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Jean-François Petit, *Jacques Chevalier (1882-1962) et la philosophie française*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang, S.A., 2015. 256 pp. 40.00€. (hb). ISBN 978-2-87574-258-2.

Review by John Hellman, Professor of History, McGill University.

Had Germany won World War II, Jacques Chevalier might be remembered as one of France's greatest educationists and philosophers. But Chevalier, Germanophobe son of a military officer, respected philosopher and Dean at the University of Grenoble in 1940, disgraced himself during World War II. He has been largely forgotten since he briefly took on the post of Minister of Education in the government of Marshall Pétain (his godfather) in late 1940.

Chevalier was convinced that it was only in submission to God that individual human beings, and entire nations, could realize their full potential. Since a State in which the Catholic Church found itself hegemonic had the right and duty to be totalitarian, Chevalier accepted the invitation of the recently victorious General Franco to help rebuild a post-Republican Spanish educational system which would liquidate the vestiges of secularism, atheism, anarchism, and Marxism. Chevalier, although anti-modern and reactionary, was convinced that his good friend and mentor, Henri Bergson (a Jew), had discovered a way to make the idea, or presence, of God more immediate through the practical institutionalization or implementation of a philosophy of intuition.

Was there anything of enduring value in the effort to transform French young people with Marshall Pétain's Révolution Nationale that began in the defeated France of the summer and autumn of 1940? The author of *Jacques Chevalier (1882-1962) et la philosophie française*, Jacques Petit, is an assumptionist priest in his prime who was led to studying Chevalier's ideas out of a sympathetic interest in the Personalism of that philosopher's most famous student and (ex) disciple Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950). Petit demonstrates how Chevalier helped engender Mounier's philosophy of Personalism which, more than the existentialism of Sartre or Camus, became a way of thinking and "being" for the high-spirited French Catholics of the 1960s, the progressive and confident Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and the charismatic Polish "Personalist Pope" John Paul II (1920-2005). (Then, like other communitarian enthusiasms of the 1960s, it suddenly died out. Waves of nuns and priests abandoned their vows and married, and the Spirit that had been discovered in fraternal, communitarian experiences, vanished.) Jacques Petit says his own work on Emmanuel Mounier [1] led him to the study Mounier's *premier initiateur en philosophie* and that, were it not for Mounier, Chevalier might be totally forgotten today (p. 14).

Jacques Chevalier, of a military family of strict Catholic religiousness, was embittered by the rejection of his Ph.D. thesis on the religious awakening of Wales which stressed the essential place of religion in popular community identity. Like Charles Péguy before him he fought back against his anti-religious "positivist" examiners. He went on to mine the scattered musings of the blind Lazarist priest and mystic, Pere Guillaume Pouget (1847-1933), whose conversations were prized for their religious cum spiritual insights, which Chevalier considered on a level of those of St. Augustine or Pascal. Chevalier students

Mounier and Jean Guitton (who would also be a prominent Catholic *moraliste* in the 1960s) had been much influenced by Chevalier in regular, intimate discussions orienting their *vie intérieure*, their personal senses of God. While Guitton remained loyal to Pouget and Chevalier, Mounier continued to develop his own *vie intérieure* among like-minded friends, becoming a *résistant* and breaking with his *maître* over the Vichy regime, just as the latter began to face vengeful anti-Pétainists.

When, in 1937, the victorious General Francisco Franco charged Jacques Chevalier with the task of reorganizing Spanish post-Republican education, it was to the great surprise and annoyance of Chevalier's superior, Jean Zay, French Minister of Education and one of the pillars of the French Popular Front government. Marshall Pétain was named French ambassador to Spain from 1939-1940. In 1940, after Pétain came to power in France, Chevalier was named Secrétaire d'État à l'instruction publique and, convinced that *laïcité*, like that of Zay, had become an improvised and intolerant creed in France, he tried to re-establish the teaching of "duties toward God" in French primary schools as an antidote (p. 13). Believers supported this controversial measure and fought to have non-believers grant the validity of belief systems built upon the "evident" existence of God.

Chevalier is depicted here as an anti-German Pétainist patriot whose enemies were both the atheistic nazifiers among the collaborators and the defenders of *laïcité* in the Resistance. He is portrayed as aggravating the collaborationists and Germans by sending a government representative to the burial ceremony of the Jewish Bergson, for refusing a *numerus clausus* for Jewish children in colleges and *lycées*, and resisting the selling out of the Jewish teaching personnel of Alsace-Lorraine in December 1940. That Chevalier was a reputed anti-German anglophile is said to have figured in his nomination by Pétain, but this did not prevent his facing the first *épuration* tribunals at Liberation: he was an unwise and unlucky "intellectual who had strayed into politics."^[2]

Jacques Chevalier was vexed by the Vatican's condemnation of Modernism in the early part of the twentieth century. The works of Henri Bergson's Catholic disciple (and successor as lecturer in the College de France), Edouard Le Roy, were put on the index of forbidden books in 1907 and the works of Bergson followed in 1914. Chevalier's quasi-apologetic interpretations of Bergson saw him demonstrating that Roman Catholicism was "la religion vivante et dynamique par excellence, à la différence des Orientaux, Hindous ou Grecs absorbant l'âme dans le tout et ignorants le charité" (p. 25). After being asked to offer courses in philosophy to foreign students at the Université de Grenoble, Chevalier composed an ambitious *Histoire de la pensée* which became a kind of handbook for a generation of French students.^[3] Chevalier saw Bergson liberating science from its implicit metaphysical prejudices and making theology closer to "the experience of God" (p. 29). Thus Chevalier drew on his students' individual and personal "experiences of God," as well as those of Henri Bergson. Chevalier gave a series of lectures on how Bergson "found God," based on their conversations. He claimed, as the faithful, authorized interpreter of the great man, to have been the witness and depository of his adhesion to Roman Catholicism (based on their conversation of March 2, 1938). Bergson, in turn, supported Chevalier's unsuccessful candidacies for the College de France, a teaching post at Harvard, where Bergson's friend William James taught, and for the Academie Française. But Chevalier's hopes for the influence of Bergson's philosophy in Vichy France—encouraged by monographs by Alain Guy or Jeanne Dubois—were disappointed (along with Mounier's in several of Vichy youth movements).

When Chevalier was given the task of liquidating the *laïc* heritage of the Third Republic as Secrétaire d'État à l'instruction publique, he proposed that the existence of God be taught as self-evident because the basis for morality—moral law, the immortality of the soul—could be discovered by natural reason. Chevalier sought to oblige all French youth to find God in their fellow human beings, as Chevalier himself had culled precious insights in the rambling soliloquies of the blind Lazarist mystic, Père **Pouget**. Chevalier's disciple, Mounier, had visited Pouget's cell twice a week for five years. For Chevalier a saint was a minister, a light-bearer of the Spirit, and an entire collectivity could be as well.

The saints as “first ministers” of the Spirit show the way, the collectivity follows after as “both obey a call, or a summons, to a dimension of a reality which transcends them and draws them” (p. 65).

In its noteworthy chapter seven based on the *Journal intime* of Maine de Biran (1766-1824), Chevalier's *Histoire de la pensée* tried to show how that philosopher founded his metaphysics and religious thought on his personal experience (i.e., his experience of God). Jean-Francois Petit's own monograph, *Philosophie et théologie dans la formation du personnalisme d'Emmanuel Mounier* makes much of Mounier's D.E.S. (Université de Grenoble, 1927), following Chevalier in his analysis of the relationship between *anthropocentrisme* and *théocentrisme* in the philosophy of Descartes (p. 109). Chevalier believed that both Descartes and Pascal were of crucial historical importance--in contrast to the Germans Kant and Hegel with their individualism--for discovering God and so marking a distinct evolutionary progression. Chevalier encouraged his own students like Mounier to meet at his home in Grenoble to study mysticism, encouraging Mounier to undertake the study of a Spanish mystic, Jean des Anges (p. 184). Mounier would devote the rest of his life to melding research on mysticism and reflection on spiritual importance of community with Mounier's own original form of communitarianism.

In the political crises of the 1930s, Chevalier thought out the political and social implications of his distinctive world view. In his *Cadences* (1939), published just after his return from Spain, Chevalier wrote of France's need for military discipline, a *morale des chefs*. Those fearful of both Stalinism and Hitlerism might welcome a learned professor of philosophy rethinking the causes of disbelief in the educational system of entire nations with the goal of forming “believers” or moral persons.

Jean-François Petit lauds Chevalier for contributing to “a renewed humanist and Christian spiritualism, disengaged from positivism and idealism” but he also signalled his worrisome intransigence: “...man is not what he is until he is what he ought to be. He is only what he ought to be when he yields his desires to the will of God” (p. 254). Petit thought Chevalier had succeeded in showing the limits of *anthropocentrisme*, but wondered if his *théocentrisme* could only have led, in the social and political context of the 1930s, to an authoritarian political orientation, masking the true originality of his construction of the rapports between philosophy and theology?

Michel Houellebecq's much-discussed recent novel *Soumission* portrays a France in which Islam has become the hegemonic culture and the celebrated professors at the Sorbonne are encouraged to promote the moral renewal of France (and their careers) by altering their teaching to take into account the self-evident existence of God.[3] In the view of France's new leaders, men and women will become what they ought to be only when they submit and yield their desires to the will of God. It is not impossible to imagine a man like Chevalier, who considered the *soumission* of young people to God the essence of rejuvenating France in 1940, adopting to such a New Order today.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Francois Petit, *Philosophie et théologie dans la formation du personnalisme d'Emmanuel Mounier* (2006).

[2] Raymond Aron, cited second-hand on p. 13, fn. 11.

[3] Jaques Chevalier, *Histoire de la pensée*, 4 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1955, 1956, 1961, and 1966).

[3] Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris, Flammarion, 2015).

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