

From Christ to the Bourgeoisie: Deleuze, Spiritualism, Sartre and the World

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Between 1945 and 1947 Deleuze published 5 short texts. Many years later, Deleuze agreed to the publication of a collection of short texts on the condition that no text from before 1953 should be included. For this reason these 5 texts are not readily available and have attracted, so far, relatively little critical attention. In this paper I will focus on a part of the argument of the second of these texts, called “Du Christ à la bourgeoisie” from 1946.¹ This text, I will argue, critically engages with Sartre. At the same time, I will argue, this essay engages critically with certain Christian traditions which, while now largely forgotten, were also important in the French 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. I will try to show however, that while the article appears to criticize religion, some arguments Deleuze uses to articulate this criticism seem to be influenced by the Christian mysticism that had been widely embraced by French intellectuals, from around 1910 until, roughly, the end of the 1940s.

Now, to start to make sense of “From Christ to the Bourgeoisie” we might ask, as Deleuze instructs us, “against whom” this text is directed? My provisional answer would not be “against Christianity”, or “against the Bourgeoisie”. These are, the more or less obvious targets, but these terms are so generic, that by 1946 they have lost much explanatory power. The Bourgeoisie, for instance, was obviously the target for Communists, but equally for Nationalists, Nationalist-Socialists, and both liberal and conservative Catholics, both of whom were themselves seen as bourgeois. Sartre also started to criticize the bourgeoisie in the years following the war, but was in his turn denounced as bourgeois by the communists. I would suggest it is more useful to focus on the more specific targets of Deleuze.

The first target, I will argue is Sartre. Sartre’s name is absent from the essay, but Deleuze implicitly refers to him at several points. He even quotes from one of Sartre’s texts, from the short piece on Intentionality in Husserl’s *Phenomenology*, although he does not attribute this quote. Deleuze begins his text with the observation that “we” or “they” [*on*] proclaim the bankruptcy of Spirit [*Esprit*] in the modern world” (93). However, he then says that “perhaps” there is a “confusion” on this point. “What we want to say is that today many people no longer believe in interior life.” (93) Now, Deleuze, as we will see, clearly criticizes interiority. We all know he spoke of a “hatred of interiority” in the philosophers he admired. Sartre also displays a hatred of interiority, describing it in the abovementioned text as that “malodorous brine of the mind [*Esprit*]”. And describing it in terms of stomach growling and “moist gastric intimacy.”² Nonetheless, Deleuze is extremely critical of Sartre. “Why is it that so often interior life cannot be evoked without dragging along the image of large soft flowers, drivel and stomach growling, sweaty palms, white larvae and hits of disrobement?” asks Deleuze. It seems, Deleuze says, that “we no longer understand [interiority] except in the form of sweatiness.” Deleuze then asks “is there for some people a new notion?” It is this new notion, as we will see, Deleuze tries to show us in “From Christ to the Bourgeoisie.” (95)

The essay was published in the first and only issue of *Espace*, a journal Deleuze edited and published with a group of university friends.³ *Espace*, which had the subtitle “monthly journal”, was envisioned as the mouth-piece of a new generation that, according to its unsigned introduction, had left behind the world of interiority but which had not yet reached the world of exteriority. (13) They want to establish a new *fraternité* between man and the world, an immediate contact between the interior and the exterior. They saw it as their task to “abolishes once and for all the categories imprinted on life by the bourgeoisie, humanism and civilisation.” (13-4) Now the interesting word here is “humanism”. A critique of interiority would in those days place them easily alongside Sartre, as we saw. And sure enough the introduction clearly denounces, as Sartre’s work does, some types of the pre-war spiritualism that was held, generally, in contempt after the war. However, they continue: “If the charms of spiritualism decline day by day, it would be wrong give no attention to the current success of various modern humanisms. It is time to denounce the deception to which they oblige one. Thinking, for them, is only a way of life, the creation of a way to act. They all take leave of pragmatism to lead to conformism. There is only one consistent humanism: that is fascist humanism.” (10) This is clearly a reference to Sartre’s own criticism of Comte’s humanism in his 1945 paper “Existentialism is a Humanism”.⁴ It is in contrast to Comte’s humanism, which Sartre himself denounces as a fascist humanism, that he defines existentialism as a humanism. This, as Deleuze’s close friend Michel Tournier said, was a huge disappointment for the friends: “We were appalled. [...] Our master dug up from the dustbin where we had buried that idiot overused [concept], smelling of sweat and interior life, *humanism*.”⁵ So it is Sartre, in his turn, who is, according to Tournier, smelling of sweat and identified with interiority. Thus Sartre, I believe, is the first target of “From Christ to the Bourgeoisie”.

As we saw, the introduction of *Espace* speaks of “various forms of modern humanisms” which should be denounced. If one of these humanisms is Sartre’s existentialist humanism, which other humanism(s) might be referred to? We could simply conclude that this is Comte’s humanism. However, I will argue that, at least in Deleuze’s text, another humanism that is clearly denounced is what was called ‘integral humanism’, a Christian humanism theorized by one of the most prominent Christian thinkers of the France, Jacques Maritain. He is, I will argue, the second specific target of Deleuze’s text.

As with Sartre, Deleuze does not identify Maritain, explicitly. Nonetheless, there are, I think, clear clues which support this interpretation. I will focus here only on one point: the clear similarities between some of Maritain’s arguments and the arguments Deleuze attributes to Christianity in his essay.

Let me first give a little bit of background on Maritain.

While it is now largely forgotten, the French 1920s saw a remarkable Christian revival which lasted until well into the 1940s. It was a time that France, in contrast to other Western Countries, saw a growing influence of Catholic thought in intellectual circles. The most prominent Christian thinker of these years was Jacques Maritain.⁶

Maritain’s influence in the years between the world wars should not be underestimated. A whole

generation of young Christian intellectuals followed his ideas, and he and his followers were also widely read outside religious circles. Maritain was, as we will see, the most prominent proponent of Neo-Thomism. Maritain was also the figurehead of those Catholics who moved away from the extremely conservative political stances of the Catholic church in the early decades of the 20th centuries. It was also Maritain's distinction between the individual and the person which lay at the foundation of 'personalism', the movement popularized by one of Maritain's protégés Emmanuel Mounier.

Maritain follows St Thomas in seeing the person as the "most noble and most perfect being in all nature."⁷ By contrast the individual is defined somewhat pejoratively. The individual represents the material pole of the human being. The "mere" individual, is egocentric, atomistic, and completely focused on self-preservation. Maritain described it as "that which excludes from oneself all other men" and as representing "the narrowness of the ego, forever threatened and forever eager to [take] for itself."⁸ By contrast the person represents the spiritual pole of the human being. It is characterized by giving, rather than [taking], "giving of the self in love and freedom."⁹ They are, however, not two separate entities. Maritain calls his thought 'integral' because he considers the human being as the unity of these two distinct poles of being. So the human being is at the same time an individual and a person, is simultaneously, he will say elsewhere, an object and a subject.¹⁰ Joseph Rickaby finds a similar proscription in St Thomas's philosophy. It is only through the union of the interior with the exterior that perfect worship is given to God. God effects or demands the union between interior and exterior, but this exterior, is not "the world", not even "nature"; it only concerns human nature, because the union of nature and spirit, the human person, is radically distinct from other beings. And this uniqueness, that in which the human person differs from "even the most advance animals", is that he is not only acted upon and moved by external forces, but that he also acts from within."¹¹

This is where Maritain's thought closely parallels Deleuze's description of Christianity in "From Christ to the Bourgeoisie". Deleuze writes that Christian consciousness is so torn that it cannot grasp in itself the relation between nature and spirit: "the misery of this consciousness," he says, "is such that to establish a certain unity of body and spirit [...] it must look outside of itself, outside of its own interiority." (97-8). In other words, the Christian grasps the union of nature and spirit as interior life only from the outside.

So, according to Deleuze, the creation of a unity between nature and spirit needs an exteriority, and this is where Christ comes in. He brings the "good news" of the Gospel. But, explains Deleuze, "this "outside world" that he reveals "is not a social, historical [...] world; *it is our own interior life*." (96, my italics) The gospel is thus, he says, paradoxically, the "exteriority of an interiority". Not a real exteriority, but an exteriority that exists only as the opposition to an interiority. It is then the paradoxical task of the Christian to internalize internal life, in other words, to internalize the exteriority revealed by Christ. (97) Again, this exteriority does not deal with politics or the social. It concerns, according to Deleuze, only "that part of the world called human nature." (104) We deal, in other words, with an "interior religious opposition, between the corporeal subject and sinner [on the one hand] and the spiritual subject" on the other hand. (103) This exterior world, the Gospel, says Deleuze, "has not come to save the world, [but has come] to

save us from the world.” “It brings everything back,” says Deleuze “to the possibility [...] of saving man from sin.” (104) And it is in this *very special* sense, he concludes, that one can speak about Christian ‘indifference’. (104) The words ‘very special’ [*très spécial*] are italicized.

The Neo-Thomism of Maritain, while influential, was by no means the only type of Christianity that was prevalent at the time that Deleuze wrote his essay. In fact, it could be argued that one could draw a line of affinity around a diverse group of Christian tenets which were united in their critical stance towards Thomism. In a 1953 book review Deleuze affirms that there are two very different “shades of Christian spiritualism”, one of which, he identifies as Thomism.¹² Thomism is a body of thought derived from the 13th century Dominican Priest Thomas Aquinas. It was promoted as the more or less official philosophy of Catholicism by Popes Leo XIII and Pius X in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. In the early 20th century it became entangled in a very fierce battle with the so-called Catholic Modernists, a group of liberal Catholics that tried to wed Catholicism to modernity. One of their fiercest opponents was Maritain, who found in the scholastic thought of St Thomas the arguments to denounce these catholic modernists. The distinction between two different shades of Christian spiritualism that Deleuze spoke about could be said to be the consequence of this modernist controversy.

Deleuze dedicated his article to “Mlle Davy”. Marie-Madeleine Davy is an interesting character. She is a medievalist and philosopher and is the personification of the spiritualism of those days. Not only was she a respected scholar in the field of medieval mystical theology, she was also very interested in Oriental religions and philosophy and in various forms of occultism and esoteric thought. She also personified the critical stance towards Thomism. In several of her books she shows herself a bitter enemy of Thomism.

Deleuze met Marie-Madeleine Davy in 1943, at the castle La Fortrelle, just outside of Paris, where she organized a series of seminars which were attended by a wide range of Parisian intellectuals, especially, but not exclusively, by those with Christian and mystical leanings. Later these seminars moved to the apartment of Davy’s friend Marcel Moré, a friend of Bataille and of Maurice de Gandillac, who was to become Deleuze’s thesis director. Deleuze regularly visited these seminars between from 1943 to at least 1947. It is safe to say that Deleuze was well acquainted with much of the Christian and mystical writings of his days. ‘From Christ to the Bourgeoisie’ shows this acquaintance.

Deleuze quotes from a now obscure work by Denis de Rougemont, a personalist moving in the same personalist circles as Moré and De Gandillac, and, as I argued before, critically engages with Maritain’s thought. The form of his argument against Maritain closely parallels the thought of some so-called affectivist medieval mystics. I will, for lack of time, concentrate here on one of these mystics, and only on one specific argument in Deleuze’s essay, and leave aside other mystical aspects which can be found in “From Christ to the Bourgeoisie”.

In the essay Deleuze remarks that Sartre’s revolutionary consciousness offers “*friendship*, not love.” (94) This is an echo of his very first published article, which appeared a few months before ‘Bourgeoisie,’ in which he criticizes Sartre for his conceptions of love and desire.¹³ This critique shows an affinity between Deleuze and the conceptions of love and desire of mystics of affectivist

persuasion. Marie-Madeleine Davy had in these years been working on a translation of some of the works of the 12th century Christian mystic William of St Thierry.¹⁴ It is St Thierry who stands at the beginning of this affectivist turn in Christian mysticism. This turn marks the split between two distinct religious traditions. First the tradition of St Thomas and his followers, down to Maritain and his Neo-Thomist revival, who following Aristotle and Augustine, prioritize intellect over what is variously called ‘will’, ‘desire’ or ‘love’. And second those who hold that it is only through love, or through affective contemplation, that one can come to grasp ultimate wisdom or knowledge of God.¹⁵ It is in this affectivist tradition that an anonymous 14th century English author wrote a two-faced attack on interiority, the argument of which is closely mirrored by Deleuze in “From Christ to the Bourgeoisie”, and which reappears almost word for word, 50 years later, in *What is Philosophy?*

This anonymous English author, presented his work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, as a close translation of the work of the early 6th century writer Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite into English, but the Cloud Author, as he is known, however, presents a clearly affectivist inspired interpretation. However, this does not mean he gives free reign to desire. Instead he seems quite critical to the more “florid” voluntaristic spiritualities which were abundant in his days.¹⁶ This criticism parallels that of Sartre’s and Deleuze’s and even Neo-Thomist hatred of interiority, that is to say the interiority linked to, in Deleuze words, the images of “large soft flowers, drivel and stomach growling”. (95) Thus while Neo-Thomists and Sartre appear to differ on their estimation of interiority, on closer inspection some of their critique is surprisingly similar. Neo-Thomism, while clinging to certain forms of interiority, are extremely critical of most voluntarist forms of mysticism and interiority. Sartre, too, as is evident from the imagery he uses in his essay on ‘intentionality’, seems to criticize specifically this flowery type of voluntarist spiritualism.

Deleuze does not necessarily seem to disagree with them. However, he pointed out that we currently *only* understand interiority in these terms. He then asks, as we saw, whether there is “for some people a new notion?” and wonders whether there is “no spiritual life apart from interior life?” (95) For the Cloud Author there certainly is spiritual life apart from a flowery type of interior life. While criticizing the more rosy types of affectivist interiority, he posits his own version of spirituality, which remains equally, if not more, critical of the intellectualist theology of the tradition of St Thomas. The Cloud-author distinguishes between a false ‘image’ of interiority and true interiority. The false image of interiority comes to life when one tries to describe spiritual life, as the intellectual tradition does, in terms of spatial metaphors of ‘above’ and ‘below’, and ‘within’ and ‘without’. The Cloud author then warns that these words can easily be misinterpreted. Those who conclude on the basis of these images that one should leave behind all historical and bodily aspects of life and translate interiority simply into mental acts, are mistaken, he holds, and become trapped in a vicious circle.¹⁷ They base their view of interiority on the *distinction* between interiority and exteriority, which depends on intellectual imaginative opposition which, one could say, can only be thought from the outside. But this is not true wisdom; in fact it is madness, says the Cloud author, it is a fantasy, it is “against nature”. They have not truly grasped interiority. Paradoxically, this true interiority does not know of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, does not distinguish between ‘bodily’ and ‘ghostly’; “Our inner man calleth it All”.¹⁸ It is this true spirituality which establishes direct relations between the inside and the outside.

This is very similar to the argument Deleuze constructs in somewhat elliptical terms in his early essay. And these parallels were not a fleeting fancy. In the section from *What is Philosophy?* on immanence, more or less the same terminology is used. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between the exterior and the outside. The outside is not exterior *to* something. By being exterior to an interiority, they hold, exteriority affirms the interiority of interiority. The outside, however, is outside to both the exterior and the interior, it goes beyond the opposition between exterior and interior. The outside is an absolute outside “an outside,” they write, “more distant than any external world because it is an *inside deeper than any internal world*: it is immanence.”¹⁹

The tightrope that this 14th century English mystic walks, following clearly in the footsteps of the affectivist mystics of the 12th century but rejecting a too spiritualist or disembodied mysticism is a recurring image in mystical thought. Another 14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, had developed a somewhat similar view and one could argue the Quietists of the 17th century develop a view that shares many of these characteristics.²⁰ It is to these Quietists that the Catholic modernists turned. They saw in the incarnational aspects of the Quietist tradition, a “forgotten tradition of Wholeness”, a “living religious tradition” which was suffocated by the intellectualism of the 17th century Church hierarchy. Obviously they also saw parallels between the Quietists and their own situation, which again saw a movement which stood in the tradition of affectivist mysticism suppressed by a church hierarchy which favored the intellectualism of Neo-Thomism.²¹

What can we provisionally conclude from this analysis of this early text? Deleuze criticizes both Sartre and Maritain. As we saw Maritain’s thought leads to indifference. Sartre’s thought, while outwardly very different, is shown to have many parallels with this thought. Deleuze speaks of Christ as a ‘leader’ who reveals to us a possible exterior world, the exterior world of the Gospel. In the same way, he speaks of Sartre who in *Being and Nothingness* also speaks of a Leader, who can reveal to a “team” or “crew” [*Equipe*] a possible world. “For instance,” says Deleuze “a possible world in which [...] the workman would no longer work for masters.” (94) This exterior world, however, that is revealed by the revolutionary leader, is just like the Gospel, not a social, historical or localized world, but rather an exteriority of an interiority. “The team always rebels against someone, against something,” says Deleuze. The intersubjective, existentialist model Sartre sets up in *Being and Nothingness* thus, like the model that Maritain advances, does not provide us with political or social world, but rather refers us back to our own interior life, with that part of the world called human nature that we have to internalize. If Maritain’s model leads to ‘indifference’, then Sartre’s model does so too. As far as it is concerned with “commitment”, it would then not be “committed” to particular causes in the real world, but, rather as Deleuze’s teacher Jean Wahl quotes approvingly “a commitment to commitment.”²²

What Deleuze seems to target specifically, is the way in which both Maritain and Sartre fail to connect the interior to an “outside”. They only connect it, by way of an opposition, to an exteriority. This criticism is parallel to the criticism of the so-called affectivist mystical tradition. It is this tradition which offers Deleuze an alternative vision of the connection between the subject and the world, a “wholeness” which he will later call the plane of immanence.

Now, I am of course not the first person to point out the mystical undertones in Deleuze’s work, but this remains an under-researched area. The most sustained engagement with Deleuze’s

mysticism, I would argue, can be found in Peter Hallward's *Out of this World*.²³ In this critical reading of Deleuze's work, the references to mysticism seem to be used mainly to support the well-known argument that thinkers who are focused on 'God', or 'the One', or 'the Absolute', generally turn their back to existence on this earth, as Deleuze does, according to Hallward. He concludes that Deleuze is "most appropriately read as a spiritual [...] thinker preoccupied with the mechanisms of *dis*-embodiment and *de*-materialisation," a thinker who will lead us "out of the world."²⁴ However, his alternative type of spirituality, the new notion of interiority that he seems to be looking for, is a self-subvertive interiority. In searching for this "real", more profound, interiority, Deleuze seems to try to go beyond the opposition between interiority and exteriority. In embracing this "real" interiority, he aims to, paradoxically, establish a direct connection between the "spirit" and the political and social "world", I am tempted to say, he tries to lead us directly "into the world", back to the world that Sartre and Maritain lead us away from.

Notes

1. 'Du Christ à la bourgeoisie', *Espace*, 1946, p. 93-106, page numbers quoted in the text. (See my translation: www.rvdw.org/from_christ_to_the_bourgeoisie_translation.pdf)
2. Sartre, 'Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology', trans. By Joseph P. Fell, *The Phenomenology Reader*, ed. Dermont Moran and Timothy Mooney (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 393.
3. François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari: Biographie croisée* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2007), p. 117.
4. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>
5. Dosse, op. cit., p. 120.
6. For more on Maritain, cf. Doering, Bernard, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame, IL: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), H. Stuart Hughes, *The Obstructed Path: French Social Thought in the years of Desperation 1930-1960* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 72-81, Joseph Amato, *Mounier and Maritain: A French Catholic Understanding of the Modern World* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1975).
7. 'The Individual and the Person', *The social and political philosophy of Jaques Maritain*, ed. By Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956) p. 21.
8. Maritain quoted in Frederick C. Copleston, 'The Human Person in Contemporary Philosophy', *Philosophy*, Vol. 25, No. 92 (Jan., 1950), p. 10.
9. Copleston, op. cit., p. 10.
10. Thomas D. Williams 'What is Thomistic Personalism,' *Alpha Omega*, VII no 2, (2004), p. 184.
11. Ibid., 184-5.
12. Deleuze, Gilles, 'revue de Régis Jolivet "Le problème de la mort chez M. Heidegger et J.-P. Sartre"', *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, 163 (1953), p. 108.
13. 'Description de la femme: pour une philosophie d'autrui sexuée', *Poésie*, 45, no. 28, oct-nov 1945, pp. 28-39. Translated by Keith W. Faulkner as 'Description of Woman: For a Philosophy of the Sexed Other', *Angelaki*, 7:3 (2002), pp. 17-24.
14. Cf. Maurice De Gandillac 'Retour à la mystique', *Esprit* (Octobre 1945), p. 650. See also: <http://transfiguration.chartreux.org/biblio-sci.htm>.
15. Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill and Bradly B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: an introduction to contemporary*

theological approaches (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), pp. 72-5.

16. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 203.
17. Ibid., p. 206. Cf. William L Portier and C.J.T. Talar, 'The Mystical Elements of the Modernist Crisis', in: *Modernists and Mystics* ed. by Talar (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 5.
18. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. by Evelyn Underhill (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 117.
19. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Trans. By Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London: Verso, 1994), p. 59 (my italics).
20. Cf. Turner, op. cit., Chapter 7.
21. Cf. Portier and Talar, op. cit., pp. 2-5.
22. Jean Wahl, review of *Encounter with Nothingness* by Helmut Kuhn, *Ethics*, v 60:3 (April 1950), 217.
23. (London: Verso, 2006)
24. Ibid., p. 3.