

**JACQUES MARITAIN ON THE CONCEPT OF MAN AND THE STATE:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*In his 1951 essay *Man and the State*, Jacques Maritain claims that the concept of man and his relationship with the state has been misconceived by the then predominant political system. To re-establish the proper equilibrium as he conceived it between these two entities, Maritain developed the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas in which the state is seen as an entity for the full development and realization of human well-being. Against the predominant conception of the state as an absolute entity with legitimate right to command all human welfare, Maritain maintains that the state is not the supreme master of the body politic or superman, but an organization bestowed with the function of power and authority and responsible for the welfare and service of man. Maritain argues that when man is put at the service of this instrument called state it leads to so many political ills. The human person as an individual according to Maritain service the interest of the body politic, while the body politic equally serve the interest of man in the society. The human person is by no means for the state to dispense with at all, rather, the state serves the interest of man in a body politic. Through the method of critical and textual analysis, this essay sets out to work out Maritain's notion of man and state in a political community and the antecedent relationship that should exist between these entities. It went on to argue that in a political society like Nigeria, where the condition of man is dehumanized even with its practice of democracy, Maritain's concept of democratic charter and his reconstructivist philosophy is a panacea to the Nigerian democratic quagmires.*

**Keywords:** Man, State, Body politic, Political Society, common good.

## Introduction

The debate concerning the relationship between the state and the individual in a political community has long been a controversial and protracted issue. This issue stretches down to the ancient period. In ancient Greece, Plato for example argues that the state is an individual writ large. This is to say that the state is a bigger form of individual. Therefore, the individual finds fulfilment only in the state. Aristotle conceives of the individual as an entity that is embedded within the polis. According to him, "The city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually" (Pol. 1253a17 -18). In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues that the main duty of the state is to realize the greater good for its citizens (NE 1094b7-8) and insists that the individual is not distinguishable from the society he inhabits, rather, the individual is part of that society and that society is a part of the human. To these ancient scholars, man was like a part in the midst of the whole. Man is nothing without the society. Charles M. Sherover further demonstrates this thus:

Society is the means by which individuals come to see themselves as those whom it has nurtured and developed; society teaches its members to seek their own matured responsibilities as members of a polity, the activities of which are to be justified as the instrument enabling them to seek their common good together (14).

Everything aims at the good in the *polis*, but the greatest good is the good of the community [*koinonia*]. The individual cannot achieve the greatest good which is happiness in isolation. Happiness cannot only be achieved in the context of the community which gives meaning to the life of the individual person in the community. The Roman Philosopher Cicero, share the view of Plato and Aristotle. According to him, the state is a necessary instrument for the achievement of common good.

On the contrary, John Locke rejected the idea that the individual can only attain fulfilment within the context of the state. He argues that the individual in the society has priority over the state. The State regulates through laws the unassailable rights of human beings "for all the power the Government has, being only for the good of the Society" and "the end of the Law is ... *to preserve and to enlarge Freedom*" (Lock 129-130). Locke argues that freedom and other undeniable rights of the citizens are the supreme and greatest good or the ultimate purpose of the law.

In the medieval era, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas developed a theory of the state that is subordinate to the man in a political society. St. Augustine claims that the state cannot lay claim to express the greatest purpose of life, but serve as a means to the realization of human life (Augustine 1950). Therefore, the state would be worth its salt if the citizens play fundamental role in them (Augustine II, 19).

In accordance with the doctrine of St. Augustine and contrary to the view of Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas held the view that human being cannot achieve his goal in the state. According to him, even though the individual is a social being and member of the state; in his pursuit of the “supreme good” (*Summum Bonum*), he transcends the state (Aquinas I-II, Q21, A4).

In the modern period, the different individual views were summed up under different perspectives. These perspectives range from the communitarian views to the liberal perspective. The Liberals or otherwise called “bourgeois liberalism/individualism” conceives of the state as a creation of the human person for the sole purpose of serving the interest of the citizens in the state. The rights of individual in the state are given priority to the state and as such, the state must serve the interest of the individual in the realization of the common good. One of the major advancement of the liberal perspective is the protection of the right and autonomy of the citizen. It is important to note that the American political structure is situated within this category.

The extreme version of the liberal perspective which is the classical libertarians seeks to protect the right of the citizens especially right to property and right to liberty through limiting government power. The communitarians on the other maintain that the citizens can only have identity in the mist of the community. The community provides the context of meaning for the citizens.

Like Aquinas, Maritain was very critical of Aristotle's, Cicero's and other communitarian perspective about the state. He argues that the state is an agency managed by experts to use power and coercion in their achievement of their goal. The state serves the interest of man and not man serving the interest of the state. According to him, “putting man at the service of that instrument is political perversion.” According to Maritain, “by reason of his relationship to the Absolute, and to the extent that he is called to a life and a destiny superior to time ... the human person *transcends* all temporal societies and is superior to them” (Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, 96). In his discussion of the common good, Maritain rejects the teaching of John Locke. He argues that the common good is neither the sum total of the good of the individual in a political society, nor that of the interest of the community to which the citizen is a part of (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 43-

49), but the improvement of moral and spiritual capacities of the human person whose common good transcend the temporary good of the state. The question fundamental at this juncture is: How can the individual attain the supreme good which transcends the temporal good of the state? This essay sets out to provide answers to this and other similar questions. It went on to argue that in a political society like Nigeria, where the condition of man is dehumanized because the proper place of man is misunderstood in the political society even with its practice of democracy, Maritain's concept of democratic charter and his reconstructivist philosophy is a panacea to the Nigerian democratic quagmires.

### **Maritain Concept of the State**

The systematic construction of Maritain's argumentation in *Man and the State* begins with the distinction he made between some concepts. The first is the distinction between communities and societies. According to him, communities are a given with a certain natural fact (language, region, class, etc.). Societies on the other hand are a product of human reason, freely constituted in order to realize a certain goal. Maritain elucidates this point thus:

Both community and society are ethico-social and truly human, not merely biological. But a community is more of a work of nature and more nearly related to the biological; a society is more of a work of reason, and more nearly related to the intellectual and spiritual properties of man (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 2).

While a society has some biological connotation which is natural by nature, the community is truly a human construct. Another distinction is between the nation, the community and the society. According to Maritain, "the nation is a community, not a society. It is a community of people who became aware of themselves as history has made them, who treasure their own past, and who loves themselves as they know or as they imagine themselves to be, with a kind of inevitable introversion" (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 5). The body politic according to him is a work of reason. It is the most perfect of temporal societies. It is a concretely and wholly human reality, tending to a concretely and wholly human good - the common good (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 10).

The state according to Maritain is the governing part of the body politic. The major function of the state according to Maritain is to maintain law and order, guarantee justice and ensure the common good. Maritain further maintains that even though the state is a superior part of the body politic, it does entails that the state is superior to the body politic (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 13). For the state to

function effectively, it must have authority that it receives from the people. Thus, the state acts as vicar of the people. Maritain argues that even though the government officials act as vicars of the people, the people must not be used as mere instrument for the service of the state. If the people perceive that the state are abusing their power, Maritain argues that the people have the right to remove them from power. This is one of the major ingredients of democracy. Maritain makes the distinction between an instrumentalist theory of the state and a despotic notion of the State thus:

The theory which ... regards the State as a part ... of the body politic, subordinate to it and endowed with topmost authority not by its own right and for its own sake, ... can be described as an "instrumentalist" theory, ... But ... the *despotic* notion of the State, ...[conceives of a state as] a subject of right, i.e., a moral person, and consequently a whole; as a result it is either superimposed on the body politic or made to absorb the body politic entirely, ... (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 13-14).

Maritain went on to distinguish between the concepts of power and state. "Power according to him is the force by means of which you can oblige others to obey you. Authority is the *right* to direct and command, to be listened to or obeyed by others" (Maritain *Man and the State*, 126). These two instruments must work together. The state's power comes from the people. The state abuses its power when it assumes the function of the whole as in a part and when this incidence continues, the state no longer commands the allegiance of the people. Maritain argues that while the immediate source of the state's authority is the people, the definitive foundation is God; for all authority comes from God.

For Maritain, sovereignty does not belong to the state; neither does it reside in the people. Maritain argues that the contention that sovereignty resides in both the people and the state is a long standing fiction. According to Maritain, the people are autonomous by the mere fact that they are self-governed but they are not sovereign. Maritain believes that while the state and the people do not enjoy sovereignty, the church does. This is because, the church is a divine institution founded by Christ. Maritain insisted on the supremacy of the sacred (the church) over the supremacy or superiority of the secular realm (the state/ the civil society). From this perspective, the sacral is superior to the secular, and "the good of the State must, therefore, be ordered to that same supernatural lasting end which is the good of every individual man" (Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, 11.).

### **Maritain concept of Man/Person**

In his Anthropology Maritain makes effort to distinguish between the individual concept of man and person. He maintains that the concepts are not two separate entities but the same way of referring to the same thing. Maritain calls the person the spiritual aspect of man and the individual the material aspect of man. Maritain argue that the material aspect of the human person is egoistic and always grasping for itself order to maintain its “precarious unity” (Maritain, *The Person*, 27). Maritain maintain that when the state begins to see man as an individual without recognizing the more fundamental aspect of man as a person that evil of the greatest order begin to manifest. As a person, according to Maritain, the human is a whole that takes place within a universe of discourse that addresses itself to God (Maritain, *The Person*, 30).

Maritain went on to address the relationship between man and the state; man as an individual and as a person. According to him, the state is seen as a whole, while man is seen as a part in the whole. In this context, the good of the whole is considered superior to the good of the part and subordinate to the state. This is why according to Maritain the state will always require the individual in the state to sacrifice their life for the service of the state. Relying on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, Maritain explains thus: “It is a fundamental thesis of Thomism that the person as such is a whole. The concept of part is opposed to that of person. To say, then, that society is a whole composed of persons is to say that society is a whole composed of wholes” (Maritain, *The Person*, 56-7).

The dignity of man is respect according to Maritain in the state when man is given his right entity as a person. In this situation, the human person is seen as a whole in the midst of the whole. In this situation, man as a person surpasses the state and his good surpasses the good of the state. The most important good of man is spiritual and the good of the state is temporal. However, Maritain maintains that these two goods are not in conflict with one another. But he maintains that the state must recognize the superiority of the spiritual good. Maritain insists that most of the problem of Western civilization is the triumph of the anthropocentric humanism over theocentric, or integral humanism. Anthropocentric humanism is centred on the individual while integral humanism is the humanism that is centred on the human person.

### **Man, State and body Politic**

The main thrust of Jacques Maritain’s *Man and the State* is to establish the proper relationship between the human person, the political society and their proper

place in the body politic. In the first place, Maritain maintains that while the concept of body politic applies "to the order of society", it must be distinguished clearly from the State (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 9). According to Maritain, the body politic is rational creation of man (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 10). Consequently, the state is that part of the body politic that is responsible for the maintenance of law and order and the promotion of the common good (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 12). The state is part of the body politic and equally serves the body politic and whatever that it equally composed of. However, as part of the body politic, the human person is part that is superior to the body politic (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 11). Maritain maintains that one of the major functions of the body politic is the creation and maintenance of law and order for the common good of the state. It is the function and duty of the state to serve the body politic. As Maritain says:

The state is but an agency entitled to use power and coercion and made up of experts or specialists in public order and welfare, an instrument in the service of man. Putting man at the service of that institution is political perversion. The human person as an individual is for the body politic, and the body politic is for the human person as a person. But man is by no means for the State. The State is for man (Maritain, *Man and the State* 13).

Maritain believes that the relationship between the state, the body politic and the human person is corrupted. He attributes the source of this corruption to the intellectual flames of the French Revolution and the philosophy of Hobbes, Rousseau, Austin, and Hegel (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 15). He therefore sets out to reconcile the healthy relationship that should exist between these concepts.

Maritain maintains the concept of the "sovereignty" of the body politic, the state, or the people must be rejected. According to him, while the concept is best suited to Christianity, it lacks political applicability. The absolutist's theory of the state according to Maritain is one of the reasons for the destruction of the proper relation of man to the state and the body politic. Maritain further maintains that the human person is a right bearing entities and his rights are derived from the authority of the natural law. The state must make sure that it protects the rights of the human person especially those "rights and values which exist neither by the state, nor for the state, and which are outside the sphere of the State". These rights according to him are derived from the natural law (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 95-97). The state must not only recognize these rights, they must also ensure that they protect them (Maritain *Man and the State*, 95-96). They are rights, Maritain says,

that "civil society does not have to *grant but to recognize*, and sanction as universally valid, and which no social necessity can authorize as even momentarily to abolish or disregard"(Maritain, *Man and the State*, 96). Maritain argues that it is wrong for the state intrude into these unassailable rights of man. Maritain captures this thus:

[T]he State has not the authority to make mere form the judgment of my conscience, any more than it has the power of imposing on intellects its own judgment of good and evil, or of loyalty on divine matters, or of imposing any religious faith whatsoever" (Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy ...* , 156).

Maritain further argues that the state is forbidden to deny man the choice of the vocation in marriage and the development of their personal faculties. These areas of human endeavours are attached to the person of man and are beyond the control of the state (Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* 160). All these rights, "Maritain says, are rooted in the vocation of the person (a spiritual and free agent) to the order of absolute values and to a destiny superior to time"(Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy ...*, 159).

Consequently, Maritain recognizes some fundamental duties of the state in the body politic. And like Thomas Aquinas, Maritain argues that the main duty of the state is the promotion of the common good of man which include both his material and spiritual conditions.

### **Critical Evaluation / the Implication of Maritain's concept of Man and the State to Nigerian Democracy**

Jacques Maritain can be considered one of the most outstanding philosophers of the 20th century. Brought up as a non-believer and converted to Catholicism in his younger years, Maritain according to Dries Deweer "became one of the most important mentors of Christian democracy and ardent defender of the rights of the human persons, their condition and their political wellbeing." (Deweer 3) Deborah Wallace expresses Maritain's utmost concern for the human person thus:

Maritain hoped for a "personalist" democracy that would curb individualism without being totalitarian, advocate human rights vehemently as integral to the common good, and promote human freedom in conjunction with virtue (128)

Maritain was one of the greatest advocates of what is called "the democratic faith." Democracy for him represented "the highest terrestrial achievement of which the rational animal is capable here below." (Maritain *Man and the State*, 60) In *Man and*

*the State*, Maritain recognizes the principle features of the democratic charter to include: representative democracy, freedom and protection of the fundamental rights of the human person. These are definitely the underlying feature of a democratic society. This is equally imperative for the much desired democracy that is elusive in Nigeria. In Nigeria, there is much concern for true democracy which is fundamental for the protection of the human persons and their conditions. Maritain emphasizes the need for the protection of the fundamental right of the human person in a democratic setting in his concept of democratic charter. According to him:

Such a charter would deal, for instance with the following points: rights and liberties of the human person, political rights and liberties, social rights and social liberties, corresponding representatives, rights and duties of persons who are part of a family society ... mutual rights and duties of groups and the state, government of the people, by the people, and for the people; ... (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 112)

Maritain was so much impressed by the rational principle of democracy as a system of government. He believes that democracy has its foundation in Christianity. For him, “democracy is the only way of bringing about a *moral rationalization* of politics. Because democracy is a rational organization of freedom founded upon law” (Maritain, *Man and the State*, 59). Therefore, in order for democracy to prosper, it must be nurtured by the democratic faith. The promotion of the democratic faith does not mean the promotion of a particular form of government, but the promotion of the democratic ideal. “In this connection,” Maritain writes, “whatever the political *regime* may be, monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic, democratic philosophy appears as the only political *philosophy*” (Maritain *Man and the State*, 129). In concrete situation, the underlying condition that must be established for any form of government is that it; a condition that is lacking in Nigeria’s system of government which can be said to be theoretically democratic in nature.

In his work entitled *Gethsemane*, Cardinal Joseph Siri subjected the distinction Maritain makes between the sacral and secular realm which he refers to as “these two absolutes which constitute a sort of intimate secret of all Maritain’s thought” (Siri 92) and found it wanting. He acknowledges that Maritain sees the secular realm as subordinate to the sacral realm, but the suggestion is that this was only a token gesture on Maritain’s part, a *pro forma* tip of the hat to tradition as it were,

and that Maritain's view implies a usurpation of the proper role of the sacral realm by the secular realm (Siri 92).

Though Maritain maintains and insists on the compatible and complementary roles the society and the individual person have towards the other, Charles De Koninck insists that as an Aristotelian-Thomist philosopher, Maritain's conception of the common good is inconsistent with that of Aquinas's thought. According to him, "even though Maritain's precise understanding of the relationship between the individual and common good was never clear, one view that can be fairly attributed to him is that the person has an ontological priority over the common good" (Osborne 76). Like Maritain, De Koninck emphasizes that the human being is a person who is directly ordered to God, but draws our attention to the fact that for Thomas, God is the common good of the universe. According to De Koninck, Aquinas is saying that humans are only partially ordered to the political common good because the political common good is not the ultimate end of human beings. The ultimate end is God, who is the common good of the universe.

Still on the same footing, Alasdair MacIntyre observes that Maritain's misinterpretation of Aquinas's notion of common good rest on his inability to distinguish between complete and incomplete communities. According to him, one way of differentiating between the different common goods is by differentiating between the common goods of incomplete and complete communities. Accordingly, MacIntyre draws attention thus:

...the fact that the contemporary nation-state cannot justify its ordering of activities and its demand for the self-sacrifice of some citizens. Consequently, although the nation-state has taken on the role of the complete community with respect to coercion and war, it does not seem to be the same as a complete community in the Aristotelian or Thomistic sense (MacIntyre 11).

Following Aristotle, MacIntyre claims that Aquinas thinks that the political unit is a complete community with a common good which is greater than that of its members. Aristotle and Thomas contrast these complete communities with local communities which are not self-sufficient, such as households and villages. This self-insufficiency helps to create a political community which is concerned not with particular practices, but with the good life as a whole (MacIntyre 5).

## **Conclusion**

The project of Maritain is a deconstruction of the relationship between the state and man. From our finding so far, Maritain is not critical of the state *per se* but of

the fact that the state has made itself the absolute sovereign of the body politic - a subject of right either superimposed on the body politic or made to absorb the body politic entirely. Maritain stated that the problem of the twentieth century was the fact that the theory of the state underwent a degeneration through which the state became overpowering and meddling in domains that were supposed to be beyond its limits leading to what he calls political perversion. The genuine theory of the state is one that regards the state as a part or an instrument of the body politic, subordinate to it and endowed with topmost authority not by its own right and for its own sake, but only by virtue and to the extent of the requirements of the common good. The state cannot be sovereign, because that would shut the door on accountability, while democracy demands that the people are able to pass the ultimate judgment. But neither are the people sovereign, because they have to be accountable to themselves as opposed to transcendent and irresponsible. Thus, the totalitarian tendency of the modern state can only be kept in check by a truly democratic re-evaluation of the state that arms the citizens to keep the state under control. The people have to dispose of the will and the means to exert control. Only then can they talk about true democracy.

We can therefore assert convincingly that despite the possible weaknesses that might be detected in Maritain's political philosophy as it relates to the proper relationship between man and the state in a political society, it offers to the Nigerian system of democracy a paradigm example for integral development. This is because its most signal feature especially his concept of the democratic charter is the fact that it is everywhere charged with an abiding awareness of the numerous political quagmire in Nigeria.

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