mental moral ends. And to the extent that such divisions existed in society they were prevented from rising to the national level by the constitutionally limited powers of the national government. But the post-Tocquevillian, 19th-century moral conflict over slavery and Mormon polygamy showed democracy was not immune from a national politics involving disputed moral ends. Since 1940, but especially since Engle v. Vitale (1962) and Roe v. Wade (1973), that politics has perhaps reached an intensity unparalleled since the slavery controversy. It is unclear whether or not Tocqueville thinks religion is necessary to resolve these disputed moral ends. He certainly thinks it is necessary for preserving the moral self-restraint which makes democracy possible.

Jacques Maritain’s America
-by John Stack

Jacques Maritain’s Reflections on America was published almost forty years ago. It grew out of three seminars, collectively titled “random reflections on the American scene,” which he held at the University of Chicago in 1956 (7). He chose not to “treat of the topic ex professo” because he resolved to retain “the tone of informal, familiar, and desultory conversation” he had used originally (7). Such a tone is fitting for a work inspired by friendship for the Americans he had come to know and love (11).

Unlike his more philosophical books, Maritain here explicitly eschewed a systematic approach, and recognized that his “statements [are] susceptible of no demonstration” (12). He conceded that they “constitute neither an historical analysis nor any kind of complete picture, nor any kind of ‘explanation’ . . . They [are] incomplete, subjective, disconnected—random reflections” (12). His primary concern was not to discuss why things in America were the way they were, but to get under the skin of the American people, “deep in the American blood” to uncover their “spiritual identity” (51). His sounding of the American soul moved him to defend Americans of the mid-1950s against the familiar and characteristically European charge of “materialism” (18). Not only were Americans gradually overcoming materialism, Maritain argued, but they were actually more humane and less materialistic than their European counterparts who had reached the industrial stage (15).

This essay reviews Maritain’s friendly and hopeful contrast between the souls of Americans and the industrial system under which they live. It considers whether or not that contrast is still defensible “after forty years.” It also evaluates his recommendations for actualizing in America Christian economic and social principles.

I

One of Maritain’s two principal themes was the relation between the souls of
Americans and the “inner logic” of the industrial system (14). In his view, Americans were generally concerned about the “common welfare” (20), “ethical standards” (15), and their “spiritual life” (24). In contrast, the industrial system was based on “the absolute primacy of individual profit” (14) and “material interests and advantage.” (50) The “inner logic” of that system had seeped into and corrupted the souls of most Europeans, but in America “the people who lived and toiled under this structure ... were keeping their own souls apart from it” (14-15). The latter took the active form of a “steady, latent rebellion of the spirit of the people against the logic of the structure” as distinguished from the passive form of mere detachment from material things (15).

Maritain’s Americans tended to be industrious without being selfish in that they didn’t view the pursuit of wealth as a zero sum game or as the end of human existence. They used money for their good and the good of others, not as an end in itself (20). True devotion to something precludes treating it as a means to an end. While man has a vocation to work, and there is a corresponding dignity of work,¹³ there is no vocation to, or dignity of, money. “It is not money,” Maritain observed, “it is work which holds sway over American civilization” (89). American civilization emphasized “the dignity of work and the fecundity of work transforming matter and nature” (89).

Maritain’s Americans considered egoism to be shameful, and respected the dignity of man (52, 113). These beliefs, along with their “generosity, good will, and the sense of human fellowship” ensured that their way of life was not based primarily on material interests (20). They frequently made voluntary financial contributions to the “common welfare,” and they tended to marry the person they loved, rather than the one with the highest social standing or the biggest bank account (83). In brief, they were not primarily concerned merely with their own material interests because they desired “to make life tolerable” for others (52, Maritain’s emphasis).

Maritain’s Americans did not fall into materialism because they did not neglect spiritual life. By no means did they wear their faith on their sleeves, but “behind the facade of violence and callousness of modern life,” Maritain detected a “remote reminiscence of the Gospel in the inner attitude of the people” (49). They generally read worthwhile books, and a good number of them followed their vocations to religious life which indicated, according to Maritain, that “the thirst for spiritual life is deep in the American soul” (24-25).

This thirst was so powerful and distinctively Christian that in America Maritain saw signs of “a new Christian civilization” (112). And it was not for a watered-down Christianity that the American soul thirsted. There may once have been, in Maritain’s view, “a real philosophy of the negation of evil” in America, but “war has put an end to it. American youth knows now that evil exists, that death exists, that the devil exists” (28). Maritain’s Americans tried to hold the world at arms length and their “Christian sense of the impermanence of earthly things” helped them to resist materialism (55).

But is this true today? We might be encouraged by reports of recent polls showing that most Americans tend to see themselves as spiritual. One repre-
sentative poll discovered that “ninety-five percent of Americans believe in a God, higher power, or universal spirit.” Yet there is more than one way to interpret this finding. Either nearly all Americans are seriously spiritual, or spirituality has become so diluted that almost anybody can claim to be spiritual without being very spiritual at all.

Consider, for example, the astonishing sales record of Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). One might suppose this indicates that many Americans still read good books. However, Bloom’s book is remarkable as an exception to the spiritually vapid popular works put out by authors such as Mary Higgins Clark, Robin Cook, Ann Rice, John Sanford, and John Saul. Bloom described his book as “a meditation on the state of our souls” and maintained that spiritual life in America has become impoverished. The popularity of his book confirms that its thesis about a spiritual void in America resonated with many Americans.

This combination of apparent spiritual longing with declining spiritual practice applies particularly to many American Catholics. Catholic Church attendance has declined by more than a third since the year *Reflections* was published. Also, today there are decidedly fewer priestly vocations compared to 1958. Still, the remarkable sales of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Pope John Paul II’s book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* would seem to indicate either an interest in an alternative to materialism or else a failure to see that their faith teaches them to moderate their materialism.

This declining spiritual practice would account for the dramatic rise in materialism and consumerism. Consider the television commercial put out recently by Nike, perhaps the most profitable sporting goods company in America.

> We are all basically hedonists. And all we want, all we've ever wanted, is to have a good time ... And we will jump up and down and scream until we get it ... She works out because she has found what she wants. And what wants her. It is, she repeats, a good time. And they have even set this good time to music. If it feels good, then just do it.

It is not unusual for commercials today to promote self-gratification and the idea that nothing is higher than the things of this world. It is no secret that companies like Nike spend millions of dollars annually on the marketing research and development of such advertisements, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that these companies can refer to numerous studies to demonstrate that many Americans find this type of commercial appealing.

Such people have failed to live up to the potentiality Maritain saw in us: “what the world expects from America is that she keep alive, in human history, a fraternal recognition of the dignity of man” (115). The hedonists in the Nike commercial hardly accord with the dignity of man and thus fail to vindicate their freedom. They act as if the purpose of life is nothing higher than the unhindered pursuit of bodily pleasure and comfortable self-preservation. Leo Strauss once described the philosophy underlying modern life as “the joyless
quest for joy.”

The Nike commercial confirms that Americans will suffer through a work out if it leads to “a good time.” If it doesn’t, “we will jump up and down and scream until we get it.” And the “it” referred to is “a good time” not “the Good.”

Maritain had noticed “an antagonistic trend toward secularism” in America, but he found it “unlikely” that this trend would undermine the Christian spirit of the American people (106). He did not foresee that, five years after the publication of Reflections, the United States Supreme Court would mandate public secularism by declaring unconstitutional publicly sponsored prayer in Engle v. Vitale (1962) and Bible reading in public schools in Abington School District v. Schempp (1963). Much less did he foresee public secularism coming to dominate to such an extent that the right of religious citizens to act in public on the basis of their religious convictions would be questionable. Today serious spirituality is the “antagonistic trend.”

Maritain’s Americans were able to resist materialism by “clinging to the importance of ethical standards” (15). To emphasize the importance Americans attached to ethical standards, Maritain declared that “hiring the devil for help will never be agreeable even to your politicians” (23). Today, however, more than a few politicians appear willing and able to strike a Faustian bargain for the sake of political power. Recently, in order to increase their favorable ratings, political leaders of opposite political principles hired Dick Morris, a man unscrupulous enough to sell his services to people with incompatible views of justice, commit adultery, and publicly trumpet this behavior in print.

Whereas Maritain found Americans caring about ethical truth, modern Americans overwhelmingly assert ethical relativism. One poll shows that “nearly three in four Americans believe there is no such thing as absolute truth.” Rather than attempting to live up to ethical standards that are true everywhere and always, they celebrate what Bloom ironically called our “moral virtue—openness,” which asserts the ethical equality of contradictory human actions.

II

Maritain’s second principal theme was that the Christian spirit of the American people was transforming the industrial system. He described as “economic humanism” the new industrial society that he saw coming into being as the spirit of the American people gradually worked to overcome the logic of the industrial system (67). A recent statement by the U.S. Catholic Bishops contains the essence of economic humanism: “The economy should serve people, not the other way around.” Under economic humanism, the desire to create wealth would be connected to a vision of a better life for all. Corporations and labor unions would base their policies on human welfare and the common good. Maritain approvingly recounted, and even “attach[ed] particular importance to,” Frederick Allen’s praise of five measures which make the industrial system more compatible with economic humanism (67). The
“ideal” (70) includes first, “tax laws,” second, “minimum wage laws,” third, “subsidies and guarantees and regulations of various sorts,” fourth “labor union pressures and new management attitudes,” and fifth, “an automatic redistribution of income from the well-to-do to the less well-to-do” (67).^9

Maritain appeared to see nothing problematic, either morally or politically, about a state with the legal authority to redistribute private property as it sees fit. He appeared to be unaware that giving a state that right abolishes private property in principle if not yet in practice. Such control over private property has been thought to characterize tyranny since that phenomena was first diagnosed by Greek philosophers.^^ Maritain trusted American government, assuming that government would reflect Christian charity. Without that assumption, such power would be merely tyrannical.

Presumably, a government would not be tyrannical if it reflects Christian charity. But Maritain had perhaps insufficiently considered that doing so is more problematic than merely “an automatic redistribution of income from the well-to-do to the less well-to-do.”^^ Economic humanism may give the poor more money but to the extent that it partakes of governmental coercion it is something other than Christian charity. Arnold McKee describes such charity as

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first a personal Christian virtue, meaning a movement of the heart toward God and neighbor (while not forgetting self-regard, so important in our introspective age) and, added to justice, converts the latter from court room equivalence to the bond that unites people.32
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Of course, Christ taught that His followers have a duty to give to the poor (Matthew 5:42; 6:2-4; 10:8; 25:35-40 and Luke 3:11). But government taking from the rich to give to the poor is the method of Robin Hood not of the good Samaritan. The distinction is unimportant only if a good end justifies unjust means.

It is striking that the New Testament contains so little by way of a political teaching. Perhaps a nation of real Christians would practice sufficient voluntary charity as would minimize the problem which gives plausible grounds for Maritain's political and economic proposals. However, in itself economic humanism looks like a proposal to replace failed Christian charity with a secular humanitarianism enforced by political coercion.

Christ practiced His love directly on individuals not on multitudes through political institutions. Impersonal governmental programs give citizens the impression that we fulfill our duty to the poor when we relinquish some of our money to the federal government to hand out to the poor. But we may never come into direct contact with those who need our love as well as, and even more than, our money. And perhaps in the absence of our love, our money may make them worse. Economic humanism through governmental coercion seems incompatible with a “movement of the heart” that “unites people.”^^
Maritain’s Americans have become corrupted over the last forty years. The Christian underpinning, which Maritain persuasively maintained guarded Americans from the temptations of materialism, has even been officially evicted from public life by the Supreme Court. “It would be difficult to contend that, the end of racial segregation aside, American culture today is superior to, or even or a par with, the culture of the 1950s.” At the end of the 20th century, many Americans have their hearts set on comfortable self-preservation and the things of this world. *Reflections* did not foresee the change from Maritain’s America to the America we know today. But it can guide us toward becoming again the kind of Americans Maritain once said we were.

**Comments on Stack on Maritain**

-by Gary D. Glenn

In contrast to Tocqueville, Maritain was a believing Catholic until the end of his days. But he was first a Catholic *philosopher* and only secondly a political thinker. In contrast to both Tocqueville and secular social science, his social and political thought did not tend to take its bearings from a detailed investigation of the facts of social and political life, not to say that it ignored such facts. Instead, following Thomas Aquinas, Maritain tended to take his bearings from philosophical and theological truth which he then applied to politics and society. His most important books on politics were *Man and the State* and *Scholasticism and Politics*.

He was arguably the foremost Catholic *philosopher*, not to say political philosopher, of the first half of the 20th century. In particular, through a revigorating of Thomism, Maritain helped make Catholic thought comfortable with the language of “rights,” a language the Church had formerly associated with the French Revolution, atheism, liberalism, individualism, and anti-clericalism. He also helped the Church see how it could live with at least some form of the extreme separation of church and state which has become the hallmark of modern democracy. In his lifetime, Maritain was read within Catholic circles and by non-Catholics interested in natural law. He was a major figure in the rejuvenated pre-Vatican II Thomism which went under the rubric “The New Scholasticism.”

Stack examines *Reflections on America* (1958), Maritain’s only book which focuses on America. He correctly suggests that it is remarkably charitable and hopeful regarding both American civilization and the healthiness of Christianity here. In particular, Maritain sought to defend America against the charge that its way of life was “materialistic.” Stack summarizes that defense well. Not only had the materialistic structure of America’s industrial civilization not affected the souls of its citizens but, on the contrary, those souls were