religions

MDPI

Essay

In Search of a Christian Social Order: T.S. Eliot as a Follower of Maritain

Sebastian Morello

Independent Researcher, Leighton Buzzard LU7 9SG, UK; sebastianmorello@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract: It is often said that Jacques Maritain, having disavowed his earlier right-wing political views, became a foremost enthusiast for liberalism among the Catholic cognoscenti of the mid-20th century. In this paper, I suggest that there is another reading of Maritain, one found in the thought of T.S. Eliot, whose political thought was, by his own insistence, inspired by his study of Maritain. In Eliot's reception and use of Maritain, the modern age has not put an end to the traditional Christian teaching that Jesus Christ's authority must be acknowledged not only by private individuals but by all temporal, political powers. Rather, the complexities of the modern age have brought to the fore the priority of personal holiness—and by extension, the holiness of the Christian community—in establishing a Christian social order over any causal power of legislative or executive acts by political leaders. In developing my case, I indicate that Eliot emphasises the categorically embodied character of the Christian life, and I highlight that the corollary of this observation is that Christian integralists and secular liberals may be falling into precisely the same error, namely the privileging of abstract schemas over existential spiritual and moral transformation.

Keywords: Christendom; spirituality; monasticism; grace; modernity; holiness; secularism; discipleship

Academic Editors: Fábio Py and Jacob Phillips

Received: 10 December 2024
Revised: 24 March 2025
Accepted: 4 April 2025
Published: 8 April 2025

Citation: Morello, Sebastian. 2025. In Search of a Christian Social Order: T.S. Eliot as a Follower of Maritain. *Religions* 16: 479. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040479

At the beginning of T.S. Eliot's extended essay of conservative, Christian political thought entitled "The Idea of a Christian Society"—which was collected with "Notes toward a Definition of Culture" in 1949 and published in that year, but which had been written a decade earlier—Eliot writes that he "owes a great deal" to certain authors, among whom he lists the historian Christopher Dawson, to whom I shall later return. But at the end of his short list of names, he singles out for special attention the name of Jacques Maritain, to whom he says he is "deeply indebted".[1]

The key political point which I wish to highlight in the thought of Eliot—whom I treat here predominantly as an essayist rather than a poet—is his conservative notion of organicism as a political and social principle, the importance of which for any 'attractive' conception of evangelisation will hopefully soon become apparent, and at the service of which we have good reason to think that Eliot placed his study of Maritain.

I do not wish to suggest that Eliot offers *the* authoritative interpretation of Maritain, and it is clear that the French philosopher's political thought dramatically developed over the course of his career. My purpose is only to show that a certain reception of Maritain in one thinker, namely Eliot, led to both a conservative and an organicist Christian political account which, perhaps unpredictably, emphasised the need for a monastic renewal and privileged holiness—or, to use Maritain's preferred term, *sanctity*—as causally powerful in the establishment of a Christian polity. Given that the present essay is 'synthetic' in that

it brings together different thinkers to convey Eliot's case for the primacy of holiness as politically relevant, I selected *The Idea of a Christian Society* as that which is most apposite to the argument rather than perusing his entire corpus or that of Maritain, Dawson, or anyone else mentioned herein. I also do not dwell below on many secondary sources from the literature, for my purposes are not chiefly literary or historical, but philosophical and theological.

By political 'organicism', referred to above, I mean the notion that civil society is natural to man; is *logically* antecedent to the State, even if not in time; and does not so much emerge from the rational deliberations and orchestrations of man, but tacitly through family life, necessity, custom, pieties, obligations, negotiations, and thousands of other human arrangements that are quite beyond the regulation of a centralised political power.[2]

I ought to note as a final preliminary point that partially driving the development of my case is a subterranean desire to address a recurrent trope that belongs to a particular Catholic traditionalist critique of Maritain—and here, I have in mind academics like the historian John Rao and the philosopher Thomas Pink—namely that Maritain gravely misunderstood the trajectory both of liberalism and the modern state which formed under it, and that he erroneously argued for the compatibility of Christianity with such a modern social settlement. It is claimed by such critics that Maritain utterly disavowed his original political commitments, which he had developed whilst a member of France's extreme right-wing *Action Française* movement after that movement received a papal condemnation in 1926 from Pope Pius XI. In turn, Maritain's critics say that the budding French philosopher, rather than following someone like Cardinal Billot, who attempted to develop a defence of the movement in service of his hope that it would be rehabilitated, rejected conservative arguments altogether. Thereafter, so his critics say, he not only accepted the assumptions of post-war liberalism and its rights-based dogmas that emerged in response to the darkest excesses of wartime utilitarianism, but he began to develop an inordinately optimistic conception of human nature and the natural capacity of the human intellect to possess truth, which he supposedly thought marked an anthropology that would dovetail nicely with post-war liberalism.

For Maritain, then, it is said, the upshot of this optimistic anthropology was the postulation that if man were left unaided and without coercion towards revealed truth, and hence found himself in a state of full moral emancipation with regard to religion, with the freedom to self-author into whatever he wished, his own ordinary appetite for the truth would impel him simply to gravitate naturally towards the truth of the natural law, which is itself fulfilled only in the truth of divine revelation. Thus, it is said that Maritain came to believe that the liberal separation of Church and State, or religion and politics, ought not to alarm his coreligionists, for most of society in such a situation would become devoutly Catholic in the end anyway.[3]

Hence, it is ultimately claimed by Maritain's critics that he entirely misunderstood the nature of the modern liberal State which, in reality, is a State that fetters man increasingly by its own ideological dogmas, bound as it is to an erroneous historiography of interminable 'progress' through what turns out to be evermore political centralisation, which by virtue of the liberal atomisation of the individual cannot be resisted.[4] And he also purportedly advanced an anthropology at odds with the pessimistic, Augustinian anthropology which the Church had traditionally enshrined as its own. The last half century has, such critics say, completely disproven Maritain's view of modernity as an epoch compatible with Christianity, or in any way fostering of its mission.

This is, in short, the story that is told about Maritain by many of his traditionalist detractors. And there are good reasons to think it is true. After all, Maritain said the following in his 1951 work entitled *Man and the State*:

> "The modern age is not a sacral, but a secular age. The order of terrestrial civilisation and of temporal society has gained complete differentiation and full autonomy, which is something normal in itself, required by the Gospels' very distinction between God's and Caesar's domains".[5]

From this passage, it seems like Maritain is saying that secularism does not contradict but fulfils an imperative found in the Gospel itself. As the aforementioned philosopher Thomas Pink comments, for Maritain, "the state is no longer confessional and . . . citizenship is no longer linked to a particular religion. In Maritain's view, this modern secularity was a positive development".[6]

My point here is not principally to argue for or against the veracity of this interpretation of Maritain as a man somehow duped by the seductions of liberalism, who in turn transformed from a far-right integralist to a naïve cheerleader of late-modern progressivism and secularism. But I do want to suggest that there may be another reading of Maritain, one that sees him not so much approving of the so-called 'secular age'—as Maritain called it—even if he saw its potential advantages, but rather as a man diagnosing things to be as they were. Maritain wrote the following in the very same work, *Man and the State*:

> "The supreme, immutable principle of the superiority of the Kingdom of God over the earthly kingdoms can apply in other ways than in making the civil government the secular arm of the Church, in asking kings to expel heretics, or in using the rights of the spiritual sword to seize upon temporal affairs for the sake of some spiritual necessity (for instance in releasing the subjects of an apostate prince from their oath of allegiance). These things we can admire in the Middle Ages; [but] they are a dead letter in our age".[7]

Note that Maritain does not here deny, as he puts it, "the supreme, immutable principle of the superiority of the Kingdom of God over earthly kingdoms". He merely says that this principle must find a different kind of applicability in the epoch in which we have found ourselves given the near absolute secularity of the public arena in the modern age. Neither does Maritain condemn the elevation of political concerns and temporal powers into the life of the Church and their use for its requirements in past ages—on the contrary, he says this might reasonably be admired—but such a relationship between Church and State is not one he sees to be available to us in the modern age. Basically, the times have changed, and therefore, the rules have changed, and thus, so has the existent relationship between spiritual and temporal powers. As the irritating modern-day tautology goes, we are where we are.

The more interesting question then, it seems to me, is not whether the views of Maritain find themselves wanting in late modernity, but whether a different kind of applicability of the supreme principle of the superiority of the Kingdom of God—a kind of applicability for which Maritain invites us to search—found expression in the thought of some of his followers and admirers. And for my own purposes, I want to suggest that it *did* find unlikely but nonetheless real expression in the thought of T.S. Eliot.

If Eliot were a true student of Maritain, as he claims to be, and Maritain did not only accept but advance the kind of post-war liberalism, concerning which Pink and other critics make their accusations, then the following quote from Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* does not suggest that he was a very *good* student of Maritain:

> "The Liberal notion that religion was a matter of private belief and of conduct in private life, and that there is no reason why Christians should not be able to accommodate themselves to any world which treats them good-naturedly, is becoming less and less tenable".[8]

As far as a Christian perspective is concerned, this observation certainly does not smack of the optimism with regard to the emergent liberal regime that was so typical at the time when Eliot was writing, in which liberalism—not Christianity—was seen in the West as the ultimate response to the threats both of fascism and communism. Eliot continues:

> "This notion [of the tolerated privatisation of Christian belief, and the corresponding secularism and neutrality of the public arena] would seem to have become accepted gradually, as a false inference from the subdivision of English Christianity into sects, and the happy results of universal toleration. The reason why members of different communions have been able to rub along together, is that in the greater part of the ordinary business of life they have shared the same assumptions about behaviour. When they have been wrong, they have been wrong together".[9]

Here, we see Eliot's typically conservative organicism coming into play. The kind of qualified toleration that has been exercised in England since, supposedly, the fall of the Stuarts (if we are to follow the Whig account of English history that has been dominant in this country for the past few centuries), Eliot claims is not in fact a toleration that has resulted from widespread sectarianism, but rather from the intense cultural unity of the English people at the level of civil society. People, whilst at odds in doctrine and religious observance, were constantly obliged to cooperate, and despite their religious differences, they found themselves able to share in the same culture, customs, interests, and habits. This tightly woven web of obligations and pieties, however, as Eliot observes, has—whether as a *result* of the decline of Christianity or as the *cause* of such a decline—withered away and has been replaced by civil atomisation and alienation. The upshot is, Eliot goes on to explain, that the very private–public distinction altogether has eroded:

> "We have less excuse than our ancestors for un-Christian conduct, because the growth of an un-Christian society about us, its more obvious intrusion upon our lives, has been breaking down the comfortable distinction between public and private morality. The problem of leading a Christian life in a non-Christian society is now very present to us, and it is a very different problem from that of the accommodation between an Established Church and dissenters".[10]

In short, Maritain's observation that the social situation has so radically changed in the modern age that it simply does not make sense to speak of a 'Christendom' at all, apart from as something that belongs to history books, seems correct. Whether we approve of the new secular settlement or not, or recognise that it has certain advantages that perhaps are lost in a Christendom regime, makes little difference: it is what we are stuck with, and we shall have to find a way of both living and advancing the Gospel in the state of affairs with which we have been landed. Finally, Eliot summarises the predicament in which Christians find themselves in the so-called 'secular age':

> "It is not merely the problem of a minority in a society of individuals holding an alien belief. It is the problem constituted by our implication in a network of institutions from which we cannot dissociate ourselves: institutions the operation of which appears no longer neutral, but non-Christian. And as for the Christian who is not conscious of his dilemma—and he is in the majority—he is becoming more and more de-Christianised by all sorts of unconscious pressure: paganism holds all the most valuable advertising space".[11]

So, as Eliot notes, the problem Christians face is *not* one of belonging to a sect which is not the one established by law. They do not merely belong to a species of unofficial religion. Rather, Christians have found themselves alienated from their own society and

yet belonging to it, bound to institutions of that society which are often wholly at odds with their supernatural mission. (Any Christian who feels uncomfortable with, say, the amount of his or her tax money that goes to funding abortions or so-called 'transgender realignment surgeries' has a sense of the direction of things to which Eliot is alluding.) And as Eliot notes, the consequence of this situation is not that the Christian faithful are becoming, as Joseph Ratzinger put it in a now famous 1969 address, a "more spiritualized and simplified Church", but rather, they have become, in Eliot's words, "more and more de-Christianised by all sorts of unconscious pressure".

Echoing Maritain, in acknowledging that contemporary society can "neither be medieval in form, nor be modelled on the seventeenth century or any previous age", Eliot attempts to present what he deems particular at the 'secular age':

> "I confine myself . . . to the assertion . . . that a great deal of the machinery of modern life is merely a sanction for un-Christian aims, that it is not only hostile to the conscious pursuit of the Christian life in the world by the few, but to the maintenance of *any* Christian society of the world. We must abandon the notion that the Christian should be content with freedom of cultus, and with suffering no worldly disabilities on account of his faith. However bigoted the announcement may sound, the Christian can be satisfied with nothing less than a Christian organisation of society—which is not the same thing as a society consisting exclusively of devout Christians. It would be a society in which the natural end of man—virtue and well-being in community—is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end—beatitude—for those who have the eyes to see it".[12]

Eliot, an Anglo-Catholic, is, as it were, asserting the traditional doctrine on the natural and supernatural ends of baptised human nature, their distinction and their connaturality, and why Christians can only be content with a society that recognises both finalities, the possession of which is the purpose of human actualisation according to traditional Christian anthropology. Moreover, any society that fails to recognise the ends of baptised human nature will not merely neglect to aid man in the achievement of that for which he is created, but it will operate in hostility to such a pursuit of his supernatural end.

Given that capturing the political aspect of society—what may simply be called the State—even if desirable, is widely deemed not at present a realistic ambition for Christians, how are Christians to respond to the social situation in which they have found themselves? Eliot suggests that what is needed is some kind of prophetic witness of those who are especially consecrated to God, who are not so much like the holy fools so admired among Eastern Orthodox Christians, but rather ordinary citizens who live consciously and intentionally holy lives in the midst of our un-Christian society. To these people, he gives the name "the community of Christians", which he explains in the following way:

> "We need therefore what I have called 'the Community of Christians', by which I mean, not local groups and not the Church in any one of its senses, unless we call it 'the Church within the Church'. These will be the consciously and thoughtfully practicing Christians, especially those of intellectual and spiritual superiority".[13]

Now, I confess, that when I read this short passage, I could not help but think of the Gnostic or Manichean notion of a spiritual 'perfecti' who are in possession of the true religion, while 'ordinary believers' are deemed unworthy of the fulness of revelation, a view of religious knowledge to which the Church has always been opposed. Such a view, however, is not Eliot's. In fact, Eliot says that he cannot reconcile himself to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's notion of a 'clerisy', as Coleridge conveys it in his 1829 work entitled *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, because therein, Coleridge imagines

a clerical intelligentsia that possesses not only total moral authority but is in control of the entire education system of the nation. Eliot, in fact writing explicitly in response to Maritain's invitation to advance a Christian engagement with the modern age, states that he has something quite different in mind to a Christian 'perfecti' of the kind described by Coleridge:

> "In any Christian society which can be imagined for the future—in what M. Maritain calls a pluralist society—my 'Community of Christians' cannot be a body of the definite vocational outline of the 'clerisy' of Coleridge; which, viewed in a hundred years' perspective, appears to approximate to the rigidity of a caste. The Community of Christians is not an organisation, but a body of indefinite outline; composed of both clergy and laity, of the more conscious, more spiritual and intellectually developed of both. It will be their identity of belief and aspiration, their background of a common system of education and a common culture, which will enable them to influence and be influenced by each other, and collectively to form the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation".[14]

Rather than Coleridge's clerisy, then, Eliot seems to have in mind something much closer to—or at least analogous to—the traditional Christian concept of the religious orders, composed of clerics and lay brothers in the first orders, brides of Christ in the second orders, and married, unmarried, or ordained oblates or tertiaries in the third orders.[15] And in fact, it is in a later discussion of his 'Community of Christians' that Eliot states that he does not have in mind "merely the nicest, most intelligent and public-spirited of the upper middle class", and he goes on in the same passage to say the following:

> "The ordinary man would need the opportunity to know that the religious life existed, that it was given its due place, would need to recognise the profession of those who have abandoned the world, as he recognised the professions practiced in it. I cannot conceive a Christian society without religious orders, even purely contemplative orders, even enclosed orders".[16]

As Eliot re-emphasises elsewhere in the same essay, his 'Community of Christians' is civil society's "more intellectual, scholarly, and devout officers, its masters of ascetic theology and its men of wider interests". Again, in the postscript of his work, Eliot offers the following description: "the Community of Christians ought to mean those who are gathered into unity in the sacramental life of the visible Church; and this community in the life of faith ought to be producing something of a common mind about the questions of the day".

So, whereas Catholic proponents of *Action Française* and other integralist movements were still arguing in the early 20th century that a Christian society would be the effect of a Christian State, in which Christianity would be endorsed and dissent might even be punished by a coercive and officially Christian political power, Eliot is suggesting that any future Christian society—however Christian it can be in the so-called 'secular age'—will come about by the holiness of devoted Christian communities within its domain. Put differently, Eliot does not see holiness only as an *effect* of the acceptance of the Gospel in the lives of individuals and communities, but he attributes to holiness—or lives lived in a holy way—a causal power whose effect may be the rendering of society Christian again. And the Christianisation of society through the prophetic witness of such devoted Christians is essential, according to Eliot, for even if a State coercive in favour of Christianity were preferable, it is not—in the opinion both of Eliot and Maritain—a political settlement available to us in the time in which we have found ourselves.

Perhaps Eliot's view—which amounts to a practical response to the dilemma of modern Christians, based upon the causal power of religious life or something approximating

it—ought not to surprise us. After all, whilst he was not a Benedictine oblate like Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Eliot frequently visited religious communities, especially the Anglo-Catholic monastic community called the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham, where he wrote many of his most important works, including *The Rock*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and, crucially, "Burnt Norton", the first of the *Four Quartets*. Moreover, "Little Gidding", the last of the *Quartets*, is named after the community founded in 1626 by the saintly Nicholas Ferrar.

Ferrar, having lost nearly all his wealth in the New World with his failed London Virginia Company, moved his household to the abandoned village of Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire. There, they lived self-sufficiently and always had a member of the family at prayer, keeping together a strict, almost monastic horarium. Ferrar's family tended to the health and education of local children, and as often as possible, they studied the Holy Scriptures together. Soon, the Ferrar family was famous throughout the land for their piety and exemplary living of the Christian life, and many travelled from all over the country to visit the Ferrars, including King Charles I, who visited Little Gidding on three separate occasions to pray with the Ferrar family.

Eliot was deeply inspired by the story of Nicholas Ferrar and his community at Little Gidding, seeing in them an example of living a prophetic witness through something analogous to the monastic life. Reflecting on that hidden and now largely forgotten bit of England which once rang with high Anglican liturgies and was filled with flocking pilgrims, Eliot writes the following verses in his 'Little Gidding' part of the *Four Quartets*:

> You are not here to verify,
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
> Or carry report. You are here to kneel
> Where prayer has been valid.
> ('Little Gidding' I, 44–47)

This emphasis on holiness is, I want to note, a fundamentally organicist and non-ideological response to modernity. It emphasises the causal power of a lived holy life, rather than, say, the reasonableness of revealed propositions, or the reasonableness of those first principles that revealed propositions presuppose, or indeed the reasonableness of coercing in their favour or in their defence. Today, we live in an age in which causal power is inordinately attributed to ideas, which is why the liberal, who very much privileges abstract concepts, becomes highly coercive when his ideas are rejected. It is often said in conservative circles that "if you scratch a liberal, you'll find a fascist", with the suggestion being that liberals are dishonest about their liberality which, as it turns out, is actually very thin. But this charge of dishonesty is likely unfair. The intolerance of liberals towards dissent from their ideas is structural to liberalism and stems from the very high regard liberals have for abstract concepts. The liberal thinks that, given the reasonableness of his ideas, *if* they are rejected, they are rejected due to obstinacy or bloody-mindedness, and hence, punishment is a perfectly reasonable response towards someone who will not take ideas seriously—after all, for the liberal, 'progress' (whatever that means) is driven by ideas.

The Catholic integralist seems to make a similar error, inordinately attributing to his doctrine powers of persuasion that they do not have. Indeed, St Thomas Aquinas specifically claims that revealed propositions are not of themselves compelling, which is why what he calls a "sympathy" between God and any future Christian after the age of reason must be established through prevenient grace for the hearer of the Gospel to accept the content of the message. Put differently, for St Thomas, grace—or holiness—precedes faith. Or in the pithy, quintipartite formula of Aquinas, "the act of believing is an act of the

intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God" (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, 2, 9, co.).

Contra the liberal *and* the integralist, Eliot wants to elevate the Christian response to modernity out of the modern paradigm of competing ideological squabbles, and certainly, he does not want Christianity degraded to one ideological option among many in the pluralistic arena of ideological competition. And he thus elevates Christianity by focussing on an answer that, rather than ideological, is existential, lived, and real: namely the actual living of a holy life.

Towards the end of Christopher Dawson's very interesting 1935 book entitled *Religion and the Modern State* (and the date of 1935 is important for understanding what he writes), the great English Catholic historian says the following:

> "It is not possible for all men to be saints, or thinkers, or social leaders, but all can try to live as Christians and to think as Christians . . . [I]t seems as though the future of religion would depend far more than in the past on the thought and initiative of the ordinary man. In Russia today all the external organisation and activities of religion have been destroyed; in Germany some of the most prominent leaders of Catholic Action have been shot, and in England it is very possible that the future will bring compulsory secular education and a growing pressure of State-secularism in every department of life. The only thing that can stand against such forces is the spiritual vitality of the Christian community".[17]

Dawson—whom, as noted, Eliot lists alongside Maritain at the beginning of *The Idea of a Christian Society* as having influenced his thought—sees the same future for Europe in 1935 as did Eliot writing only a few years later. And Dawson anticipated Eliot in his solution to the looming difficult situation of Christians in the West; to quote Dawson again: "The only thing that can stand against such forces is the spiritual vitality of the Christian community". In other words, the holiness of Christians.

Ever since the popular author Rod Dreher brought out his remarkably successful book in 2017 entitled *The Benedict Option*, many Christian commentators have suggested that in this, our so-called 'secular age', we ought to be inspired by St Benedict and his followers who gathered in small communities and began a tradition of Christian living that was ultimately to resurrect civilisation and establish a widespread Christian social order at the end of the Great Migration period in the 10th century. I have much sympathy for both Dreher's diagnosis and his suggested solution. Eliot, however, seems to be going much further and saying that we do not merely need Christian communities *inspired* by sixth-century monasticism, but we need actual monasticism *now*, with monks living in monasteries, and ordinary people attached to those monasteries and daily striving for holiness.

And it is here that I turn back to Maritain, for in his 1940 work entitled *Scholasticism and Politics*, Maritain offers a considerably concise summary of what I have been intimating with my little exegesis on Eliot. Whether Maritain changed his views after World War II in such a way as to render vindicated the accusations of his integralist detractors is not what interests me here. What interests me is that Maritain, as early as 1940, represents a tradition of Christian political thought based not on State capture by the institutional *Ecclesia*—like that which today fills the dreams of political theologians like Adrian Vermeule and Gladden Pappin—but based upon the causal power of holiness embodied in a faithful Christian community, prophetically witnessing to the truth in an era of apostasy.

The reader will have to forgive me for selecting a slightly longer, extended excerpt, but I think it is necessary to let Maritain speak in order to benefit from the clarity of his thinking on the topic with which I have been hitherto engaging. Here is what Maritain has to say:

> "It might seem from the fact alone that Christians living under the different [secular] civilisations … are participating in the supra-temporal unity of the Church and are endeavouring to merit heaven in living their private lives as Christians, that they exercise in a sufficiently efficacious manner their office as agents of co-operation and vivification in the temporal world. But I do not think that this is so".[18]

I will momentarily interrupt Maritain here, as he seems to be saying the opposite of the case I have been trying to develop, namely that we need to take the call to Christian holiness seriously if we are going to recognise its causal power in rendering Christian the currently secular societies in which we all subsist. As Maritain says, for the "vivification of the temporal world"—to use his phrase—it is insufficient that Christians participate in the supra-temporal unity of the Church in their private lives alone. But Maritain continues:

> "It is necessary to introduce at this point a more precise notion, founded on the philosophical distinction between common causality and proper causality. I do not say that by the fact alone that they live truly Christian lives, Christians do not exert an effective action on the different civilisations to which they belong. From the fact alone that they lead truly Christian lives, they exercise an effective action on the world, even the first and primordial action which they are expected to exercise. … The first thing needed by the world is the contemplation of the saints and their love, because it *causes* the gifts of divine life and of substantial Love to abound on the earth. And if Christians really strive with all their hearts for a life of union with God, and if each Christian, in his private acts and judgments, tries to give testimony to justice, to fraternal love, and to the truth, so often betrayed by men; to resist the influences of hate, calumny, resentment and panic, the collective nervous storms to which nations are exposed in the troubled eras of their history—then centres of interior vigilance and peace will be multiplied, and their influence will modify imperceptibly but really and effectively the atmosphere in which world history is unrolled".[19]

So, Maritain points out the obvious truth that the pursuit of holiness in the private lives of Christians is their first duty as Christians; more importantly, though, such a life possesses *causal power* at the level of civil society and thus is transformative for the societies and civilisations in which those Christians live. But the recognition of such causal power in the privately lived life of grace is necessary precisely because no Christian, according to Maritain, can be satisfied with a secular or non-Christian public arena. Indeed, such a world, on account of the perennial antagonism between the world and the Church—or to use the biblical terminology, between the principality of the devil and the Kingdom of God—will ultimately mean not merely a non-Christian world, but an anti-Christian world. Hence, Maritain asserts the following in the very next passage:

> "The causality thus exercised on the social and political order, on the flow of civilisation, is a higher causality, and in the philosophical sense of the word, common. And such causality, however necessary, however primordial, does not *suffice* for the development of social life required by nature and by Providence. For their reciprocal communication of energy and movement, beings demand prompt and direct causes in proportion to their nature. Such is the causality that Christians should exert in the temporal social order … It is in this sense, that I have said above that by the fact alone that they participate in the supra-temporal unity of the Church and endeavour to merit heaven in living their private lives in a Christian manner, the Christians involved in the different [secular] civilisations

> do not yet exercise in a *sufficiently* effective manner their office as agents of co-operation and vivification".[20]

So, there we have it. Christians striving for holiness in their private lives are indeed fulfilling their first duty as Christians, and the life of holiness really does possess causal power to be effective in the transformation of the temporal, social order. But human nature is a political nature, and the temporal power that orders human nature publicly will continue to go awry if the pursuit of holiness remains solely private. Thus, as Jesus Christ says in Matthew's Gospel, not only individuals but the nations themselves must become disciples (Matt. 28:19).

The question, then, is *how* can Christians hope to capture the temporal arena? *How* might contemporary Christians become the foundation-layers of a future Christendom? Historically, Christian missionaries simply converted kings, and then their subjects—after more or less resistance—all became Christian also. St Ethelbert, King of Kent, was baptised by St Augustine of Canterbury, and the Kentish Angles became Christian. St Remi baptised Clovis, and the Franks became Christian. I do not know who baptised St Vladimir, but the Rus all became Christian soon after his baptism; in fact, Vladimir announced that all those who would not be baptised would be expelled from his dominions, so that made the choice for Christianity quite straightforward for most of his subjects.

There are those among the new movement of Catholic political theologians who would like to see the return of a confident Christian establishment that can authorise the 'secular arm' of the State if and when it needs to. And as Maritain says in a quote I cited at the beginning of this paper, such "things we can admire". But as he also observes in the same sentence, "they are a dead letter in our age". And if they were a dead letter in 1951, they are a positively fossilised letter seven decades later. Nonetheless, there *are* those who would like to see a political strongman baptised and establish the integralist utopia that they think will remedy the maladies of the crumbling, late-modern anti-civilisation in which we are enmeshed. But as Psalm 146 puts it, "Do not put your trust in princes".

We can accept the *diagnosis* of the traditionalist political theologians of our time, which largely agree with those of Maritain, Eliot, and Dawson, holding that no Christian can be satisfied with anything short of a Christian social order. But what Eliot wants us to see is that to bring about such an order, we must take seriously the causal power of lives lived in union with Jesus Christ. To repeat the words I quoted above from Dawson's book *Religion and the Modern State*, "[I]t seems as though the future of religion would depend far more than in the past on the thought and initiative of the ordinary man". That is to say, not necessarily newly baptised powerholders, but the ordinary Christians who, seeing the world descend into ever intensifying madness, choose knowingly by their love of Jesus Christ to appear mad to the truly mad.

At the end of Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*, he says the following:

> "We cannot be satisfied to be Christians at our devotions and merely secular reformers all the rest of the week, for there is one question that we need to ask ourselves every day and about whatever business. The Church has perpetually to answer this question: to what purpose were we born? What is the end of Man?"[21]

Those questions, however, are ones posed not only by the Church, to which Christians hold it has in any case been given the answer in full. Rather, those questions are asked more pressingly by unredeemed man, still wandering in the darkness of the shadows cast by his first parents. Those questions will not go away, and recurrently, the frustration of side-lining them erupts into the public square with such energy that it routinely causes everyone great alarm. For Christians, the answers are out there, however, for they have been given by the Lord, and the holy witness of His friends is essential for navigating a

way out of the confusion in which late modernity has landed us. And for that, the causal power of Christian holiness, pursued and lived in the fidelity of discipleship, must be taken seriously. Desire for the shortcut of a strongman, in this light, cannot but seem like a lack of faith in the power of holiness of ordinary faithful Christians and may indeed be the true Gnostic danger of our time.

Towards the end of Alasdair MacIntyre's now classic 1981 work *After Virtue*, having analysed the civilisational crisis in which the West has found itself, which that book explores with such remarkable erudition, MacIntyre famously states that what we likely need is "a new—doubtless very different—St Benedict". What I have suggested, however, following T.S. Eliot, is that what we *really* likely need is an old—doubtless very similar—St Benedict. That is to say, we need people consecrated to God, praying and studying together, both laity and clergy, whose concern is to intensify their intimacy with God. Such a phenomenon had staggering consequences for the public arena in the 6th to the 16th centuries, and so it could from, say, the 21st to the 31st centuries. And hence, after all that, I arrive at the rather trite, Christian platitude that holiness matters.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 T. S. Eliot (1949).
2 For an extended analysis of the notion of political organicisim, see Anthony Quinton (1978), pp. 16–19.
3 It is not clear how Maritain, if indeed he did hold this view, really envisaged such a polity would come about, only that he upheld the seemingly unharmonious notions of both a Christian polity and religious pluralism, presumably because he believed that the latter could allow for the former. As the *Stamford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* puts it: "Maritain does not discuss in any detail how his model 'Christian' polity might be realised, but suggests that it is the only one that takes account of each person's spiritual worth and that recognises the importance of providing the means to foster one's growth as a person. It recognises differences of religious conscience and is, in this way, fundamentally pluralistic."https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maritain/#:~:text=Maritain%20rejected%20'modernity'%E2%80%94Cartesian,-modern'%20views%20of%20Aquinas (accessed on 3 April 2025).
4 This description is intended to convey the common characterisation of the liberal State by so-called 'post-liberals'. See, for example, Patrick J. Deneen (2018), Patrick J. Deneen.
5 Jacques Maritain (1998), Jacques Maritain.
6 Thomas Pink (2015).
7 Jacques Maritain 1998, pp. 62–63.
8 T. S. Eliot 1949.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 For a comprehensive analysis of Eliot's proposal of a 'Christian elite', see Roger Kojecky (1972).
16 T. S. Eliot 1949.
17 Christopher Dawson (1935), Christopher Dawson.
18 Jacques Maritain (1945), Jacques Maritain.
19 Ibid., p. 184. (Emphasis mine.)
20 Ibid., p. 184.
21 T. S. Eliot 1949.

References

Dawson, Christopher. 1935. *Religion and the Modern State*. London: Sheed and Ward.
Deneen, Patrick J. 2018. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eliot, T. S. 1949. *The Idea of a Christian Society in Christianity and Culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
Kojecky, Roger. 1972. *T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism*. London: Faber & Faber, pp. 156–97.
Maritain, Jacques. 1945. *Scholasticism and Politics*. London: The Centenary Press.
Maritain, Jacques. 1998. *Man and the State*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
Pink, Thomas. 2015. Jacques Maritain and the Problem of Church and State. *The Thomist* 79: 3.
Quinton, Anthony. 1978. *The Politics of Imperfection*. London: Faber and Faber.