# Personalism in Christian Social Thought and

# **The Denial of Politics**

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'The name (Personalism) was born of a response to the expansion of the totalitarian drive, against this drive, in order to stress the defence of the person against the tyranny of apparatus.'

'Just as, fundamentally, it is recollection and interiority, Personalism is at the other end of the scale from narcissism, individualism and egocentricity. It brings the whole of its weight to bear in the direction of the most obvious aspiration of modern man, whether this be called collectivist or communal.'

(E. Mounier What is Personalism? 1946. p 113 and p 176)

'Insofar as man by his very nature stands completely in need of life in society, he is, and he ought to be, the beginning, the subject and the object of every social organisation ... There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of the human person, who stands above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable.'

> (Vatican II. Decree on the Church in the Modern World. Gaudium et Spes).

'Thanks to the Gospel, the Church has the truth about man. This truth is found in an anthropology that the Church never ceases to fathom more thoroughly and to communicate to others. The primordial affirmation of this anthropology is that man is in God's image and cannot be reduced to a mere portion of nature or a nameless element in the human city.... This complete truth about the human being constitutes the foundation of the Church's social teaching and the basis also of true liberation. In the light of this truth, man is not a being subjected to economic or political processes. These processes are instead directed to man and are subjected to him'. (Pope John Paul II, speaking at Puebla)

'In a certain sense, every single human soul has more meaning and value than the whole of history with its empires, its wars and revolutions, its blossoming and fading civilisations.'

(Nicholas Berdyaev, quoted on a poster currently produced and distributed by the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, an Anglican Missionary Society). The four quotations above all share a common basis. They all make certain assumptions about people and society which identify them as having a 'personalist' perspective. In this essay I shall be concentrating on the 'personalism' of Emmanuel Mounier, the lay catholic intellectual who was the co-founder of the journal *Esprit* in 1932, and its editor until his early death in 1950. The other three quotations are there to show that personalism does not belong to the past of French cultural history but is very much alive in contemporary Christian social thought. My argument will be that, although personalism came to be associated with progressive Christianity and the political left, in fact the network of ideas which constituted it played, and continues to play, a particular ideological role in Christian social thought which ultimately makes it impossible for socialism to be taken seriously.

To begin with, I want to consider the fundamental principles of personalist theory. An initial difficulty here is that, as Mounier himself admits, they do not constitute a logical system or a rigorous theological programme. For him, truth is non-dogmatic and non-systematic. Personalism holds ambiguities and tensions within it and maintains an open and fluid attitude to the events of the moment. 'Events that happen shall be our interior guide.'<sup>1</sup> There are some absolutes within this general perspective, principles around which the rest coheres. Three of the most fundamental are the concepts of 'person', 'community' and 'commitment' ('engagement'). The neo-Thomist social philosophy of Jacques Maritain is of seminal importance, providing the key distinction between 'individual' and 'person'. To speak about an 'individual' is to refer simply to a single unit of the human population, distinct from other units by the fact of its material existence. To say 'person', on the other hand, is to indicate the unique and autonomous quality which each human being possesses by virtue of his or her humanity. This is the spiritual or moral element in a human being, not definable in the positivist terms of some contemporary scientific thought. For Maritain, an indispensable component of the definition of a person is love for other persons and a share in common life.<sup>2</sup>

Allied to this definition of the person was a concern for 'engagement', arrived at through the influence of Max Scheler, as it was mediated by Paul Landsberg, a German Jewish refugee who played a significant role in the evolution of the philosophy of *Esprit*. Personalism was then expressed as a call to action, and a call to establish a community of persons. Mounier wrote of 'la révolution personnaliste et communautaire' for which they were working. Personalist commitment was commitment to the defence of the freedom and dignity of each human being, and to work for a just and truly communal society. These two aims were seen to be not only compatible but integrally bound up together. In contemporary political terms, personalism denoted an opposition both to the individualism of bourgeois liberal democracy and to the collectivism of the Soviet Union. Later, in the 1940s, personalism also stood opposed to the totalitarian fascist state.

Mounier is especially interesting not as the creator of personalism, nor as the philosopher who worked it all out, but as the teacher, the leader and the influential promoter of a set of attitudes. He came to found *Esprit* through his involvement with leading lay catholic intellectuals in the 1920s. He was brought into this through participation in regular discussion groups held at the home of Jacques and Raissa Maritain. It was largely through the contacts made there that Mounier was able to draw together such an impressive team of contributors to Esprit. Among these was Nicholas Berdyaev, exiled from the Soviet Union on account of his idealist philosophy, but who had at one time been a committed Marxist. Berdyaev was a prominent member of the Maritain circle and also contributed an important article on Marxism to the first number of Esprit. Esprit was the work of a team, and although Mounier was the leader, others made substantial theoretical contributions. Apart from Berdyaev, the team included Paul Louis Landsberg, Denis de Rougement, a Swiss protestant, and in later years the philosophers Jean Lacroix and Paul Ricoeur. Esprit was at the height of its popularity and influence just after the Second World War. At that time, along with the journal Les Temps Modernes which was the voice of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Esprit had a leading role in French intellectual life. It has been described as 'la revue qui a formé une génération chrétienne'.<sup>3</sup>

Mounier stood out not only as the promoter of personalism but also as a left-wing catholic. Although he made a stand against Franco in 1937, when *Esprit* published pro-Republican writings and a protest over Guernica, it was not really until 1944 that Mounier's definite commitment to the left became apparent. Like many people in the aftermath of the Liberation he saw socialist revolution as the best hope for the future. The personalist contribution would be one of support and adding depth. They were to add a necessary personalist perspective. 'Une vaste révolution est en cours ... A nous de l'humaniser dans toute sa masse.'4 When the socialist revolution did not happen, and as the gap between members of the Communist Party and non-Communist socialists widened. Mounier became less enthusiastic and more distant. On the other hand, he never joined the anti-Communist campaigners and always resisted the temptation for most catholics to look to the United States in these years of intensifying 'cold war'. Mounier was consistently anti-American and maintained an unusually sympathetic attitude to Soviet policies. He was opposed, for example, to the North Atlantic Treaty and to the war in Indo-China. Most surprisingly, he held back from protesting at the persecution of Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary in 1949. He saw Mindszenty, because of his class and political affiliations, as a symbol of opposition to socialism. Mounier's last article, titled '*Fidélité'*, was on the subject of his relationship to communism. Although by then, in 1950, he was deeply critical of Soviet communism, his commitment to the poor and to the cause of justice prevented him joining those who wanted to fight communism.

"We only want to fight the war of truth. We do not want to harm those whom communism protects, nor to disturb the protection that it still gives them just by its existence."<sup>5</sup>

Mounier conceived this interest in, and sympathy for, socialism because he saw it as a radical form of humanism with a bias towards the poor. When we look at his writings, however, we find little interest in questions of economics, class division, class struggle, revolutionary strategy or political power. He apparently treated these as secondary questions, those which were concerned with the putting into practice of political principles. He saw his own vocation, and that of personalism, as the formulating of the primary questions, the principles on which the political theory ought to be based. This was what he meant when he spoke of it being the personalist task to bring depth to socialism. This separation of questions of value and principle in a culture from those to do with social organisation and the planning of political change must theory evades the question of the value or even the possibility of any genuinely scientific knowledge about society. Mounier did not consider that the most important aspects of human life could be grasped with the tools of rigorous, empirical labour. They could only be grasped by living in an active, committed manner in the light of certain values. In 1946, for example, he wrote, attacking a scientific, rational view of knowledge and referring to the Munich Agreement of 1938:

'Left wing and liberal elements were guilty of treachery in the face of Fascism, as was evident in the good intentions of Chamberlain, and in the morbid, disordered taste for that fatal objectivity which refuses to distinguish between good and bad, nourishment and poison. But the knowledge of what belongs to man, and of the world in so far as it concerns man, can only be found by the engagement of man with his object. This engagement of knowledge is the true objectivity, for, in human concerns, the spectator dissolves the object instead of clarifying it.'6

It is ironic that it was Mounier's own lack of informed and definite theoretical views about society and politics which led him to be misled about the character of the Pétain regime. The values he possessed, but he lacked the political knowledge. A survey of Mounier's responses to the upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s would give a clear insight into what personalism in fact stood for. There is space here only to review briefly the three principal phases of the political response. These are the 'Third Way' of the early years, the publication of *Esprit* in Vichy France, and the socialist stance of the post-war years.

One deep and insoluble contradiction underlies the whole history of Esprit during Mounier's lifetime. This is the contradiction between the call for active political involvement and the concurrent call for a necessary detachment from politics so as to maintain the perspective of the absolute, the values of prime importance which transcend politics. This contradiction was present in the very foundation of Esprit. The three men who decided to collaborate in the production of the journal were united in their wish to respond effectively to what they identified as a crisis in civilisation demanding a radical change in their culture. They were divided, on the other hand, as to how they would intervene. Georges Izard and Andre Déléage wanted Esprit to have roots in a political movement which would engage in political action. Mounier, however, saw such political action as liable to limit and distort their commitment to the transcendent moral values. He had the support of Maritain in his concern for the primacy of the spiritual and this support was decisive. In the course of the conferences and discussions which preceded the launching of *Esprit* in October 1932 the political role was diverted on to a separate institution which was to be called 'La Troisième Force'. The members of this organisation were to make the immediate political responses of the movement, answering the events of the moment and making practical decisions. Meanwhile, Esprit would be left free to concentrate on the formulation of principles. Each was to relate closely to the other, but these good intentions evaporated rapidly as the political involvement of 'La Troisième Force' became a reality. Early in 1933 it became closely associated with a particular group on the non-communist left which was working for socialist revolution. Maritain expressed his displeasure and anxiety at the risk to the spiritual values to which they were committed, and misgivings were expressed among the catholic hierarchy. Mounier saw the importance of holding *Esprit* and 'La Troisième Force together.

'To break with the 'Third Force' would be to send them to

nothingness, while my duty, that of *Esprit*, is to strip them of their 'leftist mystique', to accomplish the same work of discrimination on the left as we have on the right.'<sup>7</sup>

Although the links were maintained, the underlying gap widened right through the 1930s, as Mounier developed personalism as a theory which transcended party politics. Michael Kelly notes:

'This separation meant the failure of Mounier's first attempt to solve the besetting problem of his life: how to translate spiritual values into acceptable political action without abandoning their purity.'<sup>8</sup>

In 1934 Mounier's aloofness from political struggle was clearly articulated in an article written in response to the riots in Paris between fascist and anti-fascist groups in February of that year.<sup>9</sup> When Mounier looked back on this period from the vantage point of 1946 he did so in a spirit of self-criticism, regretting that there had been too exclusive a concern for purity and integrity.

"We were inspired by a need for the absolute and by our revolt against spiritual disorders, rather than by a drive towards a policy of defence against the practical effects and spiritual ruses of those disorders."<sup>10</sup>

From the time of the Spanish Civil War onwards, the growing polarization of the European political situation forced the *Esprit* team to take up definite positions on specific issues. Over Spain, *Esprit* was opposed to Franco. This meant taking a contrary line to that of the catholic hierarchy who supported Franco as a crusader against atheistic communism and anti-clericalism. Mounier narrowly escaped condemnation by the Vatican. Generally during this period, personalism was seen as closest to anarchism in its political theory, and there was a special issue of *Esprit* on this subject.

The question of Mounier's personal political affiliation is very complicated and controversial. John Hellman has exploded any image of him as a consistent 'man of the left', tracing links between *Esprit* and groups sympathetic to fascism in the 1930s and revealing Mounier's involvement with the Vichy youth movements during Petain's first year in power.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, Mounier's decision to continue to publish *Esprit* under Vichy was surprising and controversial at the time, and was opposed by Maritain and other supporters of the journal. After the war, Mounier claimed that his purpose had been 'open clandestinity', making possible public but subtle criticism of Vichy and Nazism. Hellman argues, however, that at the beginning Mounier was optimistic about the Vichy regime. Like most French catholics he was glad to see the end of the Fourth Republic. He welcomed the possibility of a French revolution committed to corporatism rather than individualism, and to the recognition of the importance of the 'spiritual'. It must be said, though, that Mounier was no supporter of the Nazis and was always opposed to anti-semitism, militarism and brutality. In spite of his imprisonment in 1942 by the police in Lyons, on suspicion of being involved with the resistance, Mounier seems to have maintained his lack of interest in politics throughout the war. Although he had resistance connections he was not deeply involved, and was certainly not behind General de Gaulle. He distrusted the intervention of Britain and the United States. For Mounier these countries stood for a civilisation built on capitalism and the bourgeois culture of individualism.

Mounier's hopes for a radically new French culture had gone sour in the Vichy period when the reality of the Nazi influence on Pétain became evident. When the liberation came in 1944, on the other hand, Mounier once again saw a chance of helping to build a new society. He hurried to Paris, and *Esprit* was the first of the pre-war publications to come back into print. There was every indication that the new revolution would be a socialist one. Communism had gained enormously in popularity because of the involvement of party members in the resistance and the PCF was the most widely supported of the current political parties in October 1945. There was also an unusual unity between the different factions of the left, brought about by the shared struggle of the resistance. Mounier was determined to join those who wanted radical change.

"We are not, as before, in a phase of remote prepartion ... The revolutionaries are ready. Since they are ready it is necessary to work with them. We cannot permit ourselves a project demanding fifty or a hundred years. We have a revolution in process."<sup>12</sup>

All his old hesitations and detachment seemed temporarily to have left him. He was, as he wrote in 1946, anxious to see actual socialist change happen.

'It is not sufficient to say: person, community, total man, in order to insert personalism into the historic drama of our age. We must also say: end of Western bourgeois society, introduction of socialist structures, the proletarian role of initiative. Year by year we must formulate our analysis of forces and possibilities more precisely. Failing this, personalism will become an ideology for all comers, blunted of its revolutionary edge and put to work to serve conservative or reformist inertias.'<sup>13</sup>

This final phase in Mounier's political response is the one in which,

in declaring himself unequivocally for the left, he suffers most from the underlying contradictions of his position. 'Politically involved' has to struggle with 'beyond politics'.

Although the Communist Party was the most popular at the end of the war, it was closely rivalled by the Christian Democrats. 'Le Mouvement Républicain Populaire', which by 1946 had become the most powerful political grouping in France. Mounier's attitude to the MRP is interesting. Although it has its theoretical basis in the Esprit personalism of the 1930s, he would not associate himself with it and in fact strongly criticised it. Gilbert Dru, who drafted the MRP manifesto in 1944, shortly before he was shot by the Nazis as a resistance leader, was an enthusiastic disciple of Mounier. The MRP ideology, like personalism, sought to combine liberal 'freedom' with a marxist view of justice, and was based on the distinction between 'individuals' and 'persons'. Mounier opposed the MRP, however, because it was not revolutionary and was prepared to work within the democratic system and the structures of French society and government. He foresaw that it would tend to become clericalist and socially conservative because of its 'Christian' label. All through his life, Mounier was opposed to the idea of a 'Christian' political party. As Willian Rauch notes:

'The whole point of Mounier's criticism of the Christian Democrats was that in politics the Christian must regard himself as being like 'the others', for religion does not dispense political competence. All men should bring to the political situation not church, goodwill and generous sentiments, but the hard and virile school of experience and historical judgment.'<sup>14</sup>

For the same reasons, Mounier was totally opposed to the 'Chrétiens Progressistes', an organisation of Christian marxists formed in 1947 and led by two Dominicans, Maurice Montlucard and Henri Desroches. Although few of the members were actually in the Communist Party, they were 'as close to the communists as the most daring left-wing worker-priests'.<sup>15</sup> Until this group came into being Mounier had been indicating that only the PCF could make the changes France needed, but his support for the party never went further than this. The 'Chrétiens Progressistes' were making a much more explicit political commitment and Mounier, as Hellman notes, was forced to articulate his Christian and personalist reservations about communism. He did so in an article in *Esprit* in July 1947, titled 'Communistes Chrétiens'. He accused them of separating their faith from their political commitment by going along with a philosophy which viewed the supernatural as an ideology.

'The rapport of communism and Christianity is not that of two doctrines ... that neatly share heaven and earth, as certain Christian communists would have it. Communism and Christianity are tied together as Jacob with the angel, in the rigour and fraternity of combat."

In a further article on the subject in January 1948, 'Délivrez-nous', Mounier questioned their option for the PCF as the only way to defend the working-class. Mounier was clearly in a difficult position in these years. Having rejected the Christian Democrats in order to look to the Communists he now found that he had to issue warnings against too intimate a relationship with the PCF. Hellman makes a comparison with the position in regard to Vichy in 1940.

'Thus, once again, determined Christian revolutionaries pushed Mounier to re-affirm the political agnosticism that always helped to keep him back from complete commitment.'<sup>16</sup>

From 1947 onwards, Mounier in his commitment to a revolutionary transformation of France, had to look to some non-communist socialist force. However, he could still write:

We will only discover a new strong doctrine and the living commitment of the working-class through actions belonging to the great revolutionary tradition of France (and also to the revolutionary tradition of Rosa Luxembourg or Gramsci).<sup>17</sup>

Mounier wanted to be associated with political activities from a distance. He refers here to Rosa Luxembourg and to Gramsci to indicate that his criticisms of communism are not made by a soft, bourgeois Christian Democrat, but as a committed revolutionary socialist whose criticisms of the PCF are constructive ones. In fact, of course, his inability to engage in active party politics, his neglect of the study of sociology, economics and political strategies and his preference for values and principles reveal that his own position is quite unlike that of Luxembourg or Gramsci. In this respect, as in many others, there are similarities between Mounier and F. R. Leavis. Francis Mulhern's study of the journal *Scrutiny*, also founded in 1932, shows that Leavis' approach to politics in this period had many parallels to that of Mounier. Leavis saw the civic responsibility of the minority as:

"... meta-political – to invigilate the political domain in the name of "the human" without entering it in its own right".<sup>18</sup>

Also, he saw:

"... the objective of truly radical initiatives for reform was not, to transform social relations through political struggle but to

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alter the ethical posture of administration, to irradiate power with morality.<sup>19</sup>

Although Mounier uses the language of a political activist, and although he is constantly warning against moralism and detachment from the political struggle, ultimately his fundamental attitude is to deny the importance of politics. In his diary for 1941, he wrote:

'I care nothing, nothing for engaging in offensive action of a political nature ... I am too sensitive to everything that deforms man in action, too much of a relativist in matters of political regimes, too little impassioned in what concerns them. I am aware that this subjective position, erected into a doctrine, will engender an error (the a-politicism that I have often denounced because I feel myself too close to it). But I must protect the clear perception of my vocation, and my methods of efficacy. I see myself working freely on all political tendencies so long as they remain open ... Perhaps this is not a position of political efficacy; I make no pretensions about it. But this is not simply a position of disengagement. I concern myself with being efficacious but in a manner other than the political.' <sup>20</sup>

The concurrent necessity and impossibility of political involvement is the underlying contradiction of Mounier's thought. His personalist philosophy is inherently a-political. On the other hand, his Christian humanism, opposed to an other-worldly faith, demands from him involvement in society and its problems. In linking these two things in his own influential person, Mounier established a set of attitudes which have been taken up by subsequent Christian radicals who also wish to be worldly and revolutionary but wish like him to refrain from choices of a party political character. This attitude flourished in the radical Christian climate of the 1960s and can still be found flourishing today. Thomas Cullinan, for example, conceives of small 'Abrahamic Groups' as Christian agents for radical change, who will have to get their hands dirty:

'Our group will also evolve the double art of getting its hands dirty, in concrete political options, and yet not handing itself over to any political organisation.'<sup>21</sup>

There is an implication that support for a political party means a loss of integrity, means becoming an unthinking robot. There is the same tension and the same deep aversion to party politics which we find in Mounier. Mounier's positive achievements must not be overlooked. He fought a life-long battle against the association of Christianity with the forces of social reaction and conservatism. He consistently attacked other-worldly spirituality and sentimental piety, recognising the validity of the criticisms of religion made by Marx and Nietzsche. As for Mounier's disagreement with marxist theory and with the PCF, it seems to me that although the basis of his argument, the defence of the person, is misleading, the contemporary presentation of marxist theory and communist strategy in politics made dissent inevitable for a Christian at that time. It was in the 1940s that the science of psychology and the philosophical problems of subjectivity were first seen as a challenge to marxist theory, bringing about its re-formulation. Mounier's criticism parallels that of Sartre and Marcuse. More recently, in opposition to their work, the structuralist marxism of the 1970s used linguistics and semiotics as a method of dealing with the human subject, methods which were not humanist. Within the French Communist Party, Lucien Seve has contributed an important work on Man in Marxist Theory. The problem of the subject is clearly basic and important in marxist theory today, so that Mounier's dissent can be seen to be more than petit-bourgeois Christian moralism.

In spite of the ambivalence of personalism as a political theory Mounier's life and writings were fore-runners of actual radical or left-wing political activities. One of the most celebrated activists to owe her inspiration directly to Mounier was Dorothy Day. The Catholic Worker Movement, which started in New York in the 1930s, is a clear example of the expression of Mounier's ideals in action, and it is significant that its political affiliation was rather with anarchism than with socialism. Dorothy Day shared Mounier's commitment to the poorest, his radical rejection of contemporary society and politics, and his emphasis on individual transformation rather than political party organisation.

*Esprit* also figures in the pedigree of liberation theology, which plays an important part in the political commitment of Christians, especially in Latin America. Juan-Luis Segundo, for example, was taught by Paul Ricoeur, who had been one of the *Esprit* team in the 1940s, and wrote his doctoral thesis on *The Concept of Man in* the Thought of Nicholas Berdyaev. There are certain problems in Segundo's social theory, centring around the tensions between mass and minority.

"What is essential to the rise of a revolutionary consciousness is not belonging to this or that social class, but the potential for being immune to mass tendencies."<sup>22</sup>

Here the ambiguity of personalism presents itself again. It leads not only to the denial of politics in the radicals of the 1960s, and not only to the problems of the social theory of Pope John Paul II, but to the tensions and ambiguities which are at the heart of political theology itself.

- 1 1949 letter. Quoted in Candide Voix, 'La Pensée d'Emmanuel Mounier' 1960.
- 2 J. Maritain. Scholasticism and Politics. 1940. See Ch. 3.
- 3 Title of an article about Esprit, written by Michel Francois in France Observateur, 2 April 1959. Quoted in Bosworth Catholicism: Crisis in Modern France, Pourceton 1962.
- 4 J. M. Domenach. Emmanuel Mounier. Paris 1972. p 153.
- 5 Oeuvres de Mounier t. 4. Paris. Seuil. 1963.
- 6 E. Mounier Be Not Afraid London 1951. English translation of La Petite Peur du XXe Siecle and Qu'est-ce que le Personnalisme by Cynthia Rowland. p 131.
- 7 J. Hellman Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, University of Toronto 1981. p 69.
- 8 M. Kelly Emmanuel Mounier. Pioneer of the Catholic Revival. Sheed & Ward 1979. p 39.
- 9 'Leçons de l'Emeute ou la Révolution contre les Mythes' Esprit March 1934.
- 10 Be Not Afraid p 117.
- 11 J. Hellman Mounier and the New Catholic Left.
- 12 Hellman. op. cit. p 207. Letter of December 1944.
- 13 Be Not Afraid pp 186-7.
- 14 W. Rauch Politics and Belief in Contemporary France 1932-1950. The Hague, 1972. p 148.
- 15 Hellman op. cit. p 228.
- 16 Hellman op. cit. p 233.
- 17 Esprit February 1950. 'Fidélité'.
- 18 F. Mulhern The Moment of Scrutiny. New Left Books 1979. p 185.
- 19 F. Mulhern op. cit. p 233.
- 20 Rauch. op. cit. p 311.
- 21 R. Ambler & D. Haslam (ed.) Agenda For Prophets London 1980 p 141.
- 22 J. L. Segundo The Liberation of Theology. p 218.

## Archetypes, Stereotypes and Humanity

#### Ronwyn Goodsir Thomas

The work of C. G. Jung, in particular his theory of female and male archetypes, has had a marked influence on the way women and men see themselves in modern society. This influence has been particularly noticeable among some feminist writers, especially those with religious interests. How much reliance should be placed on this theory of Jung's is debatable in the light of modern philosophical and anthropological thought. There are, of course, serious difficulties in any discussion of archetypes. As Jung himself said, "The archetypal representations (images and ideas) – should