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Matthew W. Maguire, *Carnal Spirit: The Revolutions of Charles Péguy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 296 pp. Notes and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812250954.

Response by Matthew Maguire, DePaul University.

I thank Eric Brandom for a review that is for the most part a careful one, and that at several moments testifies to a meticulous effort of intellectual sympathy that perhaps was not easy to make. I hope to write with good will about what readers of H-France will find most interesting, and avoid minor differences of opinion and tone. They are understandably tedious to readers looking for historical understanding rather than authorial point-scoring.

Two brief points are more than mere scoring. Péguy's thinking about Judaism consisted of much more than an "anti-antisemitic" position, as Brandom claims. He offers a positive account of Judaism, and a remarkably influential, affirmative Christian theology of Judaism. One can, of course, freely question that theology, but one cannot assert that Péguy opposed anti-Semitism and did no more, though naturally he did that too.

The reviewer also missed the definition of the key term "metaphysics." It is a famously vexed word with a remarkably long history. I use the term as Péguy did, as I explain directly in a note to the introduction, using these first notes as they often are—to define an important term for the argument. It can be found on p. 237: "For Péguy and others, it [i.e., metaphysics] refers to questions of ultimate origins and ends, including questions of meaning, being, value, good and evil, and truth, i.e., what is 'after' or 'beyond' the domain of scientific and demonstrable knowledge. He believes it is simply not possible to think and live with no assumptions and conclusions about these questions; nor is it possible to have demonstrably certain and secure (rather than probabilistic) foundations for one's conclusions, whether they are 'positive' or 'negative,' 'high' or 'low.'"

Péguy is incorrigibly discursive, at times a writer of penetrating insight and humor, and at other times carried away with indignation. That gives his work a fertile but variable polysemy, and readers drawn to his poetry, his philosophical thinking, or his politics could make diverse use of it.

Eric Brandom is entirely right that historians need to be aware of different historical contexts. But he unmistakably makes a more specific criticism of the book when he says, "we are not entirely free to choose what contexts we like," in a passage that cites as its only example a very

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specific historical context: the appropriation of Péguy by some right-wing authors during the interwar years, ultimately leading to fascism and the Vichy regime.

Brandom raises a legitimate issue. Fittingly for an exploration of Péguy's thought, it includes at once a conceptual question of method, and a question of historical particularity. First, what contexts are owed to the reader in a historical account of any thinker's work? Second, what might be said about Péguy's reception in the years surrounding the Second World War? Each of these questions could benefit from its own book. But the reviewer's comments are important, and they deserve an answer here.

The appropriation of Péguy by different authors and groups, in different historical moments, is an entirely legitimate subject of historical research. That said, is it a necessary task for *any* research into Péguy to turn toward right-wing readings connected to Vichy, as the reviewer's criticism implies?

The connection between a thinker and a single posthumous political movement—variously, say, Locke and the American Revolution, or Rousseau and the French Revolution, or Marx and Soviet Communism, or Nietzsche and Nazism—is an interesting and possible topic of scholarly enquiry, but it is by no means a necessary one for those investigating the writings of Locke, or Rousseau, or Marx, or Nietzsche, and their discrete historical contexts, or the possible contemporary relevance of those writings. To insist that Locke's, or Rousseau's, or Marx's, or Nietzsche's relation to a single subsequent political movement be treated in any study of the thought in question would be to risk (to put it gently) raised eyebrows among specialists.

Yet one finds precisely this turn in assessments of Péguy. It is still more strange with Péguy—compared to, say, Nietzsche or Marx—because in his case, the poisonous posthumous movement in question held him in less esteem than he was held by the Resistance to that very movement. If one were to insist upon other thinkers being treated this way (and I do not insist upon it), it would be as if a great deal of the most determined German resistance to Nazism came from groups that included many prominent and enthusiastic Nietzscheans, and yet Nietzsche was perpetually in the dock for alleged posthumous complicity with German National Socialism. In the case of Péguy, it is too often the case that one passes lightly over or even skips Péguy's profound appeal to the French Resistance, to those dedicated to dialogue between Christians and Jews, and to very different twentieth-century thinkers—Walter Benjamin, Léopold Senghor, Jules Isaac, Dorothy Day, Rachel Bespaloff, Maurice Blanchot, and Gilles Deleuze among them—before veering toward the interwar radical right and Vichy with an unsettlingly purposeful alacrity.

An author writing about Péguy's thought should be entirely free to study his thinking on its own terms, and within its own context, just like authors writing about Rousseau, or Marx, or Nietzsche. An author may also choose (or not) to enquire into the comparative accuracy and legitimacy of different historical readings of a thinker, with a focus upon the thinker's own writings. For example, a discussion of the relative depth and rigor of different political readings of Péguy appears in chapters 6 through 8 of *Carnal Spirit*. But even granting the necessity of turning to interwar politics and the 1940s, specifically historical problems quickly come into view. One finds that although there were indeed rival Péguy's in play during these years, it is not at all clear that the French Resistance and Vichy split Péguy into equal portions, or approached him in the same way.

Of course there was an attempt by Vichy to appropriate Péguy. Playing the ugly role for their father in Occupied France that Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche played for her brother in Nazi Germany, two of Péguy's children, Marcel and Pierre Péguy, were supporters of Vichy and claimed their father for the movement.[1] There were indeed other fascists and fascist-sympathizers who announced their attachment to Péguy's poetry or slithered toward his denunciations of parliamentary corruption without regard for the historical differences between responding to political scandals in the Third Republic and responding to Nazi tyranny.

Yet Péguy's posthumous reception among the partisans of Vichy and affiliated movements was often mixed, and sometimes simply negative. The notorious collaborator and novelist Céline vehemently rejected any affinity between the National Revolution and Péguy, not least because Péguy had been a Dreyfusard and had rejected anti-Semitism.[2] In the summer of 1943, the pro-Vichy intellectual Jean Variot wrote a distinctly ambivalent article about Péguy, entitled "Charles Péguy, Great Poet and Bad Politician" for *Inter-France*. Variot claimed to love Péguy's poetry, but complained that Péguy was neither a racist nor right-wing: "he was clearly too pro-Jewish... as for his political ideas, they were those of Victor Hugo." [3]

Those persons and groups within the National Revolution most sympathetic to Péguy's work tended either to run afoul of its censorship or to leave Vichy's ranks altogether. Emmanuel Mounier's journal *Esprit* was at first moderately inclined to Vichy, and was indeed heavily influenced by Péguy. The journal was shut down by the Occupation government in 1941, and would not publish again until after the Liberation. The Vichy-sponsored school at Uriage drew upon themes from various sources, including Péguy, but the community became disillusioned with collaboration, and then with Vichy itself. The school's estrangement from the regime led to it also being shut down, and many of those associated with it joined the Resistance. To my knowledge, there are no examples of members of the Resistance drawn to Péguy's thought who moved at any point during the Occupation in the opposite direction, i.e., toward rather than away from French fascism and/or Vichy.

In contrast, the Resistance turned frequently to Péguy with markedly greater confidence, and with fewer qualifications. Even the start of the war made Vichy's claim upon Péguy rather tenuous compared to that of the Resistance. Before the Nazi invasion of France, Péguy was repeatedly held up to the French public as an example of courageous resistance to German imperialism.[4] This made any subsequent attempt to conscript Péguy into a supporting role for an overtly collaborationist Franco-German dictatorship rather awkward from the start.

As for the Resistance itself, Charles de Gaulle said that no other writer exerted a greater influence upon his thought than Péguy.[5] Beyond his profound influence upon de Gaulle and Gaullism, Péguy was repeatedly quoted within diverse precincts of the Resistance from its earliest days to its end. Some Resistance writers paid homage to Péguy through the very titles of their journals, as Péguy's *Cahiers* inspired the Resistance publication *Cahiers du Rhône*, edited by Albert Béguin.[6]

It was not only the beginning and course of the war, but also its end that signaled an ongoing and lively affinity between the Resistance and Péguy—and across the anti-fascist political spectrum. On the Left, the novelist and editor Vercors—who strongly opposed the post-Liberation reintegration of collaborators into French letters—declared that his fellow writer, the executed communist journalist Gabriel Péri, was remarkably like Péguy. The Resistance

publisher *Les Éditions de Minuit* (in which Vercors was a central figure) published extracts from their respective writings in a single volume, and according to Vercors' introduction, Péri and Péguy "fell, twenty-five years apart, for the same idea of France—for the same idea of Man." [7] In January 1945, an obituary for Péguy's longtime friend, the novelist Romain Rolland, in the then-communist *L'Humanité* made conspicuously favorable mention of "our Péguy, the socialist, the patriot." [8] The British Catholic magazine *The Tablet* wrote of the French Resistance in late 1944 that "the greatest name is still one from the last war: that of Charles Péguy. The Resistance has produced no Péguy of its own." [9] To celebrate Bastille Day in 1945, French radio broadcast a recital of Péguy's poetry, followed by additional readings less than a week later. [10]

To be clear, this is evidently not to say that good historical scholarship could not be written on efforts to appropriate Péguy for Vichy. But it is rather strange that, unlike the work of other consequential thinkers, it is this connection that is often understood to be obligatory and essential, while a host of very different and important philosophical, theological, literary, and political affinities and radiants of influence connected to Péguy before, and during, and beyond the Second World War can be set aside without criticism or controversy.

Yet—and I'm afraid I will have to tax further the reviewer's exiguous patience with this way of thinking—there is a reason for this distinctive treatment of Péguy in relation to other modern thinkers. For all their recalcitrances and subtleties, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche (especially the last three) can be and often have been assimilated into a trajectory of thinking that is said to surpass and supersede premodern alternatives in ever more fundamental or radical ways; they can be understood as *nos ancêtres les modernes*. Péguy cannot be comfortably assimilated into a supersessive trajectory of that kind, and so any possible posthumous association of his work with an odious movement remains not just a legitimate field for possible research (as naturally it is), but too often a mandatory frame of reference for any investigation of it. This is especially true for those who not only rightly uphold real and ongoing goods within secular modernity, but implicitly affirm the unparalleled and supersessive legitimacy of that modernity as a non-negotiable metaphysical commitment.

The reviewer wrote testily of a "defensive crouch" in the book. Rather, I stand openly and with good will for my argument, and I'm eager to read more about Péguy from other authors. The book is indeed more spirited than many academic histories, because I intended it to be at once a rigorous work of scholarship and an act of memory in relation to its subjects, as both Henri Bergson and Péguy understood the work of memory. What appeared to the reviewer to be defensive was in fact an assertion of life, at a moment when history and the humanities—both for reasons of their own making and for reasons thrust upon them—are in need of more life. As an act of gratitude for what these ways of thinking have given us, the book speaks patiently of love, and its final word is hope.

## NOTES

[1] See Marcel Péguy, *Le Destin de Charles Péguy* (Paris: Perrin, 1941); "Léon Blum contre Charles Péguy." *L'Appel*, November 13, 1941, in the Archives Charles Péguy, Periodical Citations of Péguy, Box 145; Pierre Péguy, *Route des Scouts de France*, January 1941, in Archives Charles Péguy, Periodical Citations of Péguy, Box 143.

[2] Céline, letter to *L'Appel*, December 4, 1941. Archives Charles Péguy, Periodical Citations of Péguy, Box 145.

[3] Jean Variot, "Charles Péguy, Grand Poète et Mauvais Politique," *Inter-France*, August 27, 1943. Archives Charles Péguy, Periodical Citations of Péguy, Box 148. Péguy had been friends with Variot before his death, though Variot continued both to admire and work with Georges Sorel, with whom Péguy had broken off all contact because of Sorel's anti-Semitism.

[4] See e.g., Jacques Copeau, "Le Courage Français," *Le Figaro*, April 4, 1940, and Copeau, "Ce soir au Théâtre Français: Péguy," *Le Figaro*, June 1, 1940. Archives Charles Péguy, Periodical Citations of Péguy, Box 142. For additional reviews, announcements, and notices connected to Péguy as a rallying point for fighting the Nazis in French newspapers, see the complete contents of Box 142.

[5] Interview with Charles de Gaulle with Alain Peyrefitte, at the inauguration for the Centre Charles Péguy, September 9, 1964. *L'Amitié Charles Péguy*, 53, January-March 1991, pp. 42-43.

[6] See Frédérique Neau-Dufour, Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz (Paris: CERF, 2004), p. 127. Neau-Dufour also claims that the founders of the Resistance journal *Défense de la France* were inspired by Péguy and his *Cahiers*.

[7] Selections from the Writings of Charles Péguy and Gabriel Péri, *Péguy-Péri: Deux Voix Françaises*, with a preface by Vercors (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1944), pp. 2-3.

[8] Obituary for Romain Rolland, *L'Humanité*, January 2, 1945. Archives Charles Péguy, Periodical Citations of Péguy, Box 150.

[9] "French Realities," *The Tablet*, November 11, 1944. The original article is missing the accent aigu in Péguy's surname, which I have added.

[10] From "Radio '45" programming guide, Archives Charles Péguy, Periodical Citations of Péguy, Box 153.

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