Two Catholic Conservatives: The Ideas of Joseph de Maistre and Juan Donoso Cortés

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The prophetic voice of Cortés offers the insight that the violent social upheavals in the modern world parody Christianity; however, Christian solidarity is a far cry from socialism. Human solidarity in Catholicism offers more hope than social and liberal reforms. Both writers take into account original sin and defend authority.

In most histories of 19th century conservatism, the figure of Joseph de Maistre is a prominent one. Some authors who see an Anglo-American brand of conservatism distinct from what they call continental conservatism present the Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke as the founder of their Anglo-American conservatism, and Joseph de Maistre as the embodiment of the continental brand of conservatism, which they oftentimes describe as autocratic, Catholic, and backward looking. The purpose of this essay is to suggest that whatever the accuracy of this neat division of 19th century conservatism in the western world, it is not accurate to portray all non-English conservative thought of the 19th century as a footnote to the thought of Joseph de Maistre.

The influence of Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) in continental Europe during the first three decades of the 19th century is an undeniable fact. In France he had his most influential follower in Vicomte Louis Bonald (1754-1840), but he also influenced the Austrian Prince Clemens von Metternich (1773-1849), and the Spaniard Juan Donoso Cortés (1809-1853). It cannot be said, however, that all non-English conservative thought of the 19th century derived from him. In Spain, Jaime Balmes (1810-1848) developed a different kind of conservative political thought. Although influenced by de Maistre, Donoso Cortés developed his own kind of conservatism, accepting free will and advocating human solidarity and social responsibility.

De Maistre was born to the minor nobility of Savoy (then a component of what was called the Kingdom of Sardinia, a conglomerate of territories including the island of Sardinia but with its political center in the Italian Piedmont, at Turin). After the armies of the French Republic forced him into exile in 1793, he began his career as a counter-revolutionary political writer.
In the year he published *Letters of a Savoyard Royalist*, followed by two unpublished anti-Rousseaunian works (*On the State of Nature* and *On Popular Sovereignty*, of 1795), *Considerations on France* (1797), and *Essay on the Generative Powers of Political Constitutions* (1809). *Letters on the Spanish Inquisition*, the celebrated *On the Pope*, and his unfinished *Dialogues of St. Petersburg* were published after his death. Most of these works were translated into English and modern translations of them are still in print. Exiled in St. Petersburg between 1795 and 1815, de Maistre became influential among the circles of royalists from France and Italy who, in the capitals of Austria, Prussia, and Russia, plotted for the restoration of their legitimate sovereigns and the *status quo ante* in their homelands.

There is some truth to the characterization of the political views of Joseph de Maistre as autocratic and backward looking. Originally a critic of the excesses of 18th century royal absolutism, after suffering from the excesses of the French Revolution which overthrew it, he became a eulogizer of divine-right monarchy, with its presuppositions of a birth-aristocracy’s monopoly of political power, and of the unquestioning acceptance of the royal will by subjects without right to resist or even demand responsible behavior from the sovereign. In other words, he proposed a return of socio-political life in Europe to what it had been in what is now called the *Ancien Regime*.

De Maistre thought that the support of the Catholic Church was essential for the restoration of that *Ancien Regime*, by its influence as a religious force, and as the provider of education in most of Catholic Europe. In his treatise *On the Pope*, he emphasizes the monarchical organization of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and the absolutist nature of the papacy, counseling the cooperation of European monarchs with the pope in order to bring back the political order and the society of estates predominant in most of Europe before the French Revolution of 1789. Here he also understates the importance of historical conflicts between European monarchs and the popes and does not mention natural law.

It is puzzling that nowhere in the works of de Maistre—a professed Catholic—can one find the Catholic concept of natural law—a law present in the heart of each human being and established by reason, consisting of universal precepts, and whose authority extends to all men, providing the indispensable moral foundations for building the human community and the necessary basis for the civil law. In his two anti-Rousseaunian tracts, de Maistre criticizes Rousseau for the naiveté of his belief in the natural goodness of humankind, accuses him of fostering immorality with his works debunking social hierarchies and morals, and shows indignation at his proposing in *The Social Contract* that Christianity cannot serve as a civic religion. But de Maistre nowhere criticizes Rousseau for his dispensing with natural law. It has been argued that in his anti-Rousseaunian treatises he is closer to Rousseau than their
superficial reading might suggest. It has been said that de Maistre agreed with Rousseau in considering that man’s first need is that his nascent reason be curved and lose itself into a general will, and he made no attempt to criticize Rousseau’s controversial chapter on civic religion.

Donoso Cortés is not as well known in the English-speaking world as de Maistre. In 1991 his early work, *Lecciones de derecho político* (1836-1837), was published in English as *A Defense of Representative Government* by Captus University Publication, but most of his works have not been translated into English. The most recent translation of his major *Essay on Catholicism, Liberalism, and Socialism* was published in 1925. In 1967, the *Intercollegiate Review* published Frederick Wilhelmsen’s perceptive article "Donoso Cortés and the Problem of Political Power," and in 1974 John T. Graham published an imaginative essay on the Spanish publicist, but no other major article or book-length work on him was published in English until two years ago when R.A. Herrera published his *Donoso Cortés, Cassandra of the Age*.

Born in a family of the Spanish provincial gentry, Donoso Cortés distinguished himself as a scholar at an early age. Before he was thirty he entered Spanish politics in the Moderate Liberal Party, formed after constitutional monarchy was established in Spain upon the death of King Ferdinand VII (1784-1833). Later he held an important diplomatic post in Paris, during the reign of King Louis Philippe (1830-1848), and in 1849 he was Spanish Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotenciary to Prussia. He was again posted to Paris, this time as Ambassador, during the presidency of Louis Napoleon and the beginning of the Second Empire, and he died in that city in 1853. During his lifetime, he influenced prominent statesmen, gaining praise from Metternich, who declared that "after Donoso Cortés, one has to put down one's pen, for nothing more and nothing better can be said on the historical transition we are witnessing."

The political ideas of Donoso Cortés take into account original sin and defend authority, like de Maistre’s. But Donoso Cortés defends an authority legitimized both by performance and origin, and he uses the concept of natural law in his definition of what is legitimate authority. He will accept the overthrow of an ineffective legitimate government by an organized sector of the governmental hierarchy if it is the only alternative to its violent overthrow by anonymous popular forces. His speech on dictatorship before the Spanish parliament in 1849, where he said the above, is often misinterpreted as a defense of dictatorship, but in context it was a defense of that act when no other alternative except popular revolt remained. Like de Maistre, Donoso Cortés was a monarchist, but even after he became disillusioned with constitutional monarchy after 1849, he did not advocate unquestioning obedience to power holders, and demanded responsible behavior from them—as he showed in his scathing attack of December 1851 against the dictatorial regime of General Tarragó.
Narváez, known as *Discurso sobre la situación de España*. The aristocracy that Donoso Cortés favored in his latter years was open to men of merit and enterprise, and he had social concerns. In a letter that he wrote in 1851 to his friend the Queen-Mother María Cristina, he said that the rich had betrayed their Christian duty of charity to the poor, and predicted social revolution unless the united Christian monarchs of Europe stated a new age of social ethics by helping the poor and restraining the excesses of the rich.

After going through a period of personal turmoil and political disillusion, Donoso Cortés adopted the political views he died upholding. In 1851, he published the work in which he expresses his definite socio-political thought, his *Essay on Catholicism, Liberalism, and Socialism*. In his Essay, he is more convincing in his critique of liberalism and socialism—actually, what he means by liberalism is present-day United States’ libertarianism, and under the term socialism he refers to communists and anarchists—than he is in his argument for the universal embrace of what he calls the Catholic system. Donoso Cortés seems to assume that Catholic citizens, rich and poor, and public officers of all ranks, will always act justly, as they ought. But he is formidable in his critique of 19th century liberalism and socialism. With uncanny foresight he predicts the overthrow of weak liberal regimes by socialist groups disturbingly like the German National Socialists of the 1930s and the International Socialists who for so long ruled over Russian and Central Eastern Europe.

Donoso Cortés criticizes liberals for attributing the origin of all evils to political systems and for seeing the only remedy to all evils in politics. He criticizes them also for their deification of legitimate government, which he claims they define as government of the middle classes and professionals, and their incapacity for seeing a legitimate government as capable of doing wrong. His major criticism of socialists is their belief that man is perfect and society corrupt, with the corollary call for men to destroy all social institutions. Donoso Cortés condemns both for not acknowledging that the main problem in society is the flawed character of human nature, wounded by original sin.

The middle class liberalism criticized by Donoso Cortés had become established in most of southern Europe and in Belgium in the 1830s, and came to a crisis in 1848. He justly diagnosed its shallowness and self-contradictions because, while these liberal governments claimed to be harbingers of freedom and espoused popular sovereignty, they imposed property and income qualifications to suffrage. In his opinion socialism had sounder logical basis than liberalism, but viewed it less as a secular ideology than as an incipient new theology or secular religion. Donoso Cortés believed that both liberals and socialists had replaced religion and traditional authority with mass authority, claiming that they were increasing human freedom. He refuted them on that claim, with the counter claim that their ending of religious and traditional checks would leave political power unchecked, and would thereby produce not
freedom but despotism.  

In his Essay, Donoso Cortés breaks new ground with his Catholic argument for human solidarity. Based on the dogma of human descent from Adam and the deduction that each human being is responsible for every fellow human being, he defines what he calls Dogma of Solidarity as the substantial unity of the human race and the close relationship of all human beings to each other, which demand all Catholics to be concerned about their neighbor, and forbid them to be indifferent to the needs of others. Implicitly he asserts that Catholics are obligated to act upon the dogmas of their faith, which tell them that fellow human beings are brethren, irrespective of accidental differences such as social position, economic power, and race. Donoso Cortés challenges liberals, who profess a belief in the rights of man, and socialists, who profess to believe in the equality of all human beings, to tell him on what material grounds they base those beliefs, when so many daily experiences show human inequalities, oppression, and strife. Thus, he emphasized how arbitrary are the bonds of humanity if they are not supported by the fact that there Is a God, creator of all, and father of humankind.

The political views that Donoso Cortés expressed in his Essay of 1851 are very different to those he expressed in his Lecciones de derecho político of 1836-1837 (when he was a Moderate Liberal). However, both works have a common underpinning: respect for the Catholic Church as a divinely inspired institution. In the Essay he denies the capability for sound reasoning of fallen man and the genius of representative government which he had defended in Lecciones. In the latter period of his political life, he came to despair of human institutions, disillusioned by the aftermath of the European revolutions of 1848, which overthrew moderate liberal regimes which he had supported; until that year he favored constitutional monarchy and a liberalism moderated by Catholicism.

Donoso Cortés expressed his early views on representative government in Lecciones, but he gave the historical reasons why an evolutionary constitutional monarchy tempered by religion and respect for law was appropriate for Spain in his De la monarquía absoluta, of 1838. In this essay on the origins of absolutism in Spain, he also argues the transitory and necessity-oriented nature of political systems, saying that while absolute monarchy ought to disappear from Spain at the time of his writing and give way to constitutional monarchy, it was not because absolutism was intrinsically bad, but because it had been appropriate for a type of society that no longer existed in Spain. This was typical of a man who condemned claims of perfection by any political system, because he believed that societies are in continuous flux, and will require different political systems according to the signs of the times.

In De la monarquía absoluta, Donoso Cortés portrays the Spanish state as one with religious and populist foundations, having risen from dioceses and
municipalities after the fall of the Roman Empire and the Visigothic invasion. After the Muslim Conquest of 711, the populist elements of the Spanish state were reinforced by the foundation of an elective Spanish monarchy. In the course of the Middle Ages, the warrior class of nobles abused its powers, provoking the alliance of the Crown with the Church hierarchy and the people, which became stronger after the establishment of hereditary succession in the 11th century—a century which also witnessed the grants of privileges to cities and the formation of the Cortes of Castile. On account of that alliance, absolute monarchs in Spain always respected the privileges of the Church and local fueros. Even after he rejected representative government in his Essay, Donoso Cortés’ ideal monarch was the limited monarch of the Middle Ages as opposed to the divine-right absolutism established in Spain by the House of Bourbon in the 18th century. It is ironic that Donoso Cortés never wavered in his support of Isabel II, daughter of Fernando VII, because the political program of her absolutist challenger to the succession (who backed his claims with the non-Spanish Salic Law, established by the first Bourbon king of Spain, but later abrogated by his hispanized descendant Charles IV, and once again by King Fernando VII himself), don Carlos, upheld the prerogatives of the Church and fueros abolished by her first liberal government.

One reason for the difference between the monarchy that de Maistre advocated and that which Donoso Cortés advocated may be the difference between Spanish absolutism and French absolutism. In the France of the Ancien Regime, natural law was not a welcome Catholic concept. The absolute monarchy that de Maistre wanted restored had developed as a politico-religious institution in France under the first three kings of the House of Bourbon (Henry IV, Louis XIII, and Louis XIV) during the 17th century. By 1625, the Bishop of Chârtrres ventured the opinion "there is no one who does not hold and believe that the King of France is in no way mortal but instead something very like the Deity and similar to Him." This arrogation of a sacral persona to the monarch was indicative of a mood in France which was given official expression by the French bishops in 1682 in the Declaration by the General Assembly of the Gallican Clergy of the absolute independence of the French monarch from both the nation and the Church. Such was the divine-right absolutism overthrown by the French Revolution of 1789.

Although by the time when he wrote his Essay, Donoso Cortés had rejected constitutional monarchy, he was far from advocating a monarchy with the prerogatives over the Church and people that the absolute kings of France and other European nations had acquired by 1789. Albeit reluctantly, he accepted liberty as a God-given attribute of humankind, although he did not accept as true liberty what liberals and socialists called liberty. His historical model for a monarchy, the Spanish monarchy, was supposedly founded at the election of don Pelayo as King of Asturias; a monarchy where kings were not crowned, but
sworn to respect and defend the laws and rights of their subjects. Although, by the beginning of the 17th century, the kings of Spain had limited the prerogatives of the aristocracy and the Church, in 1614 the Spanish theologian Francisco Suárez, S.J., was allowed to publish a treatise where he said, "No king or lord has or ever had his political authority directly from God or by divine institution, but through human institution." As late as 1640, the Spanish diplomat Diego Saavedra Fajardo wrote in a manual intended for Prince Baltasar Carlos-Idea de un príncipe político christiano-, "Let the Prince know that the nature of his sovereignty is not such that the people have not any . . . good kings are pleased that their subjects enjoy some freedoms; it is only tyrants who want to be absolute rulers."

Absolutism of the Freitch kind came to Spain in the 18th century, with the House of Bourbon. King Charles III (king from 1759 to 1788) is known to have said that whoever criticized the activities of the government, even bad ones, committed an infraction. But the Spanish Bourbons were never able to obtain a declaration of the Spanish clergy like that which the General Assembly of the Gallican Clergy made for Louis XIV, and except for some abuses by Charles III and Charles IV, and the excesses of liberal governments during the minority of Isabel II (queen from 1833 to 1868), Spanish monarchs remained respectful of the prerogatives of the Church and popular—in Donoso Cortés’ own words—"religious and populist." In a perceptive analysis of the political ideas of Donoso Cortés, Frederick Wilhelmsen concludes that behind his predilection of type of monarchy lies a philosophy which transcends them, because it purports to teach us something about power as power no matter where or in what historical moment of time, or under whatever form of government it might exist.

De Maistre was opposed to the theory of popular sovereignty because he believed in the sovereignty of the crown. His ideal government was divine-right monarchy as it existed in France in the 18th century. He upheld the authority of the pope as a legitimizer of absolute monarchy; a paradigm of what royal authority ought to be (partly because he believed in the utter corruption of human nature by the fall and in the reality of original sin). His low expectation of human capabilities for good made him an advocate of authoritarian government and repression. He considered the executioner a hero of law and order. Donoso Cortés became an advocate of authoritarianism at the end of his political career, but the one and perpetual order he proposed was to be limited by estates, and in his system sovereignty was God’s. He deemed dictatorship preferable to popular insurrection, but he did not idealize it; and he denounced corruption as damnable in any type of regime. After 1848, he adopted de Maistre’s view of humankind as radically corrupted, and saw in Catholicism--fruit of divine revelation--the sole foundation of order and civilization. But he did not set his hopes for human regeneration in any
political system, adopting the Augustinian attribute that evil is personal and that there is no way to extirpate it that does not begin with the human heart.

By the end of his political career, Donoso Cortés’ ideas had come to resemble those of de Maistre. Indeed, it can be said that he had been influenced by the Savoyard. But important differences remained between these two Catholic conservatives. De Maistre was an advocate of divine-right monarchy for whom the king was sovereign and the Church his most valuable support. Donoso Cortés was an advocate of authoritarianism limited by socio-economic groups within society, for whom sovereignty comes from God and the Catholic Church is the deposit of divine revelation. Even in his authoritarian Essay, he expresses belief in an essential law which even kings have to respect—the natural law never considered by de Maistre. In practical terms the most important difference between them, however, is that de Maistre never considers the grievances of the revolutionary populous, and Donoso Cortés does. De Maistre never makes reference to social problems, seemingly convinced that revolutions are produced by ideas, while Donoso Cortés sees social injustice as a source of revolutions in his "Discurso sobre la situación Española" of 1850, and in his letter to the Queen Mother of 1851.

A careful consideration of the differences between the political projects of these two conservative publicists shows that at the heart of their divergences is the place of Catholicism in them. De Maistre saw in the altar a support for the restoration of the Ancien Regime while for Donoso Cortés the Catholic Church is Mother and Teacher, and the only hope for the creation of a new order. Another cause for divergences in their projects is their views on liberty. De Maistre saw human freedom as a dangerous threat. His political ideas emphasize order and authority at all costs. Throne and altar are for him powers to which unquestioning obedience is due in all things and at all times. Donoso Cortés saw human freedom as a gift from God—even in his latter years—not as evil in itself, although he despaired of humankind’s use of the gift of choice.

All this said, one might wonder what is the use of reviewing the ideas of these men dead so long. I would dare say that it is refreshing to be reminded that there is more to conservatism than concern over money and power. Traditional conservatism distinguished itself for a mistrust of human nature and trust in unbroken historical continuity and in some traditional framework to tame human nature. This is particularly true of traditional Catholic political and economic views. As Thomas R. Rourke pointed out in a recent dispute with Michael Novak, "Catholic thought, grounded in Saint Thomas Aquinas and expressed in numerous encyclicals’, defined itself in opposition to economic liberalism on the grounds that the latter rejected the Catholic concept of the common good in favor of a relatively unrestricted pursuit of individual goods." Since Saint James the Apostle wrote his epistle, bishops and popes have preached that Christians are obligated to share their wealth. Most
recently, His Holiness John Paul II has written, "The Redemption has saved mankind and at the same time united all people, making them responsible for one another."\(^38\)

Although I would not propose the ideas of Juan Donoso Cortés as a political manual for today’s Catholics, I think that they are more "Catholic" than those of Joseph de Maistre. R. A. Herrera sees Donoso Cortés as a prophetic voice with the insight that the cause of the radical violence of the social and polemical upheavals in the modern world is the Christian spirit that revolutions appropriate as a parody of Christianity, which, when joined to rationalism and the idealism of abstract quantity, creates a public orthodoxy as inflexible as it is ubiquitous.\(^39\) The same author says of Donoso Cortés, "He prods contemporary man to rethink his principles and retrace his steps."\(^40\) Edmund Schram’s verdict on Donoso Cortés’ contribution is his heightening of the Christian concept of solidarity by comparing it to the social doctrines of liberals and socialists.\(^41\)

In a political culture where the democratic principle is unwritten orthodoxy, the ideas of Juan Donoso Cortés may seem reactionary. His system of responsible authority derived from God through popular acclamation and legitimized by performance is the antithesis of present-day societies, where profound socio-economic divisions have developed too complex and widespread to be solved by traditional charity or impersonal government agencies. But there are some elements in it that can be useful to face certain aspects of modern-day reality. His claims of a high moral ground for what he called the "Catholic system" are a challenge to Catholics today, and his Dogma of Solidarity is a corrective in our hedonistic society. But most appropriate to the signs of the times is his conclusion that, if man and society are fallible and can never be perfected, then it matters more that religious improvement within individual souls will make humans act upon aspects of their faith, such as human solidarity in Catholicism, than social and liberal reforms, which can always be subverted by unreformed individuals.

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**Notes**


12. Juan Donoso Cortés, "Carta al eminentísimo señor Cardenal Fornari sobre el principio generado de los más graves errores de nuestros días," in Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el liberalismo y el socialismo y otros escritos, José Luis Gómez, ed. (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, S.A., 1985), 327.
15. , "Carta a María Cristina," in Ibid., 2:722-729.
16. For a text representative of the Moderate Liberal period of Donoso Cortés see his "Lecciones de derecho político de 1836-37" in Ibid., 1:327-445.
17. Donoso Cortés, "Ensayo sobre el catolicismo, el liberalismo y el socialismo," in Ibid., 2:595.
18. Ibid., 599.
22. Ibid., 2:649.
24. Ibid., 1:578.
27. Ibid., 33.


39. Herrera, Donoso Cortés, 133.

40. Ibid., 135.