possible. Therefore, we resort to the notion of representation formulated by Roger Chartier (1990) and consider that it is useful in the analysis of the issues of intellectual history.

We also seek to investigate the foundations of the antimodernism of Catholic intellectuals, in the 20th century. Under the undisputed leadership of Maritain, it is necessary to delimit the path taken by Catholic intellectuals in the transition from anti-rationalism (a philosophical trend represented by thinkers such as Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941), among others) to neo-Thomism. According to Campos (1968), neo-Thomism was, to a large extent, responsible for the renewal of Catholic thought in that period. This task was also furthered by the personalism of Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950) and existentialism, filtered by the Christian strand of Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). Nevertheless, the process of reading, interpreting and appropriating the work and thought of Thomas Aquinas

(1225-1274) was neither simple nor uniform. Rather, it was characterized by tensions and contradictions.

A very problematic aspect is the evaluation of the possible connections between Maritain (1979) and his work and integral Catholicism, of the *Action Française*, of Charles Maurras (1868-1952). Maurras was cited by Maritain to justify the notion of “civility” (p. 16). We conjecture that the beginning of the interpretation of Thomas Aquinas by Maritain is based on elements of French integralism, that is, of conservative, counterrevolutionary, and anti-modern thought. Evoking his “personal memories,” he argued: “three or four years after my entry into the Church, I had never found in the *Action Française* any open book by Maurras.” He criticized the lack of knowledge about the author on the part of its members, and concluded that he himself “should examine the political work of Maurras, considering the principles of Saint Thomas” (Maritain, 1984, p. 759). Such conjecture is based on a tacit alliance between Catholics and positivists. Both would defend a common principle: order (Dias, 1996; Farias, 1998); against the revolution and anarchy of modern thought. An important task is to specify what Catholics understood by revolution. Maritain sentenced that the revolution is “anti-Christian” (Maritain, 1979, p. 17). This is a difficult problem. Quoting Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), Maritain qualified the French Revolution as the “Révolution satanique”⁶ (Maritain, 1984, p. 760, emphasis added). The revolution is the Protestant Reformation (16th century), the French Revolution (1789) and, above all, the Russian Revolution (1917). However, for example, according to Maritain there was a “Kantian revolution” that consummated “the Cartesian revolution” (p. 116). Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and René Descartes (1596-1650) are presented as revolutionary thinkers who, therefore, should be avoided by Catholics. In other words, laicism is revolutionary. Therefore, Catholics went to great lengths to try to refute secular thought, since it rejected the metaphysics of the Church. It is necessary to pay attention to the interpretation of the Christian (Catholic) tradition made by neo-Thomist philosophers in this context.

⁶ Satanic revolution.

The following works by Maritain are important historical sources for this study: *Antimoderne*⁷ (1922), *Trois Réformateurs: Luther – Descartes – Rousseau* (1925), *Une opinion sur Charles Maurras et le devoir des catholiques* (1926), *Primauté du Spirituel* (1927) and *Humanisme intégral* (1936). Our objective is not to conduct a detailed analysis of these works, but only to establish a dialogue in order to comprehend the representations of modern thought constructed by Maritain.

Maritain and the renaissance of Thomism in the 20th century

With the publication of *Antimoderne*, Maritain intended to foster the renaissance of Thomism in the 20th century. We will present some characteristics of the historical context of this book. It is necessary to show the connections between Maritain and the Church's magisterium, especially with the documents of the popes. This exercise will enable us to see how Maritain appropriated the critique of modern thought presented by the pontiffs.

Regarding the history of the book (Chartier, 1998; Darnton, 2010) by Maritain (1922), some pieces of information are important, such as the publication by Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes, in 1922. The work was dedicated to Vladimir Ghika (1873-1954)⁸, described as the “prince of the ages and by highest vocation a priest of the Church of Jesus Christ.” The book was fraught with advertisements for publications by Catholic intellectuals (neo-Thomists) of the time, such as the journal *La vie intellectuelle* and *Somme Theologique de Saint Thomas D'Aquin*, both from the same publisher. Authors such as G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), for example, had their works published in the book.

Regarding the connections between Maritain's thought and papal documents, it is necessary to highlight some important texts, such as the encyclical *Fausto appetente die* (1921), by Benedict XV (1914-1922).⁹ This encyclical was intended to commemorate the seventh centenary

⁷ This is the work on which the study is based. However, a dialogue with other works by Maritain (which we consider important in understanding the theme) will be established throughout the text.

⁸ Vladimir Ghika was a Romanian prince, diplomat, essayist and martyr of faith. He was persecuted by Nazism and Communism. He studied the work of Thomas Aquinas with the Dominicans in France and Rome. He became a priest and died as a prisoner of the communist regime in Romania in 1956, aged 80.

⁹ The time frame refers to the period of the pontificate and not to the lifetime. This rule will be adopted throughout the study whenever we refer to popes.

of the death of Dominic de Guzmán (1170-1221), founder of the Dominican Order, of which Thomas Aquinas was part. Maritain quoted the Pope's phrase that stated: “the Church has adopted the doctrine of Saint Thomas” and indicated that “this Doctor was praised with the most outstanding praises of the pontiffs” (Maritain, 1922, p. 18). In addition to being highlighted as “master and patron of Catholic schools” (Benedict XV, 1921). Thus, somehow, the work falls into the context of the commemorations of the seventh centenary of the death of Dominic de Guzmán.

The foundations of Neo-Thomism can be found in the 19th century, in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), by Leo XIII (1878-1903). This document ordered the resumption of the study of the work of Thomas Aquinas by Catholics and advocated its renewal in the context of modernity. Leo XIII was a very important pope in the history of the Church, not only for promoting Neo-Thomism but mainly for inaugurating the Church's social doctrine with his famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), on the workers' issue. In this publication, the pope presented a combination of principles of liberalism¹⁰ with socialism, indicating Catholicism as a sort of third way between these two doctrines. However, this is not an original thought, but an arrangement based on Catholic doctrine, with liberal and socialist principles. The encyclical is often used to show the Church's solidarity with workers and justify the pope's defense of labor rights. Nevertheless — it must be said —, that same document defended the right to private property as something sacred and willed by God. Thus, the encyclical constituted a conservative solution to the so-called workers' issue, an attempt to reconcile social classes, especially employers and employees. That was a way for the Church to try to check the advance of socialism among Catholics.

That said, Maritain's (1922) conservatism in this period was not so evident in the papal documents cited in this book. It is necessary to advance another four years and reach the work *Une opinion sur Charles Maurras et le devoir des catholiques* (1926). In this publication, after Pius XI (1922-1939) condemned *Action Française* (1922-1939), also in that same year, the French philosopher identified his relation with the pontiffs, and their respective more anti-modernist documents. An important matter is to analyze Maritain's stance regarding Pius XI's

¹⁰ According to Pellicciari (2011, p. 11), Pius IX defended that “Catholicism is not reconcilable with liberalism.” However, “the combination of liberalism and communism is on the other hand recurrent in the prophetic magisterium of Pius IX” (*Ibid.*). Thus, the controversy concerning Catholic anti-liberalism (Lamounier, 2014) and liberal Catholicism (Azzi, 1994) dates back to the pontificate of Pius IX.

condemnation of Maurras and his *Action Française*. Note ten in this book is very enlightening. Maritain referred to the following encyclicals: *Mirari Vos* (1832), by Gregory XVI; *Quanta Cura* (*Syllabus* § X) (1864), by Pius IX; *Immortale Dei* (1885), by Leo XIII; *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*¹¹ (1907), by Pius X; *Ubi Arcano Dei* (1922), by Pius XI. These documents represent the core of Catholic antimodernism. They are part of the papal documents defined as “encyclicals against modern thought” (Gramsci, 2011, p. 119). The struggle against modern ideas, in this context, was the Catholic antiliberalism, heir to ultramontanism (Lamounier, 2014, p. 19). Among the documents, the encyclicals *Quanta Cura* (*Syllabus* § X), *Immortale Dei* and *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* are highlighted as strong evidence of the antimodernism of the popes of that period (Maritain, 1984, p. 761).

Encyclical *Quanta Cura* (*Syllabus* § X), by Pius IX, was the well-known condemnation of the errors of modernity. The aforementioned passage, chosen by Maritain, was precisely the error “of the philosopher and of philosophy” (in modernity) that avoided “submitting to some authority” (the Church). In this case, this claim would be completed by paragraph eleven, which condemned the philosophy that did not accept the correction of the Church and that insisted on its supposed errors (Pius IX, 1864). In other words, the neo-Thomist leader sought to restore the principle of authority (especially of the pope), dear to Catholics, and to submit philosophy to it. That is, philosophy could not be emancipated from ecclesial authority. It was an attempt to refute laic and secularized philosophy. Lustosa (1980) characterized the long pontificate of Pius IX (1846-1878) as a period of “ultramontane revitalization” (p. 273) of Catholicism in Brazil and worldwide. To counter the threat to the pope's power, with Italian unification and the loss of the papal states, Pius IX created the “devotion to the pope” (p. 280). As a result, the pope lost his temporal power (the pontifical states incorporated into the Italian State), but reinforced his spiritual power (the control of the conscience of Catholics). This consisted in the so-called ultramontane reform of Catholicism, which occurred during the 19th century. The devotion to the Pope, created in this period, served to reinforce his power, above all to ensure the privileges of the Church with the secularization and laicism of the modern State.

¹¹ The encyclicals *Pascendi Domini Gregis* and *E Supremi Apostolatus* by Pius X and the *Syllabus*, by Pius IX, are the most incisive papal documents of the time in their condemnation of modern thought. Such texts were also cited in chapter 5 of the book *Antimoderne*, entitled *Réflexions sur le temps présent*. Maritain saw in the encyclical *Pascendi* an update of the *Syllabus* (Maritain, 1922, p. 200).

As for the conception of modern State, the encyclical *Immortale Dei* (1885), by Leo XIII, showed a certain nostalgia for the Catholic kingdoms of the Middle Ages. These kingdoms, with the spiritual powers (Church and Pope) and temporal powers (Catholic King) in conjunction, were the stereotype of the so-called Christian State. Leo XIII, throughout this text, praised the union between the altar and the throne; or, between the pope and the monarch. It was the defense of the proximity of Catholic theology and politics, based on the theology of Christianity (Azzi, 2005). A way of combating the secularism of the modern State (Lenharo, 1986), which was independent of the Church, especially in countries with an ancient Catholic tradition such as France or Italy.

Maritain (1922, p. 18-19) defended, albeit with some doubt, the value of civilization as it had been argued by Charles Maurras. We find his critique of what he called “the modern schism,” which would have resulted from the “Renaissance” and the “Reform.” The greatest expression of this thought would be Descartes, whose ideas could be qualified, according to the philosopher, as “a pure and simple claim to barbarism.” Thus, modern thought was considered a “spiritual adultery,” something that “cannot be forgiven,” because by breaking with the classical tradition, mainly medieval, “all this nullifies its best results from the root.” Accordingly, Maritain made a moralistic interpretation of modern thought, seeking to deny its potential heuristic value and, at the same time, repropose medieval ideas (of Thomas Aquinas) in the context of the 20th century.

Maritain (1979, p. 19-20) insisted that “the negative judgments that can and should be made about the world and modern thought, considered in the spirit that animates them, are an indispensable starting point” and added “however, to go further.” It is important to emphasize here that not only thought is subject to criticism, but the modern world itself, that is, social, political, moral and cultural behavior. It would be necessary to start from these “negative judgments” about the modern (thought and world) to re-present Thomism. And again he turned to the popes who were exponents of antimodernist thought in the modern age: Pius IX and Pius X. He argued: “Anyone want to know what the spiritual principles of the modern world are? I refer you back to the *Syllabus* and the encyclical *Pascendi*, which, together in an impressive compendium, show us here the supreme results.” Luther, Rousseau and Kant are presented as philosophers guiding modern thought by laying the foundations of the immanentist and

transcendentalist mentality, which would need to be refuted, considering the recovery of “spiritual autonomy.”

Neo-Thomism was presented by Maritain (1979) as a result of an “anguish of the present”; therefore, he said that his philosophy was “anti-modern against the errors of the present” and “ultra-modern for all the truth involved in the future” (emphasis by the author, p. 14). According to Maritain, the critique of modernity was not a return to the Medieval period. He argued: “If we greatly admire the century of Saint Louis, we do not therefore want to return to the Medieval period” and concluded by arguing that this would be “the absurd desire that certain perspicacious critics generously attribute to us” (emphasis by the author, p. 18). The great ideal of the philosopher was “to see restored in a new world, and to inform a new matter, the spiritual principles and eternal norms of which medieval civilization, in its best times, presents us only a particular historical achievement” (*Ibid.*). Here we have an important concept: restoration. This idea represents well the Catholicism of Maritain's time. To restore means to give a new feature (but faithful to the original characteristics) to an old work. This is a common procedure with old works of inestimable historical and artistic value. This was the motto of Pius X, the most anti-modernist pope of the 20th century, “to restore all things in Christ” (Azzi, 1994). Thus, one can understand the restoration of Catholicism in modernity. This Church reorganization process began in the 19th century, with ultramontanism, and reached the 20th century with the mindset of neo-Christianity. Therefore, neo-Christianity is an evolution of the ultramontane ecclesiological conception, but with new nuances and peculiarities, among which the central role of the layman and the formation of a militant Catholic laity, engaged in Catholic Action. The medieval period was described by Maritain as “qualitatively superior, despite its enormous deficiencies”; however, it should be considered as “definitely surpassed” (*Ibid.*). The Middle Ages was already surpassed; nevertheless, it should receive a new feature to be reintroduced to the modern world. Maritain's antimodernism had some element of novelty, it was not simple medievalism, although this may be a critique foisted upon it.

Representations of modern thought

The representations of the modern elaborated by Jacques Maritain (1922) are not restricted to the sphere of thought, as we have already had the opportunity to affirm. But, rather, they also encompass the world, that is, the cultural and social forms of modernity. The book *Antimoderne* presented negative judgments about the modern. According to Maritain, it was necessary to be based on this premise. Presenting the modern as something harmful, qualified in a critique with moral foundations such as: intellectual barbarism, spiritual adultery, and contempt for tradition. Here, following the indication of Ginzburg (2007), who recommends attention to vestiges and traces in history, we find an indication of traditionalism. Romano (1979) indicates that traditionalist thought is modern. This argument can be confirmed, for example, by the ideas of Mannheim (1986) and other thinkers who dealt with the so-called conservative modernism. That is, traditionalism¹² (the defense of the Christian tradition in secularized society) can also be qualified as conservative modernism (Löwy, 1989). On the political level, this meant fighting the modern, secular, republican and democratic State. Consider, for example, Pius XI's vehement critique of modern laicism and his contempt for liberal democracy. The intention was to re-Christianize the State, bringing it closer to the Church, which aimed at recovering its hegemony in the control of social life.

Modern thought, according to Maritain (1979), was subject to criticism for its rationalism. The philosopher noted that “the reason of rationalism must inevitably be reduced to purely discursive reason” (p. 60). The only argument accepted by modern science would be “that God does not exist; that only what man knows or believes to be able to explain is real,” thus, “modern science depends exactly on the pseudo-reason of rationalism” (Ibid.). According to Maritain, modernity confused “this pseudo-reason with reason, as pseudoscience with science, and now there is an attempt to separate reason from faith, and by declaring that, in order to be a Christian, one must abandon reason; a truly detestable error” (Ibid.). All this would be a consequence of modern science, “when it is not nourished and protected by theological doctrine” (Ibid.). He understood that, by denying the value of faith and metaphysics, modern thought was in an “incomparable vicious circle” (p. 62). Such criticism was directed, in particular, to “Descartes, ‘the father of modern philosophy’” (p. 47). His statement was

¹² Maritain (1922, p. 192) cited authors such as Joseph de Maistre, Donoso Cortès and Vladimir Soloviov.

completed: “one cannot read the works of all those who founded our arrogant science, without remaining struck [...] to reveal what advantage science would have in itself in its approach to religion” (*Ibid.*). The founders of modern science “were infected with errors” (*Ibid.*). In his critique of Descartes, as was common with other conservative intellectuals, he resorted to the ideas of Pascal¹³ (p. 60) to justify his position.

In the representations of modern thought, Maritain (1979) admitted the “disorder of reason” (p. 69) as one of its characteristics. Modern philosophy would suffer from a “defect in method” (p. 70), according to which “the spirit intends to explain everything with what it already knows and to make the world according to its pleasure” (*Ibid.*). It would be necessary to “cleanse the edifice of philosophy of the worst errors in order to achieve this beautiful unity, to gather it together with metaphysical and moral truths” (*Ibid.*). In this sense, philosophy is linked to a metaphysical, moralistic and religious vision. It could open itself to “divine revelation,” to “supernatural ends” and would cease to be a “mixture of errors” (p. 71). Maritain often referred to the expressions “schism” and “apostasy” to evaluate modern philosophy, as in the following example: “the case of modern philosophy is very diverse. Here it is no longer a matter of reason left to its natural forces alone. It is a matter of reason related to apostasy” (p. 72). The modern age would be marked by “two intellectual sins” (*Ibid.*). The first of them, “the ambition to acquire, with only natural forces, a perfect and exhaustive science (prevalently mathematical until now)”; and the other sin would be “the prejudice of modeling the real according to the designs of the human spirit, which is the secret principle of this separation between reason and true order” (*Ibid.*). The human spirit was in a situation of “slavery” and linked to the “errors” of a kind of “contract” (p. 73). This situation resulted either from “Hegelian logicism,” “which claims that being and nothing are the same thing” or from “Bergson’s anti-intellectualism,” “which claims that mutation is the very substance of things” (*Ibid.*). The consequence of modern thought would be “the weakening of reason, which loses the light of the first principles” (*Ibid.*). In addition, it could be called “intelligence breakdown” or “scientism tyranny” (*Ibid.*).

In this aspect of modern scientism, Maritain (1979) criticized the “so-called positive science” (p. 74), which would reduce philosophy “to pure mechanistic scientism” (*Ibid.*). However, according to his analysis, this scientism “subjects philosophy and every higher

¹³ Pascal was a French anti-rationalist thinker who adhered to Jansenism, a Catholic heresy that defended that salvation was for a few and obtained only after great asceticism.

discipline to the dimensional quantity and to mathematics” (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, “scientism subjects the mind overmuch to imagination and sensibility, to impressionism, as it is easy to observe in the procedures of pseudoscientific history and in the new philosophy that, despite certain appearances, is only a deeper symptom of the scientific spirit” (p. 78). Such criticism was also addressed to evolutionism. These criticisms were examples of the refutation of naturalism, promoted by the popes and propagated by Catholic intellectuals. Under the name naturalism, we can find different philosophical doctrines, such as: positivism, evolutionism, pragmatism, and historical materialism.

Yet, criticism of positivism must also not lead to the mistaken notion that there was a radical opposition between positivists and Catholics. Similarly to Catholicism, the doctrine founded by Comte had several currents and trends within it. Among them, it is possible to identify that which advocated an approximation with the Church, such as the positivism of Charles Maurras and *Action Française*, for example. According to Gramsci, “neoscholasticism enabled the alliance of Catholicism with positivism (Comte, which led to Maurras)” (Gramsci, 2011, p. 123). These positivists, mostly atheists, saw Catholicism as a guarantor of order and morality in social life. This indicates that philosophical criticism did not mean the absence of political collaboration. Shortly after Pius XI's condemnation of *Action Française*, Jacques Maritain made a great effort in *Une opinion sur Charles Maurras et le devoir des catholiques* (1926) to try to show that this reproof concerned only Maurras' philosophical and religious ideas. Thus, his political thought and method would continue to be useful to Catholics. As previously mentioned, to correct the errors it was sufficient to “read Maurras' political work considering the philosophy of Saint Thomas” (Maritain, 1984, p. 759). This is an important topic in the 20th century French historiographical debate, to discuss the meaning of Pius XI's condemnation of Maurras' ideas, that is, if this consisted in a philosophical or political rejection (Fattorini, 2007), in addition to what Maritain thought in this regard, as presented in his book *Primauté du Spirituel* (1927).

Although the book *Antimoderne* presents many criticisms of modern thought, it also represents an effort by the important French thinker to try to reconcile Catholicism with some modern concepts. This effort is characterized by some contradictions, among which a certain anachronistic reading of the thought of Thomas Aquinas. A necessary work is to analyze how the neo-Thomist intellectuals of the 20th century appropriated Thomism. Or, in other words, how a philosophy that emerged in the thirteenth century was presented with “current” features

in the contemporary context. It is necessary to investigate “the conditions of the Thomist renaissance” (Maritain, 1922). We do not consider adequate a reading that considers only the aspect of criticism of modern thought present in the work. A more careful analysis of the book will also manage to observe signs of a “Catholic modernism,” that is, the *aggiornamento* (updating) of the Catholic doctrine.

From Bergsonism to neo-Thomism

In the chapter *De quelques conditions de la renaissance thomiste*¹⁴, the product of a lecture given at the Higher Institute of Philosophy in Louvain, on January 26, 1920, Maritain showed that Bergsonism had provided the foundations for a possible renaissance of Thomism. Nonetheless, he argued that: “Bergsonism is entering the museum of systems” (Maritain, 1922, p. 113). The intellectual Ernest Psichari¹⁵ (1883-1914) was designated by the philosopher as his predecessor in the discussion of Neo-Thomism in Belgium. Bergsonism was outdated, since “a new world will appear before us, which will in part be our work, and which will be something else, we want at least that the stupid chaos without God and without love is in the way of Christendom” (*Ibid.*, emphasis by the author). Among the negative judgments presented about the modern world is the “stupid chaos without God and without love,” with which it would be possible to characterize it. There is Maritain’s intention to give a leading role to the neo-Thomists in this new world that would emerge. In the development of this “new world,” there would be “immense importance of economic factors on the order of material causality, the capital and formally decisive role will be given by ideas” (Maritain, 1922, p. 114). According to the observation of the French philosopher, the “new world” would require the shifting from metaphysical and spiritual issues (Bergsonism) to economic and social issues (neo-Thomism) (Lima, 1973; 2001). Accordingly, it would not be up to philosophy to keep asking about the “value of Bergsonism” (Maritain, 1922, p. 114), since there would be “much more important issues” (*Ibid.*) to worry about. Maritain made it clear that the work of reviving Thomism was already being undertaken by the University of Louvain, since its great exponents were there. In

¹⁴ Some conditions of the Thomist renaissance.

¹⁵ Chapter 6 of *Antimoderne* is dedicated to Ernest Psichari, who was the grandson of liberal and anticlerical thinker Ernest Renan (1823-1892).

fact, the movement for the renewal of Thomism (Comblin, 1974) had started, to a large extent, in Belgium thanks to the work of Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier (1851-1926).

Maritain (1922) intended to deal with the history of modern philosophy in order to examine “the causes at the end of the Middle Ages and in the beginning of modern times, by which scholasticism lost the empire it had over intelligences and which ensured the triumph of the new philosophy (*nouvelle philosophie*), more specifically of the Cartesian reform” (p. 114). In other words, the philosopher sought the causes of the decline of scholasticism in two precise periods: the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Modernity. Furthermore, he sought to look into the causes of the “triumph” of the new philosophy and especially of Cartesianism. Maritain's aim was to “cleanse the teachings of this great intellectual drama and specify, by opposition to one another, the conditions required for the successful renaissance of scholasticism” (Ibid.). The situation at the time was described as a “great intellectual drama” and the philosopher’s work was to “cleanse the teachings” coming from the new philosophy to try to ensure the success of Thomism.

The starting point for the conditions of renaissance of Thomism, according to Maritain (1922), was in the 17th century. By quoting German historian Leopoldo Von Ranke (1794-1886), the philosopher argued that it was necessary to understand “the great classical movement of the French 17th century, which emerged from a type of reaction of France against Europe” (p. 115). This movement of reaction was contrary to the “winds of the European Revolution, which began in the Renaissance and the Reformation, and which did not end, the first breaths of the spirit of independence blew after a century or two like a wind of devastation over the face of the earth” (Ibid.). There are some important terms here, such as: reaction movement, European Revolution and Renaissance and Reformation. Maritain noted in this classic seventeenth-century French movement the emergence of a reaction against the European revolutionary spirit. Moreover, it pointed to the emergence of an opposition between France and Europe. The twilight of the Middle Ages led to:

Man, who, having made, as M. Höffding said, the *discovery of the human*, having turned his eyes away from the objects of contemplation that had previously absorbed him – from the resplendent and always tranquil Trinity, from the ever-present drama of Redemption, from a sweet and terrible universe made in the image of the Father – and *having turned his gaze on himself, on the subject, on the Self*, like Adam when he saw that he was naked, Man realizes that he was something infinitely interesting and infinitely lovable, *beginning to change all values and break all established orders, to make a world worthy of him* (Maritain, 1922, p. 115-116, our translation and emphasis).

The French philosopher identified anthropocentrism as the main characteristic of philosophical thought after the decline of scholasticism. This autonomy of the subject turned on himself implied a change of values and the breaking of all established orders. It was necessary to create a new world, based on a new order, that was worthy of this emerging autonomous subject.

The 17th century would have allowed, according to Maritain (1922, p. 116), a “national restoration” of France, which was “monarchist and Catholic, to stop, or delay, revolutionary work, to the point of completely hiding it, at least from a superficial look, under the splendor of classical flowering.” Thus, according to the thinker, “the order and discipline of the French 17th century appear as a vigorous reaction against the humanitarian barbarism already in progress” (*Ibid.*, emphasis added). This reaction was described as “ephemeral” and “had failed to save civilization” (*Ibid.*). The death of King Louis XIV, “without energy and exhausted” (*Ibid.*), would have contributed to frustrate the expectations of this movement of reaction and restoration. In addition to the death of the king, the “restoration effort” suffered from “many defects and many weaknesses,” among which *Gallicanism* and *Jansenism* would be highlighted, described as “the most visible of these defects” (*Ibid.*). Maritain (1922) resorted to Father Georges de Pascal (1839-1917), in his work *Lettres sur l'histoire de France*¹⁶, in volume II, to justify that the 17th century was marked by a “pagan spirit and an accentuated forgetting of the old national traditions” (*Ibid.*). The quotation, at the bottom of the page, further stated that the characteristic of the “pagan spirit” on the “political order is the cult, the worship of the deified man over a person or over a collectivity” (*Ibid.*). The criticism consisted in the conjecture that the new philosophy would lead to the “worship of the deified man.” Although, in his view, “the Catholic renovation gave to an elite magnificent fruits of holiness, penance and interior life”

¹⁶ Letters on the history of France.

(Maritain, 1992, p. 117). Therefore, this movement would not have been able to stop the “pagan spirit” of the times to come.

In the European context, according to Maritain, “the Westphalia treaties consolidated the disappearance of Christianity – of the Christian society of nations – to replace it with the European equilibrium system, and thus it officially consolidated the political existence and the rights of heresy, with which the kings of France had made an alliance anyway” (Maritain, 1922, p. 117). Based on these ideas, the emergence of the modern State, independent of the control of the Church, was the “political existence and the rights of heresy” and decreed the “end of Christianity.”

After this historical characterization, Maritain (1922) presented his second, more speculative, argument. It consisted, notwithstanding the weaknesses and deficiencies of the “Christian restoration” movement, in “some effort to restore under the domain of rational speculation the *philosophia perennis* which is the philosophy of the Church, because it is the result of the natural evidences of reason” (p. 118). This philosophy of the Church was the thought of Thomas Aquinas. The 17th century was a “test of Thomist renovation” (*Ibid.*). It was the classical movement that emerged in this century that “provided a remarkable example of an attempt to return to the intellectual and moral order without Saint Thomas, or, as we would say, deprived from Thomist formality” (*Ibid.*, emphasis by the author) We can infer from the philosopher's argument that the Church needed a philosophy with sufficient intellectual vigor that could face the new philosophy and/or Cartesianism. This philosophy would be Thomism, but imbued with a certain renewal. There was a great deal of work to be done to check “the long decadence of Christian philosophy, the demon of mediocrity seems to have multiple authors of it” (p. 119). This effort would require, from intelligence, an effort of “continuous renewal” (*Ibid.*). In a way, in the 17th century, Christian philosophy was intended to be “less discursive and less argumentative, more intuitive and also more affective, simpler, in an *easier* word” (p. 120, author's emphasis). It was subject to the “Platonic mode” (*Ibid.*). Such mode would be incapable, in Maritain's view, of enabling the renewal of Christian philosophy.

Maritain (1922, p. 121) sentenced that “a Platonic mode does not constitute a philosophy.” And he kept maintaining that “the great organism of the sciences and the arts in progress in the 17th century remained deprived of a metaphysics, of *scientia reatrix*, would it be body without a head?” (*Ibid.*). The great effort of Catholic intellectuals of that period was to try

to give Neo-Thomism this condition of *scientia reatrix* for the sciences and the arts, that is, the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas would be the major metaphysical foundation of knowledge. According to his understanding, it will be from the “immense deficiency created by the absence of Saint Thomas that Descartes will profit” (*Ibid.*), returning to the opposition between Thomas Aquinas and Descartes. Thomist thought would be a sort of antidote to Cartesianism. Maritain understood that “Descartes succeeds in introducing into classical France a new philosophy that, in part, confronts the impiety of the libertines and appears as an ‘embracing and bold’ spiritualism” (*Ibid.*). Criticisms directed to Descartes consider that “Cartesian philosophy is a masked philosophy [...] that advances masked on the theater of the world” (*Ibid.*). This philosophy was an “illusion” and “inspired many spirits analogous to those that have recently served as the foundation for Bergsonism” (p. 122). He developed the idea that “Bergsonism is Cartesianism” (*Ibid.*). Both philosophies “pretend to agree with positive science” and would have contributed to “renewing spiritualism” by a doctrine “conforming to the mental and moral tone of society at a given time,” and would allow “original contact with Platonism, with Plato and with Plotinus” (*Ibid.*). The criticism continues, demonstrating the Church's disapproval of Descartes' philosophy.

Yes, but on November 20, 1663, the Church inserted Cartesianism into the index; and, with the Cartesian reform — which is, in the history of intelligence, the properly French sin, as the Lutheran reform is the great German sin and the pagan soul of the Renaissance the great Italian sin —, there was the introduction, into the rational and philosophical order, of all the diseases of modern thought: naturalism, individualism, subjectivism, scientism, egocentrism (Maritain, 1922, p. 123, our translation).

The consequence of Cartesianism, according to Maritain, was the *Aufklärung* (enlightenment), which “proclaimed the absolute independence of the human spirit” (Maritain, 1922, p. 124). This history would show the importance of “every attempt to restore the Christian order, and to put in the first line the restoration of philosophy that is founded on the first evidences of intelligence and on the first evidences of sensible experience, and which is shown everywhere and always docile to reality, I want to say of the philosophy of Aristotle and Saint Thomas” (*Ibid.*). The new philosophy of Descartes and Bacon “triumphed easily” and needed to find a “qualified adversary” (*Ibid.*). There was a “total lack of representatives of scholastic philosophy,” considered “defenders of Saint Thomas” and “representatives of philosophical truth” (*Ibid.*). Through his work, Maritain called for the development of a renewed Thomistic

philosophy. Such philosophy would be capable, according to his understanding, of restoring the Christian order.

Maritain (1922) identified that for three centuries “scholasticism was degenerated” (p. 126). He also made, therefore, a critique of the philosophical system to which he was affiliated. After showing the “intellectual wealth” and the “quality of scholastic *doctrine* and *spirit*” (*Ibid.*, emphasis by the author) he made an incursion into the history of Thomism, in the 14th century. That is, he wanted to demonstrate the historical process that enabled Thomism to become “the official philosophy of the Church” (p. 127). In the analysis of the French thinker, modernity would have been forced by the popes to return to Thomas Aquinas:

The almost countless acts by which Leo XIII, Pius X and Benedict XV forced modern times to return to Saint Thomas as *the only health of reason*, of a certain traveling and prodigal reason that, after having stopped for five or six centuries, spread its substance to the four winds of the spirit until it was reduced to keeping the flock without the honors of materialist and scientific illusions, and to nourishing the vain pods of Kantianism, finally sighing after the peaceful order of the Father's house (Maritain, 1922, p. 129, our translation and emphasis).

After thoroughly covering the history of medieval philosophy, in particular scholasticism, Maritain (1922) presented the limits of “naturalists” and “of the new science of phenomena in the process of forming the most rudimentary materialist, hylozoist, pantheist, kabbalist, and above all mechanistic metaphysics” (p. 139). All this was formed on the basis of “an immense and inextricable misunderstanding” (*Ibid.*). In his view, a “contamination of modern science with the postulates of mechanistic metaphysics” was “fatal” (p. 140). To this “historical phenomenon” [of modern “naturalist” and “mechanistic” science], “we should not return” (*Ibid.*). From Maritain's perspective, the “scholastics” had the “duty of intellectual purification” (p. 140) of modern science. This would be possible because the neo-Thomists were, according to his perception, “the holders of wisdom, that taken from the supreme science, the judge of its own principles and of the principles of the other sciences” (*Ibid.*). Neo-Thomism would also serve to avoid and reject the “naturalism” of modern science.

Another important aspect highlighted by Maritain (1922) is that this “Thomist philosophy has the advantage of radiating widely in lay circles and of being actively represented by them [laypersons], since, in the modern world, science and philosophy are no longer shared exclusively by clerics” (p. 144). Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the leading role achieved by Catholic laypersons within the neo-Thomist movement. This is an extremely relevant point,

since the so-called Catholic laity would organize themselves seeking to recover the social, political and cultural hegemony of the Church in many countries. It was a kind of reconquest of the State, secular and modern, within the political project of neo-Christendom led by Pius XI. Through the education of the laypersons, based on neo-Thomism, the Church intended to have a militant laity (composed of intellectuals, bachelors and men of science and letters) that would regain its space in the formation of the world view of the ruling elites. Such elites would be educated within Catholic principles and would represent the interests of the Church in different spheres of State and society.

Another pressing topic highlighted by Maritain (1922) was the recovery of scholastic metaphysics as a way of overcoming the mechanistic metaphysics of Descartes. This topic was seen as “the most important condition for the Thomist renaissance” (p. 145). Metaphysics “is not something we make use of for a practical purpose” (*Ibid.*). According to Maritain, “its nobility lies precisely, in the words of Aristotle, in that it serves no purpose” (*Ibid.*). He continued: “we understand that it [metaphysics] is not, according to its essence, ordered to anything other than the contemplation of truth: it is because it is indeed necessary for men, for man who is an animal that feeds on transcendence” (*Ibid.*). He presented that which would be the mission of scholastic philosophers: “to contemplate ever more deeply and more vehemently, *profundis* and *vehementius*, the truths of metaphysics and to make this science progress” (*Ibid.*, emphasis by the author). Therefore, neo-Thomist philosophers should be committed to metaphysics and its progress. It is a very metaphysical phase of Maritain's thought.

As argued by Maritain (1922), scholastics should not “sympathize with modern thought” let alone “trim the angles of scholasticism to fit these [modern] systems, and rethink Thomism according to Kant or M. Bergson, but rather in the manner of Saint Thomas” (p. 147). He insisted on re-discussing the issues of ontology and the scientificity proper to philosophy. He defined that “philosophy is a science, it is the measure of the being” (*Ibid.*). He avoided, however, reducing the scientificity of philosophy to the “modern mathematism and phenomenism” (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, Neo-Thomists faced the challenge of “comprehending modern philosophy in depth, of comprehending it much better than the moderns themselves (because they possess a superior discriminating light, and the principles of true comprehension)” (*Ibid.*). The scholastics' job was to “save that which modern philosophy contained of good in it” (*Ibid.*, author's emphasis). Here there is an opening to modern thought and even a possibility to

recognize something good in it. It is not just about condemning modern philosophy, but about the possibility of recognizing its value.

It is also possible to find, in the book *Antimoderne*, as we have already had the opportunity to argue, a critique of the Thomist thought itself, to which Maritain had affiliated. Years later, he pointed to the “crisis of the Catholic spirit” in *Primauté du spirituel* (1927). Therefore, it is not appropriate to read these works only as catalogs of condemnation of modern thought. We find in them, in addition, an interesting exercise of self-criticism of Thomism and of the “Catholic spirit.”

Final considerations

The book *Antimoderne* (1922) enables us to understand a decisive moment in the intellectual trajectory of Jacques Maritain. It also marked a new position assumed by its author and his institution and acknowledgement in the Catholic intellectual field and, in particular, in the neo-Thomist philosophical field. This process began with the approach of the French philosopher to Catholicism, still in the 1910s, resulting in his conversion and baptism, but also leading to a mutation in terms of ideas and a new social and political engagement. This was his transition from Bergsonism to neo-Thomism.

Thus, through the work in question, Maritain decisively engaged in the anti-modernist struggle of the Catholic Church, as represented in the encyclical *Pascendi*, by Pius X. However, this struggle had its peculiarities. The representations built by Maritain in the work help to understand the characteristics of Catholic antimodernism and its contradictions. The intention was to elaborate a renewed scholastic philosophy that would face the new philosophy (*nouvelle philosophie*). Such philosophy, at least at this stage of Maritain's thought, was antiliberal and counter-revolutionary. The point was to confront Descartes' thought with that of Thomas Aquinas. Re-present scholastic metaphysics against mechanistic metaphysics. A necessary work is to problematize the different modes of appropriation and interpretation of Thomas Aquinas' ideas within the neo-Thomist movement.

The Church needed a robust philosophy that would stand up to Cartesianism, and that would be neo-Thomism. The pursuit was that this philosophy could update Catholic thought

as to the demands of modern life without, however, giving in to modernism. Any combination with a non-Catholic philosophy was avoided. It was a return to the Thomism of the origins, which was intended to be pure. Another important aspect is that, in the neoscholastic movement, laypersons would be given leading roles, rather than the clerics, as in the past. Thus, a vigorous militant Catholic laity was formed, composed mainly of “converted” intellectuals who represented the interests of the Church in secular and laic society. Thus, the fight against “laicism” was also part of this anti-modernist struggle of Catholics.

That was the beginning of a new phase for Catholic thought. The struggle against liberalism had become a struggle against modernism, which had even penetrated the interior of the Church and of Catholic scientific activity. This led to the emergence of an exclusive and uncompromising philosophy, of which this work by Maritain is an example. This philosophy, despite claiming to be a pure Thomism, built a collaboration with the positivism of Charles Maurras, of the *Action Française*, fostering integral Catholicism. It can be questioned whether a passive and contemplative philosophy, such as neo-Thomism, which, according to Maritain, should stimulate a metaphysics that leads to the contemplation of “truth,” would be capable of allowing the scientific and technological progress of modernity. We know that, later, especially after the books *Humanisme intégral* (1936) and, especially, *Christianisme et démocratie* (1943), a new direction would guide Maritain's thought, leading it towards liberal Catholicism and Christian democracy.

The representations of modern thought present in the analyzed work, despite being imbued with great erudition, are moralizing philosophical criticisms that aimed to depreciate modern ideas contrary to Catholic teachings and deny them their heuristic potential. Furthermore, they constitute an interesting and little explored exercise of self-criticism of the “Catholic spirit” and of the “degenerate scholasticism” with the intention of reorganizing them in relation to modernity. The Church, through its great intellectual forces, tried to achieve a monopoly in the world of official and school culture. This resulted in the effort to give neo-Thomism the status of *scientia reatrix* for the sciences and culture. A large number of philosophical and pedagogical works based on neo-Thomism were produced, aiming to educate the ruling elites within the principles of Catholicism and to check the advance of laicism, seen as revolutionary. This was part of a project of power that sought to conquer the cultural market for Catholicism, ensuring the hegemony of its interests over society and over the State.

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