Europe as Viewed by Joseph de Maistre

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ABSTRACT

The theorist of the Counter-Revolution, Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), developed a reflection on the fate of post-revolutionary Europe. Like his contemporary Louis de Bonald, he caught a glimpse of the continent's regeneration after the chaos of the Revolution. He believed that the reestablishment of a European balance went hand in hand with the restoration of monarchies, although he ascribed a major role to religion: Catholicism would serve as a defense against despotism and a bond of reconciliation for nations, while the papacy—also the bearer of a spiritual monarchy—would transcend Europe's political and religious unity. De Maistre's European model was thus entirely structured around papal sovereignty.

Joseph de Maistre by Karl Vogel von Vogelstein, circa 1810, Musée d'art et d'histoire de Chambéry. Source : Wikimedia Commons

For Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), the reestablishment of a European balance based on the concert of strengthened or restored monarchies was a priority for post-revolutionary regeneration. In this regard his views were close to those of his contemporary Louis de Bonald, another theorist of the Counter-Revolution. However, the role of religion as a bond of reconciliation among nations took on an unprecedented and almost mystical dimension for him. In *Du Pape* (1819), he depicted the Holy See as the historical and metaphysical origin of the continent's political unity, as well as the ark of salvation that would enable its coming realization. More than simply an early manifestation of ultramontane Catholicism, Maistre called for the birth of a fully-fledged European model structured around papal sovereignty.

Religion and Sovereignty: A Mystical Europe

For Maistre, the monarchical principle could not be reduced solely to a logical and rational legitimacy, as it proceeded from the spiritual monarchy that was the Holy See, thereby distinguishing his thought from that of Bonald. Further, the concept of papal *infallibility* was for him the essence of a spiritual *sovereignty* that structures the temporal world. Religion, the Church, and the pope merge into a single and almost supernatural entity, one that will never grow old or disappear, the only institution that is eternal and unchanging by virtue of its divine nature. Roman authority is thus ontologically superior to any human authority: the former gives rise to and consecrates the latter, providing the foundation for royal power through the ceremony of coronation, with kings obeying the pope as a result. The founding of the Throne of Saint Peter allowed Europe to become a part of history. The process included an esoteric dimension, which made the sovereign pontiff into the "great demiurge of universal civilization," and Charlemagne into a "modern trismegistos"—the latter term referring to the doctrine of hermeticism. Driven by this spiritual omnipotence, divine will expressed through papal will would guide the destiny of the continent and even the world—consider the Treaty of Tordesillas—and would possess the exceptional right to wage war, which would subsequently be a holy war, as with the Crusades.

The Papacy, An Authority of Mediation and Regulation

The papacy was not, for all that, a crushing and potentially tyrannical authority. On the contrary, Maistre believed that it was the only defense against despotism. As the supreme depository of rules of governance, it could unmake the monarchs that violated these rules, and avoid the revolutionary risk that made disobedience by the people inevitable, even in passive form. Against humans, who are naturally corrupted by their passions, it opposed a moral constraint: kings potentially tempted by arbitrary power would be opposed by a moral and political constraint. Moreover, as a conveyor of Christian perfectibility, Rome had allowed the West to become civilized over the centuries. The thinker attributed an emancipatory virtue to Christianity, one that freed humanity of servitude, and raised women up from their subordinate rank to ennoble men in return. "Popes," Maistre asserted, were ultimately "the teachers, tutors, saviors, and true spirits constituting Europe." They shaped it by teaching its leaders how to lead, and by offering reminders of general political principles and their manner of application, to which all specific applications must conform. They are not simply judges, but the ultimate representatives of mediation; it would therefore be desirable for them to (once again) become the arbiters of diplomacy, a role they played formerly and indirectly through the presence of papal legates during the signing of major treaties. At a time when congresses were being held to determine the fate of states, Maistre called for an active resumption of this magisterium, which could bring peace rather than war, reconciliation rather than conflict. While the passages in his writing on the inevitable nature of violence have often drawn attention—and have been interpreted as an acceptance and even apology for it—for him the ideal to be pursued was actually perpetual peace, after two decades of conflict that marked a regression and even an eclipse of international law.

European Unity and its Coming Realization

The revolutionary and then the imperial period were no more than an interlude, which Maistre wanted to end in an

international reconciliation conditioned by the reunification of Christianity. This meant giving life to this "possibility of all Christian sovereignties coming together via religious fraternity in a kind of universal republic, beneath the measured supremacy of the supreme spiritual power." Historical antagonisms would be resolved, with religious unity engendering political unity. This resurrection would begin through the universal language of Latin, the liturgical idiom that was both sacred and transnational.

Like Bonald, Maistre gave France an exemplary role in initiating this broad movement, namely an ancient mission that he attributed to the French character, which was particularly inclined to consider religion as a political necessity. The Kingdom of France was the first to build itself, thanks to the work of bishops, who served as the monarch's counselors, and represented a link between druidic paganism and Catholic ecclesiology. The "reconstruction of the holy edifice" could only proceed through the cooperation of the French episcopacy, on the condition that it forever rooted out Gallicanism. However, the thinker believed that the first spark had to come from England, as Anglicanism, which had remained close to the one "true" Catholic faith, was destined to effortlessly join it once again. He believed that all of the churches born of the Reformation actually tended towards breaking with schismatic logic, and aspired to return to the Roman fold. By contrast, Maistre was more pessimistic with regard to the fate of Russia and Greece, as the Asian influence distanced the former from the original European mold, and the latter bore the seeds of twelve centuries of division.

Maistre's thought thus outlined a Europe in the process of being rebuilt around an alliance of Catholic powers on the one hand, and Protestant powers returning to Catholicism on the other. The Orthodox world was, for the moment, excluded from this grand achievement, whose symbolic location would be the Pantheon, the pagan temple of all gods that had become the Christian temple of God and all the saints. This papal Europe constantly fluctuated between the past and the future, between the conscious will of its actors and the supernatural work of divinity.

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