

Joseph de Maistre, how Catholic a Reaction?

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The publication late in 1796 of a small book entitled *Considérations sur la France*¹ announced the appearance of a formidable literary opponent of the French Revolution. Although the title page did not carry the author's name, the authorship seems to have been an open secret and with several more editions appearing in the following months, Joseph de Maistre's reputation as an apologist of throne and altar was soon established. Maistre's collected works now fill a fair-sized shelf, but this first slight volume was a faithful overture which sketched the themes and set the tone of all that followed.

Just as Augustine had affirmed the Providential governance of events amid the ruins of the Roman world, so Joseph de Maistre proclaimed that never had the role of Providence been more palpable than in the humanly inexplicable torrent of the French Revolution. Significantly, the original manuscript title of the piece had been *Considérations religieuses sur la France* (the adjective had been deleted on Mallet du Pan's advice that it ill-suited the temper of the times).² The religious or moral themes included, in addition to the elaboration of a Providential interpretation of the Revolution, condemnation of the anti-religious character of the Revolution and the Enlightenment, speculation on the redemptive value of the suffering of innocent victims (such as Louis XVI), and the statement of a thesis of the divine origins of political constitutions. The book closed with a confident prediction of a Bourbon restoration.

Considérations sur la France, Maistre's only important work to be published before the Restoration, was rigorously prohibited in France. However, Maistre's suggestion that irreligion had been the main cause of the Revolution proved acceptable to the *émigré* mentality. The Providential explanation allowed them to overlook social and economic changes, the injustices of privilege and similar factors less amenable to correction. A return to religion and an alliance of throne and altar was an understandable and traditional way of restoring order to the world, and Maistre's book was soon known as the "breviary of the *émigrés*.³

Maistre's *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques et*

¹ The edition used for this paper will be found in J. de Maistre, *Oeuvres Complètes* (hereafter *Oeuvres*), (14 vols., Lyons, 1884-1893), I, 1-186.

² Letter to the Comte d'Avary, September 6, 1797, *Joseph de Maistre et Blacas: leur correspondance inédite et l'histoire de leur amitié, 1804-1820*, introductions, notes et commentaires par Ernest Daudet (Paris, 1908), 21.

³ L. Arnould, *La Providence et le bonheur d'après Bossuet et J. de Maistre* (Paris, 1917), 188.

des autres institutions humaines,⁴ which was written about 1808 but which didn't appear in France until 1814, reiterated the thesis of the Providential origin of constitutions and stressed the necessity of providing a religious foundation for any lasting institution. *Du Pape* and *De l'Eglise gallicane*, published in 1819 and 1820, books in which Maistre denounced the pretensions of the Gallican church and argued for the acceptance of papal infallibility, strengthened his image as an apologist of a rigid and orthodox Catholicism. In the posthumous *Soirées of Saint-Petersbourg*, subtitled *Entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la Providence*, the lay apologist developed an elaborate theodicy in attractive literary form. The publication of other posthumous works and Maistre's correspondence later in the century did nothing to alter his reputation as a "theocrat" whose political theory was supposedly representative of the Catholic reaction to the French Revolution.

For most of the nineteenth century, French Catholics, with the exception of a few Gallican churchmen who opposed Maistre's ultramontanism, accepted and flaunted Maistre as an authentic Catholic rejoinder to the Enlightenment and the Revolution. On the other side, most French liberals, unable to forgive Maistre's attack on Voltaire and the other revered great men of the eighteenth century, rejected him as an odious example of Catholic obscurantism. A piece in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1852 contains a vivid description of these divergent reactions:

By one party he has been reviled as the apologist of the headsman, the advocate of the Inquisition, the adversary of free inquiry, the virulent detractor of Bacon, the friend of the Jesuits, and the unscrupulous perverter of historic truth for his own controversial purposes; by the other, he is extolled as an austere moralist reacting against the sentimentality and philosophism (to use his own word) of the age, a steadfast believer, and an unshrinking upholder of all he believed, a loyal and devoted subject to a despoiled sovereign, an elegant scholar, a powerful logician, a disinterested statesman, and the unflinching advocate of a persecuted order, which reckoned among its members the friends and instructors of his youth.⁵

Although there were curious cross currents in the 1830's and the 1840's with both Saint-Simon and Comte expressing admiration for Maistre and borrowing some of his ideas, well into the twentieth century there continued to be Catholic admirers (of Action Française persuasion) who revered Joseph de Maistre as a great lay father of the Church.

Now it is true that Maistre seems always to have considered himself a loyal

⁴ Available in an excellent translation by Elisha Greifer entitled *On God and Society* (Chicago, 1959). It also appears, along with selections from some of Maistre's other writings in *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, edited and translated by J. Lively (New York, 1965).

⁵ Anonymous, review of the 1851 edition of the *Lettres et Opuscules inédits du comte J. de Maistre*, *Edinburgh Review*, XCVI (1852), 290

and orthodox Catholic. There is little to suggest that he ever sensed himself as being outside or opposed to traditional Catholicism. The following passage from a letter which he wrote to a papal nuncio in 1815 suggests his conception of his relationship to the Church and the papacy and his role as an apologist:

I would be very happy, your Grace, if you can again find and avail yourself of the occasion to put my person, my writings, my zeal and all the strength that I possess at the feet of His Holiness, whose very loyal, philosophical, political and theological subject I am. I believe reason, politics, and religion equally interested in his recall to the full and free exercise of his sublime functions and in the early deliverance of the priesthood from the unjust chains with which we have very imprudently bound it. A new field is open to the wise and religious statescraft of the Sovereign Pontiff, and perhaps we laymen, men of the world, are in a position to present him with some arms that are the more useful for having been forged in the camp of revolt.⁶

Moreover, Maistre formally declared his willingness to submit his writings to the judgment of the Church.⁷ He regarded the Catholic religion as the one divinely revealed true faith and this belief found expression in a blameless life and the conscientious performance of his religious obligations.⁸

Joseph de Maistre was undoubtedly a sincere Catholic, but whether or not his reaction to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution is best understood or characterized as a Catholic reaction is another question. In the first place, a careful analysis of Maistre's work reveals that there are significant differences between his position and traditional Catholic teaching.⁹

One of the most distinctive features of Maistre's political thought is his insistence on the divine origins of political authority. He maintains that government is of divine origin because it is the direct consequence of human nature. Man has been created a social being and society "cannot exist without sovereignty."¹⁰ Thus far he is in agreement with the traditional Catholic teaching. However, in so far as he stresses the necessity of government as a remedy for human wickedness rather than as the result of the rational character of human nature he

⁶ Letter to Monseigneur Severoli, archevêque de Raguse, nonce à Vienne, December 13, 1815, *Oeuvres*, XIII, 191-192.

⁷ From the preface of *Du Pape*: "L'auteur ne terminera point cette préface sans profiter de l'occasion pour soumettre son ouvrage au jugement de Rome, sans la moindre réserve imaginable; il se contredirait de la manière la moins excusable s'il refusait de reconnaître contre lui une autorité qu'il a défendue contre les autres avec tant de zèle et de bonne foi." *Oeuvres*, II, xv.

⁸ R. Lebrun, *Throne and Altar: The Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Ottawa, 1965), 117-132.

⁹ There is a problem of defining "Catholic political philosophy." H. Rommen's *The State in Catholic Thought* (St. Louis, 1947) has been used as a guide for purposes of this paper.

¹⁰ *Oeuvres, Etude sur la souveraineté*, I, 314.

may be placed in the Augustinian rather than the Thomistic tradition on the question.

But Maistre goes beyond asserting the divine origins of sovereignty in general. In his curiously entitled *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines*, he sought to prove that every particular political constitution has a divine origin. He holds that “the more one examines the role of human agency in forming political constitutions, the more one becomes convinced that it enters only in an infinitely subordinate manner, or as a simple instrument.”¹¹ The English constitution, for example, “the most complex unity and the most propitious equilibrium of political powers that the world has ever seen” was not made *a priori*. It was the work of infinite circumstances and if it displays order and pattern, it follows that the men involved, who acted without foreseeing the outcome, “were guided in their course by an infallible power.”¹²

It should be noted that Maistre regarded written constitutional documents as mere scraps of paper and he used the term in the literal sense as that which “constitutes” a nation and creates “that national unity by virtue of which one nation is not another.”¹³

The conservative bent of Maistre’s argument is quite obvious. If political constitutions are really divine creations, it follows that any human attempt to usurp the divine prerogative by trying to create a new political constitution (such as that of the French revolutionaries) is presumptuous, dangerous and doomed to failure.

In Catholic political philosophy the notion that political authority is ultimately of divine origin is usually understood in the context of natural law, which is thought of as a kind of divine or eternal law. Bellarmine, for example, put it this way: “... the law of nature is a divine law and by divine law, therefore, government has been introduced into the world.”¹⁴ In the traditional Catholic teaching, natural law is a matter of human intelligence and will. Aquinas, for example, defines the natural law as “the rational creature’s participation of the eternal law.”¹⁵ In observing the natural law, men participate in the eternal law of divine Providence in “an intellectual and rational manner.”¹⁶ In this context, the traditional teaching on the divine origin of sovereignty does not, as Joseph de Maistre tended to do, deny that human wills have a vital part to play. Though the state may be required by nature, it may be achieved by reason.¹⁷

Historically, according to Heinrich Rommen, Catholic political philosophy has given three possible solutions as to *how* legitimate political authority comes

¹¹ *On God and Society*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁴ *De Laicis*, Bk. III, Ch. VI, as translated by J. C. Rager in his *Political Philosophy of Blessed Cardinal Bellarmine* (Washington, D.C., 1926).

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 91, a.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ J. Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago, 1961), 10.

to be established in the world.¹⁸ The first solution involves a somewhat mystical divine right of kings theory according to which “authority and power have been conferred upon a certain person by a special act of God.”¹⁹ The sovereign possesses his authority by divine law as a property which cannot be abolished or transferred to anyone else except by another specific divine intervention. Rommen believes that this theory has had very little influence in Catholic political philosophy because it seems irreconcilable with the fundamental concepts of natural law.²⁰

The second solution has been called the “designation theory.” In this formulation, it is posited that man’s social nature and historical development produce a situation that demands political authority. A certain person or group of persons are indicated by circumstance and natural gifts of leadership as most fitting to hold this authority. Then the community, “being simultaneously transformed into a body politic” designates this person or group as sovereign. In effect, the transfer of authority from God to man is ascribed to Providential direction of the natural order (though without a supernatural act of intervention), “while to citizens as a whole is ascribed only the designation of the person.”²¹

The third solution, the “translation theory,” posits a kind of social contract. In this theory, authority rests, in origin and by natural law, with the citizens as a self-organizing political body. The concentration of authority in the hands of an individual or a group is dependent on “formal or informal acceptance by the citizens originally forming the body politic.” Consequently, “constitution-making authority rests in the people, in the body politic itself, and this by natural law,” and all constitutions as we find them in history exist by force of human law.²²

This last theory was elaborately developed in the period of what is usually called Late Scholasticism.²³ It found its most perfectly elaborated form in the works of Francis Suarez and before the French Revolution it was accepted by nearly all Catholic scholars. In the nineteenth century, however, in reaction to contemporary democratic and revolutionary ideologies, a number of Catholic writers abandoned the translation theory, with its form of social contract, in favor of the designation theory. In the twentieth century, Catholic opinion again seems to favor the translation theory.

Now where does Maistre’s theory fit into this spectrum of opinion on the problem of the legitimate origin of political power in the concrete case? It is obvious that he is at the opposite pole from the translation theory. Rommen judges Maistre’s theory to be an “extreme type” of the designation theory in which history, that is the providential direction of human affairs, designates the ruler

¹⁸ Rommen, *op. cit.*, 430-433

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 431.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 435.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 443.

²² *Ibid.*, 432, 445.

²³ See Rommen’s excellent discussion of the historical circumstances of the controversy. *Ibid.*, 451-476.

valid in morality and law.²⁴ But perhaps one should go further and label Maistre's thesis of the generative principle a version of the mystical divine right of kings theory. Rommen, referring to the latter theory, points out that "it is significant that the few Catholic representatives of that theory, either omit the rational, clear, traditional concept of natural law, ... or indulge in a kind of irrational natural law of partly naturalistic origin ..."²⁵

In fact, the most significant characteristic of Maistre's political thought in comparison with traditional Catholic thought is the absence of a "rational, clear, traditional concept of natural law." One would suppose that Joseph de Maistre must have been aware of the traditional concept of natural law from his education and his wide reading. In an early unpublished piece on Freemasonry he utilized a natural law argument to justify the Masonic oath of secrecy.²⁶ But it is a remarkable fact that in his mature writings the phrase and the concept are scarcely to be found. There are a couple of passing references in which the phrase occurs but nowhere is the idea given much scope.

There is one passage, for example, in which Maistre refers to natural law as an argument in support of his contention that a law, as opposed to an ordinance "presupposes a higher will which enforces obedience."²⁷ Natural law, decreed and enforced by a Divine Legislator, is seen as an ultimate sanction for civil law. The emphasis is consonant with Maistre's generic definition of law as "the will of a legislator, manifest to his subjects to be the rule of their conduct."²⁸

Maistre's general concept of law as well as his almost exclusive reference to natural law as a divine sanction for human law is in sharp contrast to the traditional Catholic teaching where emanation from a higher will is only one aspect of law and, in fact, is usually subordinated or joined to other considerations. Thomas Aquinas, for example, defined law as "nothing else than an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by him who has the care of the community."²⁹ Note that there are two ideas here that were missing from Maistre's definition—law as a rule of reason and law as directed to the common good.

Aquinas makes the force and justice of human law depend on the extent of the law "being right, according to the rule of reason."³⁰ More recently, Maritain, in the same tradition, argues that natural law itself is law only because it manifests an order of reason—that is of Divine Reason.³¹ The consequences of Maistre's omission of the element of reason in his approach to law is clearly evident in the following passage from the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 432.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 435.

²⁶ J. de Maistre, *La Franc-Maçonnerie: mémoire au duc de Brunswick*, publié avec une introduction par Emile Dermenghem (Paris, 1925), 123.

²⁷ *On God and Society*, 5.

²⁸ *Oeuvres, les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, V, 104.

²⁹ *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 90, a. 4.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, I-II, Q. 95, a. 2.

³¹ Maritain, *op. cit.*, 96.

If the law of the country prescribes the death penalty for all thefts by servants, every servant knows that if he steals from his master, he exposes himself to death. That other much more important crimes are neither perceived nor punished is another question; but for him, he has no right to complain. He is guilty according to the law, he is judged according to the law, he is put to death according to the law; one has done him no wrong.³²

The concept of the common good, as Rommen points out, is “the really central idea of Catholic political philosophy.”³³ Law must be directed to the common good; so too, the wielding of political authority must be considered as “essentially of service character to the common good and to persons.”³⁴ Or as Maritain has expressed the same point, “the people are not for the State, the State is for the people.”³⁵

In contrast, Joseph de Maistre rarely alludes to the question of the end or purpose of political authority and where he does his answers say nothing about the common good. The one passage in which he takes up the question directly suggests that he regarded political authority as an end in itself:

It is often asked if the king is made for the people, or the latter for the first? This question supposes, it seems to me, very little reflection. The two propositions are false, taken separately, and true, taken together. The people are made for the sovereign, the sovereign is made for the people, and both are made that there may be a sovereignty.³⁶

In fact, it was Maistre’s treatment of the question of sovereignty, and in particular, his insistence that “every kind of sovereignty is absolute by its nature”³⁷ that earned him a reputation as an apologist for despotism. Although there are qualifications that may be made,³⁸ it is true that he put great stress on the absolute nature of sovereignty. In his *Etude sur la souveraineté*, he states that an analysis of every known form of government leads to the conclusion that “in whatever way sovereignty is defined and wherever it is placed, it is one, inviolable, and absolute.”³⁹ He quotes Rousseau with approval to the effect that:

³² *Oeuvres*, IV, 188. Rommen has noted that the history of natural law shows “that the idea of natural law flourishes when law is defined as the rule of reason and for reason and that it recedes into the background when law is defined as will.” *Op. cit.*, 166.

³³ *Ibid.*, 433-434.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, 26.

³⁶ *Oeuvres, Du Pape*, II, 168-169.

³⁷ *Oeuvres, Etudes sur la souveraineté*, I, 417

³⁸ Lebrun, *op. cit.*, 51-55.

³⁹ *Oeuvres*, I, 418.

The sovereign authority can no more modify than it can alienate itself *to limit it is to destroy it*. It is absurd and contradictory that the sovereign recognize a superior.⁴⁰

And he considers that “the assault against sovereignty is undoubtedly one of the greatest crimes that can be committed, none having more terrible consequences.”⁴¹

There are a number of problems when one tries to compare Maistre’s treatment of the nature of sovereignty with the traditional Catholic teaching on the question. It is true, as Rommen says, that the whole tradition of Catholic thought from Aquinas to Leo XIII has upheld “the concept of a power against which there is no appeal and which is therefore supreme in the hierarchy of temporal powers.”⁴² But as Rommen also points out, “the traditional definition of the temporal power says that it is supreme *in suo ordine*.”⁴³ It is supreme only in its own order, in regard to certain matter and a certain content; natural and divine law, the spheres of the individual, the family and other groups, are all recognized as genuine limits on the power of government.

Now Joseph de Maistre never explicitly denied the traditional teaching that political authority remains subject to natural and divine law. But the fact that he used the term “sovereignty” and that he followed modern authors such as Rousseau in defining the nature of sovereignty is suggestive and significant. As Maritain has demonstrated, the term “sovereignty,” a modern invention dating from Bodin and developed by writers like Hobbes concurrently with the practice of absolutism, came to imply “not only actual possession and right to supreme power, but a right which *is natural and inalienable*, to a supreme power which *is separate from and above* its subjects.”⁴⁴ Neither the word or the concept was used by Thomas Aquinas. The terms he used, *principatus* and *suprema potestas*, though often translated as “sovereignty,” meant simply “highest ruling authority” and are not really equivalent to the modern meaning of the word sovereignty. In fact, there seems to be a basic incompatibility between the modern concept of sovereignty and Catholic political philosophy. As a recent historian of natural law, A. P. d’Entrèves, has pointed out, the development of the modern notion of sovereignty was one of the things that undermined natural law thinking. He argues that:

Natural law is not properly law if sovereignty is the essential condition of legal existence. It is not possible to conceive a law of nature if command is the essence of law.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The italicized portion of the quotation Maistre acknowledges to be taken from Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Bk. III, Ch. XVI. In fact the entire passage is from this source.

⁴¹ *Oeuvres, Considérations sur la France*, I, 11.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, 397.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, 15.

⁴⁵ A. P. d’Entrèves, *Natural Law, An Historical Survey* (New York, 1965),

In this context, Joseph de Maistre's neglect of natural law concepts is doubly significant.

The demonstration could be continued, but it should be clear by this point that a careful examination of the content of Joseph de Maistre's political thought leads to the conclusion that though he may have been a sincere Catholic, the orthodoxy of his theories is not to be assumed. There is certainly no justification for crediting him, as one commentator has done, with having given "a full and complete Catholic answer" to the Revolution and its philosophy.⁴⁶

But perhaps it may be possible to contribute more to a sounder appreciation of Maistre's place in intellectual history by proceeding from the analysis of the content of his thought to a consideration of the circumstances and dynamics of his intellectual development. It may be helpful to speculate as to how and to what extent his theories served the needs of his personality and social position.

Count Joseph de Maistre was born in 1753 in the Alpine city of Chambéry in what is today the French province of Savoy.⁴⁷ In those days, however, the province, though French in language and culture, was part of the Italian kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. Maistre's father had become a second president of the Senate of Savoy, a judicial body similar to a French parliament, and had been ennobled for his considerable contribution to the codification of the laws of the realm. It is interesting to note the recent origin of the family's nobility. Maistre's paternal grandfather had been a cloth merchant in Nice.⁴⁸

Joseph was expected to follow his father in the legal profession and he was, in his own words, "delivered early to serious and thorny studies."⁴⁹ His well-educated mother and his maternal grandfather, who was also a magistrate of the Senate, both played important roles in his early education. After the completion of his legal training in Turin, Maistre returned to Chambéry in 1772 and entered the magistrature.

For almost twenty years he continued his legal career in this provincial town, attaining the rank of Senator by the eve of the Revolution. However, his professional work was far from exhausting his time and energy. He remained deeply interested in his studies and devoted long hours to the acquisition of languages and to extensive reading in both classical and contemporary authors – including the works of the Enlightenment. He would eventually become a bitter opponent of the philosophes and their ideas, but there is more to his relationship to them than simple rejection. He studied their writings and never doubted their importance. One suspects that Maistre spent many more hours pondering

⁴⁶ B. Menzer, *Catholic Political Thought, 1789-1848* (London, 1952), 30.

⁴⁷ On Maistre's early life to 1797, the most comprehensive treatment will be found in F. Descostes, *Joseph de Maistre avant la Révolution* (2 vols., Paris, 1893), and *Joseph de Maistre pendant la Révolution* (Tours, 1895), C: J. Gignoux, *Joseph de Maistre* (Paris, 1963) is a recent and satisfactory single volume biography.

⁴⁸ A. Donnadiu, *Les Origines Languedociennes de Joseph de Maistre* (Chambéry, s.d.[1949]).

⁴⁹ Letter to the Chevalier de Rossi, May 1808, *Œuvres*, XI, 109.

Rousseau than St. Thomas.⁵⁰ Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Hume, Locke, Leibnitz and company were to be cited more frequently in his works than any “Catholic” authority.

Maistre’s attraction to the dominant ideas of the time shows up in a number of ways. In 1777, in a *Discours sur la Vertu* delivered before the Senate of Savoy, we find him describing the origin of political society in these Rousseauistic terms:

Picture for yourself the birth of society. See those men able to do whatever they wish, gathered in a crowd around the sacred altars of the country which has just been born. They all voluntarily abdicate a portion of their liberty; they all consent to submit their particular wills to the sceptres of the general will.⁵¹

The mature Maistre repudiated the notion of a social contract – but as we have already seen, he continued to follow Rousseau on the nature of sovereignty. It is curious to note other affinities between Maistre and Rousseau. Maistre shared Rousseau’s Romantic reaction to the dry rationalism of the Enlightenment. Both thought sentiment and feeling important guides to truth, both were concerned with the emotional ties between the individual and the community, both would have made patriotism a kind of religion.

There is a theory that any man fights most intensely what he fears and represses in himself. If we apply this idea to Maistre’s relationship to the philosophes, perhaps we could say that the very bitterness of his attack on them is a measure of the attraction he felt for their ideas. One can find a striking example of this ambivalence in Maistre’s treatment of Voltaire in the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. He acknowledges that Voltaire possesses a fine talent, that he is charming and attractive – but, he continues, “let us be under no illusion; if a man runs his eye over his book-shelves and feels attracted to the *Works of Ferney*, God does not love him.”⁵² And he concludes a long diatribe on the faults of Voltaire’s writings with these revealing remarks:

How can I express the feelings he arouses in me? When I see what he was capable of doing, and what he in fact did, his inimitable talents inspire nothing less in me than a kind of sacred rage, which has no name. Divided between admiration and horror, I sometimes feel I would like to have a statue erected to him.. by the hand of the common hangman.⁵³

The all-pervading influence of the *Esprit révolutionnaire*, as Maistre called it, was something he was quite aware of. We find him writing to Balanche (about

⁵⁰ Some students of Maistre have reached the conclusion that he lacked basic knowledge of traditional Catholic philosophy. See M. Huber, *Die Staatsphilosophie von Joseph de Maistre im Lichte des Thomismus* (Basel, 1958) 93, and P. Vulliaud, *Joseph de Maistre franc-maçon* (Paris, 1926), 93.

⁵¹ Cited in F. Descostes, *Joseph de Maistre avant la Révolution*, II, 44.

⁵² *Oeuvres*. IV, 208.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, IV, 210.

1818) and remarking that:

... we are all in its grasp. Undoubtedly, some are affected more, some less, but there are very few minds which its influence has not reached in some way or another. As for the one who is preaching to you, I often ask myself if I'm not held too.⁵⁴

In another letter there is this revealing acknowledgement: "You won't believe [...] how I fear my century."⁵⁵ In short, Maistre's reaction to the philosophes was a complicated emotional affair.

An analogous relationship between Maistre and his opponents is also apparent in his response to Protestantism. After the philosophes, his most vigorous approbation was reserved for these innovators whom he condemned as the enemies of obedience and sovereignty.⁵⁶ Yet there are striking similarities between Maistre's theology and that of the sixteenth century reformers. We may note in both Luther and Maistre, a profound sense of the majesty and sovereignty of God and great stress on the consequences of original sin. With Maistre, as with the reformers, there was an extreme emphasis on divine activity at the expense of human initiative.

Robert Triomphe, who recently published a previously unedited letter in which Maistre developed a long condemnation of Herder, notes that Maistre and Herder held similar philosophies of history.⁵⁷ Both were hostile to the abstractions of the proud philosophy of the Enlightenment, both spoke in terms of an organic nation and a national soul, and both tended toward a form of pantheism in their identification of God and history. Triomphe suggests that Maistre could not afford to admit the resemblance of his own theories to contemporary German thought, he had to denounce Herder – "if he had admitted the resemblance, he would have been left with no one to hate but himself"⁵⁸

Maistre's attraction to contemporary fashion is also evident in his long association with Freemasonry. From 1774 until after the outbreak of the French Revolution he belonged to lodges in Chambéry and was in contact with Scottish Rite Masons in Lyon. Through the Lyon group he became acquainted with "illuminism" and "Martinism," rather esoteric and mystical doctrines which Maistre himself later described as "a mélange of Platonism, Origenism and hermetic philosophy on a Christian base."⁵⁹ Though Maistre gave up his Masonic

⁵⁴ Cited in D. Bagge, *Les Idées politiques en France sous la Restauration* (Paris, 1952), 48, n° 4.

⁵⁵ Letter to the Comte de Vallaise, June 30, 1814, cited in A. Blanc, *Correspondance diplomatique de Joseph de Maistre* (2 vols. Paris, 1830), I, 375.

⁵⁶ See Maistre's *Réflexions sur le protestantisme dans ses rapports avec la souveraineté*, *Oeuvres*, VIII, 63-97.

⁵⁷ R. Triomphe, "Joseph de Maistre et Herder, documents inédits," *Revue de Littérature Comparée* (XXVIII, 1954), 322-329.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁵⁹ *Oeuvres, Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, V, 248.

membership about 1790, he retained his interest and he continued to collect and study illuminist literature.

Maistre's association with Masonry was not really incompatible with his Catholicism. Despite papal condemnation, these eighteenth century clubs were often frequented by priests and bishops as well as Catholic noblemen. And it may be suggested that he was probably attracted to Masonry and the illuminist ideas current in certain Masonic circles precisely because of the opposition to rationalism and irreligion that he found there.⁶⁰ At one point, in a memoir addressed to the Grand-Master of the Scottish Rite Freemasons of the Strict Observance, he proposed that one of the goals of Masonry should be the reunion of the Christian churches.⁶¹ In short, though Maistre's fascination with illuminist notions is evidence of a peculiar intellectual taste – a *Wundersucht*, as one German commentator called it⁶² – and though he may have been naive and even injudicious in his fraternization with these esoteric groups, it would seem that these Masonic associations are not of great importance as a source of his ideas.

And if the young Maistre was a man of his century with his interest in the philosophes and Masonry, other associations demonstrate his ties to older patterns. In these same pre-revolutionary years he belonged to a Jesuit directed organization which had as its purpose periodic nine-day spiritual retreats for its members. He was also a member of the Pénitents Noirs, a local religious confraternity whose members took upon themselves various acts of charity including such things as spending the night before execution with condemned criminals.

The coming of the French Revolution, or more precisely, the invasion of Savoy by a French revolutionary army in September of 1792, completely disrupted Joseph de Maistre's life. He fled from Chambéry, first to Aosta in northern Italy and then to Switzerland where he remained until 1797. By 1799 he had been appointed chief magistrate of the island of Sardinia, but in 1802 his king sent him as an ambassador to St. Petersburg where he was to remain until 1817. It was not possible for his wife and daughters to join him until the close of the Napoleonic wars in 1814. In effect, the revolution had taken everything from Maistre – his native city, which remained in French hands until 1815, his property, which was confiscated by the revolutionary regime in Savoy, his job, and even his family. He had, then, compelling personal reasons for reacting strongly and it may be fruitful to consider him as a representative of and a spokesman for a traditional society and a traditional social order bowled over – by the forces of change.

⁶⁰ In 1793 Maistre defended his Masonic activity in these terms: “Il est aussi surprenant qu’extraordinaire que, dans le moment où le scepticisme me paraît avoir éteint dans tout l’Europe les vérités religieuses, il s’élève de tout côté des sociétés que n’ont d’autre but et d’autre occupation que l’étude de la Religion.” Letter to Baron Vignet des Etoles, cited in F. Vermale, *La Franc-Maçonnerie savoisiennne à l’Epoque révolutionnaire d’après ses Registres secrets* (Paris, 1912), 455.

⁶¹ *La Franc-Maçonnerie; mémoire au duc de Brunswick*, 100-104.

⁶² J. P. Rohden, *Joseph de Maistre als politischer Theoretiker* (Munich, 1929), 108.

Karl Mannheim, a pioneer in what is called the “sociology of knowledge,” has shown how the social interests of a given group sensitizes the members of that group to particular aspects of social and political life.⁶³ He finds it quite significant, for example, that conservatism as it developed in reaction to the challenge of the French Revolution, stressed the irrational, unorganized and incalculable factors in the life of the state. He argues that “the *je ne sais quoi* element in politics, which can be acquired only through long experience, and which reveals itself as a rule only to those who for many generations have shared in political leadership, is intended to justify government by an aristocratic class.”⁶⁴ For the same reason the conservative outlook stresses the folly of “construction according to calculated form” and the wisdom of “allowing things to grow.”⁶⁵

It is no trick at all to fit some of the major elements of Maistre’s political thought into this sort of interpretative framework. He outdid Burke in ridiculing the French assemblies for attempting to fabricate *a priori* constitutions, and he made an axiom of the theme of slow natural growth. He thought that a line from Horace, “*Crescit occulto velut arbor aevo*” (It grows imperceptibly through the centuries, like a tree), was the “motto of all great institutions.”⁶⁶

In recent years, sociologists, economists and political scientists, intrigued by the problems involved in the rapid modernization of traditional societies in the twentieth century, have evolved some interesting insights that suggest other ways of approaching Maistre’s thought. A number of these scholars, each working from the point of view of his own discipline, are concluding that traditional societies and their elites are characterized by distinctive value structures, belief systems and personality types. F. W. Riggs, for example, contrasts Agraria, a model of a traditional agrarian society, with Industria, the ideal type of a modern society.⁶⁷ Many of the things that he says about Agraria’s values and philosophy seem to fit Maistre quite nicely. According to Riggs, Agrarian norms are predominantly “deferential,” its values “communally oriented,” its ethics “particularistic.” “Every superior Agrarian,” Riggs continues, “knows that people are different, that some are better than others, and that what is right for one would clearly be wrong for another.”⁶⁸ Compare with Maistre’s famous jibe at the French Constitution of 1795:

Like its predecessors, [it] is made for *man*. Now there is no such thing as *man* in the world. I have seen in my lifetime Frenchmen, Italians, Russians and so on. Thanks to Montesquieu I even know that *one can be Persian*. But as for *man*, I declare that I have never in my life met him;

⁶³ *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology* (New York, 1953), 107.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *On God and Society*, 33

⁶⁷ “Agraria and Industria; toward a Typology of Comparative Administration,” in J. Sittin (Editor), *Toward the Comparative Study of Public Administration* (Bloomington, Ind., 1957).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

if he exists, he exists unknown to me.⁶⁹

Riggs notes that “for the Agrarian, the individual is an abstraction,” and that Agrarians consider it “inappropriate to value individuals sundered from their context.”⁷⁰ Compare with Maistre’s strictures against individualism and his organic concept of the nation. To go from the particular to the general, Riggs finds that the “philosophy of Agraria’s ‘great tradition’ is replete with profound speculation about the origin and destiny of man, from whence he comes and whither he goes, whether he is basically ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ whether he possesses a ‘free will’ or is subject to ‘predestination.’ Political ideology ... often presupposes a verdict on final goals.”⁷¹ Much of Maistre’s political speculation follows this pattern remarkably well.

E. E. Hagen, a scholar who has come to stress psychological factors in the process of social change, believes that “authoritarian” personalities tend to predominate in traditional societies (as opposed to more open or “innovational” types in modern societies).⁷² One of the characteristics of an “authoritarian” personality is that such a person tends to see the world as disorderly, arbitrary, unmanageable and threatening. And the individual who finds the world a threatening place tends to find his satisfaction in striking back rather than in trying to manipulate or understand his environment. He has a need for aggression which may be manifested in a tendency toward physically or verbally belligerent behaviour and a preoccupation with violence.⁷³ One thinks of Maistre’s bitter diatribes against the Enlightenment and the Revolution and his famous meditations on war and violence.⁷⁴ Hagen also hypothesizes that the question of why pain exists must haunt “authoritarian” individuals in especially high degree. A religious or Providential interpretation of events can provide a comforting answer to such a person by teaching “him to bow humbly before these spiritual powers in order that they may bless his life, and to enable him to prove by enduring the pain that he is worthy of their favor.”⁷⁵ This Providential view may be self-reinforcing because, as Hagen puts it, “having solved the problem of pain by this cognition of the nature of the world, the members of traditional society cannot conceive of the world as subject to management by their initiative and intelligence, for that conception, by denying that arbitrary forces rule the world, would destroy the justification for pain.”⁷⁶ Perhaps this insight could provide some explanation of why Maistre was so insistent in denying men the power to create political constitutions, or why he thought it important to produce a two

⁶⁹ *Oeuvres, Considérations sur la France*, I, 102.

⁷⁰ Riggs, *op. cit.*, 63.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷² *On the Theory of Social Change* (Homewood, III, 1962). See also T. W. Adorno and others, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950).

⁷³ Hagen, *op. cit.*, 99-107.

⁷⁴ *Oeuvres, Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, V., 2-26.

⁷⁵ Hagen, *op. cit.*, 150

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 151

volume theodicy.⁷⁷

Another way in which the need for aggression may operate, if it is interiorized, is in the production of guilt feelings. Joseph de Maistre seems to have been a very honest and upright man and yet there is some quite convincing evidence that he was deeply troubled by feelings of guilt. The Count of *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (Maistre himself, seeking to demonstrate that most complaints against Providence about the misfortunes of the innocent are unfounded, develops his argument this way:

So where are the innocent? Where are the just? ... Let us begin by examining the evil in ourselves... for it is impossible to know the number of our transgressions and it is no less impossible to know just how such and such an act has hurt the general order and opposed the plans of the Eternal Legislator.... Where are the limits of responsibility? I'm not afraid to confess to you that never have I meditated on this dreadful subject without being tempted to throw myself to the ground like a culprit begging forgiveness, without accepting in advance all the misfortunes which may befall me as an easy compensation for the immense debt which I have contracted to eternal justice.⁷⁸

Some of the recent work on the functioning of "belief systems" may also be suggestive here. Rokeach has conducted experiments which show, among other things, how a "closed" belief system can act as a "tightly woven network of cognitive defenses against anxiety."⁷⁹ He thinks that "individuals may become disposed to accept or to form closed systems of thinking and believing in proportion to the degree which they are made to feel alone, isolated and helpless in the world in which they live and thus anxious of what the future holds in store for them"⁸⁰ Perhaps one might speculate about the extent to which Maistre's Catholicism served him as a defense system against what he felt to be the dangers of the Revolution. This is not to question the subjective sincerity of his faith. But it is interesting to recall the portrait of his religious physiognomy penned by one of his Russian friends:

Answering to all the exigencies of his reason, satisfying to all the needs of his genius, the Catholic system was always for him in a state of living demonstration; and never, perhaps, has the power of Catholicism known a greater or more absolute exercise. The faith had become so much the very nature of his mind that outside it he could consciously admit only ignorance, limited intelligence, bad faith or mysterious chastisement. In

⁷⁷ Writing of his *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*: "Ce livre est tout ce que j'ai fait, et tout ce que je suis. . . c'est mon grand oeuvre." Letter to G. M. de Place, July 9, 1818, cited in C. Latreille, "Lettres de Joseph de Maistre à G. M. de Place," *Revue bleue*, L (1912), 263.

⁷⁸ *Oeuvres*, IV, 185.

⁷⁹ M. Rokeach, *The Open and the Closed Mind* (New York, 1960), 69.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

him, the idea ruled all and subdued his heart, which was more honest and righteous than naturally pious.⁸¹

We are suggesting that there is some warrant for regarding Joseph de Maistre as a representative and apologist of a traditional society overwhelmed by massive change. Yet his role is ambiguous here too. Not only was he “infected” by the ideology of the forces of change, as we’ve seen, but in addition the role of defender of traditional structures and values is always a difficult one. Much of the strength of traditional society lies in the fact that its structure and values are unquestioned – indeed unquestionable. Conservatives don’t really want to talk. To theorize is to admit the existence of a problem and to give away half the battle right away to the liberal side. As Hagen put it, such study appears a “little queer” to the traditional elite.⁸² We may note that Joseph de Maistre was always regarded as “liberal” and suspect by the court in Turin. He eventually became aware of the suspicion with which he was regarded but this knowledge did not prompt him to renounce his monarchist beliefs or his loyalty to the House of Savoy. Could it be that he stressed the prerogatives of monarchs and persisted in an almost fanatical loyalty to his own king precisely because he felt tempted by doubts about monarchical authority and felt rejected by his own court?

But the suspicion with which he is regarded by his own party is only one of the difficulties facing the conservative theorist. There are also problems arising from his essentially defensive posture. It is only when the status quo is under heavy attack that the need to justify it becomes imperative. As Mannheim points out, “goaded on by opposing theories, conservative mentality discovers its *idea* only *ex post facto*.”⁸³ In Maistre’s case, his first serious defense of the *ancien régime* was written after it had been swept away by the Revolution. He was thus from the beginning, strictly speaking, a reactionary. His task became, not a mere defense of the status quo, but the creation of a counter-utopia.

Moreover, as Mannheim again pointed out, “the peculiar characteristic of intellectual development seems to lie precisely in the fact that the most recent antagonist dictates the tempo and the form of the battle.”⁸⁴ Maistre had to take up the questions that the Enlightenment and the Revolution had raised to crucial importance – and to a considerable extent, he was impelled to use his opponent’s methods. It is no coincidence that Maistre has often been characterized as a conservative Voltaire. Perhaps it was treating issues in a fashionable way that enabled Maistre to gain a hearing, but relevance does have its price.

The image of Joseph de Maistre that emerges from these considerations is still far from clear. A really adequate appraisal of the character and meaning of Joseph de Maistre’s reaction to the challenge and crisis of the Revolution would require a detailed biographical study. But in answer to this paper’s title, his was not a

⁸¹ Falloux, *Madame Swetchine, sa vie et ses oeuvres*, 441, cited by C. Ostrogorsky, *Joseph de Maistre and seine Lehre von der höchsten Macht and Ihren Tragern* (Helsingfors, 1932), 35

⁸² *Op. cit.*, 78.

⁸³ *Op. cit.*, 207.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

particularly Catholic reaction. Here was a man attracted to the ideology of modernization but committed to traditional structures and beliefs, torn from a comfortable position by a whirlwind of change, and struggling to understand (and hopefully to reverse) what was happening to himself and his society. Robert Triomphe may be right in suggesting that Maistre's thought should be characterized as an "ideology of rupture," that he was one of those bruised souls who, in a time of crisis, "look for an impossible unity through the mirages of irreconcilable interior worlds."⁸⁵

Perhaps Maistre's experience is simply illustrative of what often happens to an intelligent well-educated man in a period of transition. F. W. Riggs, the model builder we cited on *Agraria and Industria*, has more recently developed a model for a society in transition. He says the learned man in such a situation is often characterized by a profoundly ambivalent outlook. He is "torn between schooling and experience, between an alluring future and a glamorized past, between scientific values and historic myths- incongruously juxtaposed in the appalling yet appealing present."⁸⁶ Pulled both ways, some become traditionalists, others modernists. "Others seek among 'the ten thousand schools' the elusive synthesis that will enable them to find harmony between the clashing tendencies which war with each other in their minds."⁸⁷ Perhaps Maistre's "metaphysical and mystic passion for unity," which has been seen as the keynote of his whole philosophy,⁸⁸ should be interpreted as a response to this feeling of being torn asunder.

Whatever his nostalgia for unity, Joseph de Maistre scarcely succeeded in resolving the contradictory forces by which he was buffeted. Still, the tension and conflict in his thought is one of the things that makes him so attractive. We sense his commitment and anxiety; without his passionate involvement much of the verve and vivacity of his works might well be missing. Paradoxically, his heterodoxy may even have helped his popularity with French Catholics. According to Triomphe, many were attracted to Maistre's works because they could find there "under a false tag, the counterband ideology which their consciences would have rejected if it had been more truthfully labelled 'Protestant heresy' or 'Germanic mysticism'.⁸⁹

Whatever the reasons, a great many nineteenth century French Catholics accepted Maistre's reaction as the right response and his writings helped to perpetuate an intransigent and unrealistic opposition to everything connected with the Revolution. Maistre had labored sincerely for the welfare of both state and Church. Ironically, his influence in France has probably been detrimental to both religion and political stability.

⁸⁵ "Pascal et Joseph de Maistre," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, XXX (1961), 268.

⁸⁶ F. W. Riggs, *Administration in Developing Countries; the Theory of Prismatic Society* (Boston, 1964), 151.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ F. Paulhan, *Joseph de Maistre et sa philosophie* (Paris, 1893), 64.

⁸⁹ Triomphe, "Pascal et Joseph de Maistre," 268.