"HEART-RENDING AMBIVALENCE": JACQUES MARITAIN AND THE COMPLEXITY OF POSTWAR CATHOLIC PHILOSEMITISM

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ABSTRACT

Philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) embraced a quest for sanctity at the core of his vocation as a French Catholic intellectual. Known as an exponent of the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, he also devoted considerable energies to the promotion of democracy and human rights, as well as the combat against antisemitism. Maritain has been lauded for his sometimes courageous attempts to eradicate anti-Jewish prejudice from the Christian conscience, though some prevailing interpretations oversimplify this thinker's motivations and ideas. Keeping in mind the historically-contingent and often ambivalent nature of philosemitism, this article analyzes Maritain's postwar writings on the Jewish Question and his interactions with Popes Pius XII and Paul VI, Anglican theologian James Parkes, Jewish historians Leon Poliakov and Jules Isaac, and fellow Catholic writers Paul Claudel and Francois Mauriac.

FULL TEXT:

PDF

doi: https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v6i1.1820

Jacques Maritain (November 18, 1882 – April 28, 1973) was a French Catholic philosopher. He converted to Catholicism and is the author of more than 60 books on a wide variety of philosophical subjects ranging from the philosophy of nature to metaphysics to aesthetics. Maritain was one of the foremost figures in the twentieth century revival of St. Thomas Aquinas. The foundation of Maritain's thought is Aristotelian, St. Thomas and the Thomistic commentators, especially John of St. Thomas. Maritain is known for his original use of these sources and his way of engaging them with contemporary theories. Overall Maritain's philosophy is founded upon evidence which is acquired first by the senses and secondly by an understanding of first principles (metaphysics). French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) gained a reputation both as a leading Catholic intellectual and as an outspoken critic of antisemitism, and as such has been lauded for more than fifty years as a progressive influence within twentieth-century Catholicism. He also has been cited as a dissident voice within the Church, his public statements about the Holocaust throwing the alleged silence of Pope Pius XII into sharp relief. Examining the development of Maritain's philosemitism, this article presents a more nuanced assessment, challenging historically rooted generalizations ab